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**Roberto Calasso - Deconstructing mythology**

***A reading of *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia****

I, Lara Fiorani, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Lara Fiorani

## ABSTRACT

This thesis reviews Roberto Calasso's *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia* (1988) and demonstrates that thematic and formal elements of this text allow us to cast a post-modern and poststructuralist light on his theorization of 'absolute literature' – a declaration of faith in the power of literature which may appear to clash with the late twentieth century postmodern and poststructuralist climate responsible for concepts such as *la mort de l'auteur*.

The importance of these findings lies in their going against Calasso's claim that he never needed to use the word 'postmodern' and his complete silence on contemporary literary criticism, as well as on most contemporary authors.

Calasso's self-representation (interviews, criticism and the themes of the part-fictional work-in-progress) acknowledges as influences ancient Greek authors, both canonical and marginal; French *décadence*; the *finis Austriae*; Marxism; Nietzsche; Hindu mythology and Aby Warburg. These influences are certainly at work in *Le nozze*, however they may be employed to subvert Calasso's self-presentation.

I have explored in detail the representations of literature emerging from *Le nozze*, and shown that they allow the identification in Calasso's texts of elements confirming his fascination with poststructuralism, in particular with the thought of Jacques Derrida, despite the complete silence on this philosopher throughout Calasso's work.

I have proven Derrida's influence on the treatment of the theme of *différence*, the emphasis on *indécidabilité*, the development of the concept of metaphor – and of the series of metaphorical crown images underlying form and content of *Le nozze*, the celebration of the power of *grammé*, the reversal of traditional hierarchical/patriarchal structures and relationships, the emergence of language as *furtive*, *other* and feminine in Calasso's text.

I have also proposed an influence of poststructuralism on the form of Calasso's text and that his re-writing Greek mythology works as a deconstruction of its traditional readings.

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## INTRODUCTION

### I. Foreword

At its publication, in 1988, of *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia*, a collection of re-writings of the greatest tales of Greek mythology, and of famous pages of Greek historians, has been saluted by distinguished Italian and international intellectual figures (Brodsky, Chatwin, Citati, Manganelli to name a few), as an important and meaningful book. Roberto Calasso is not a classicist; therefore the interest generated by this book cannot be ascribed to a historical or philological rediscovery of these classics. The acknowledgement of the importance of Calasso's text appears to be motivated by the recognition that, through his act of re-writing these stories, he was not making a commentary on Greek culture as such, but on its reception by contemporary readers and writers, and what this reception revealed about the current state of literature.

This thesis will undertake a detailed study of the view of literature emerging from Calasso's work, focusing particularly on *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia*, to reveal differences between Calasso's stated beliefs on this topic and the suggestions transpiring from the text. Calasso's self-representation emerges from explicit comments in interviews and critical works, and from more implicit ones, such as editorial choices made as head of the publishing house Adelphi, plus the themes and content of his own texts. I will challenge Calasso's self-representation and review sections and the overall structure of *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia* to cast a poststructuralist light on his theorization of *letteratura assoluta* ('absolute literature').

The thesis will not review the influence on Calasso of other ancient and contemporary mythographers. Amongst the contemporaries, I am thinking particularly of Robert Graves<sup>1</sup> and Pietro Citati – both present on the catalogue of Calasso’s publishing house, Adelphi –, as well Tomasi di Lampedusa (‘Lighea’) and Pavese (*Dialoghi con Leucò*). For the ancients, I refer specifically to the works of Apollodorus, Hyginus, Ovid, and Nonnus. Whilst, on the basis of my preliminary investigation, research on these influences could deliver some interesting conclusions, I believe it exceeds the scope of this thesis.

Calasso claimed that, in his life, he never felt the need to use the word ‘postmodern.’<sup>2</sup> His rejection of the term may partially be explained by his formation in a Marxist environment – his coming from a Marxist family and his youth in postwar Italy where respectable intellectuals tend to display a Marxist affiliation. In contrast with the Marxist belief that literature retains the ability to directly influence reality and history, and that it is therefore a valuable and serious intellectual activity, postmodernism emphasizes in literature an element of ‘play’. Postmodern practitioners tend to hold subversive views of textuality and literature, to question language’s ability to affect and even express reality successfully, and foreground in texts the opportunity for play.

It has to be recognized that, as a publisher, Calasso has mainly kept away from contemporary postmodern literature<sup>3</sup> and devoted his energy to rediscovering books, either forgotten by tradition or pushed to its margins. Furthermore, as an author, he has focused on the “unfashionable” topic of the relationship between the human and the

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<sup>1</sup> A review of the influence on Calasso of Robert Graves writings, particularly *The Greek Myths* and *The White Goddess* - the latter published in Italian by Adelphi -deserve in my view a detailed separate study. See Robert Graves, *La dea bianca*, Adelphi, Milan, 1992 and Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1955.

<sup>2</sup> Roberto Calasso quoted in Deborah Grossman, ‘Word from Olympus’, *The New Yorker*, April 12, 1993, pp. 32-33, at p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> The only exceptions, as discussed later, are Nabokov, Borges, Manganelli and Chatwin. But their discussion is limited to brief references made to their work in the recent *Cento lettere a uno sconosciuto*, and in interviews.

divine, and proclaimed – in an age of doubt in the referential powers of language and writing – a celebratory view of ‘absolute literature’.

Editorial choices, interviews, criticism, and even the themes and content of his part-novelistic work-in-progress all evince his literary and theoretical forebears in authors and thinkers from the past: marginal ancient Greek authors such as Nonnus and Porphyry, French *décadence* (Baudelaire and Mallarmé); the *finis Austriae*; the family legacy of Marxism; Nietzsche; Hindu mythology; and the art history of Aby Warburg.

I will not dismiss these influences, but maintain that they can actually support a reading of *Le nozze*, which overturns Calasso’s conscious self-presentation, and makes him a champion of postmodernism, that is to say, a vision of past influences unbound from historical sequences and freely adopted for their reciprocal cogency, regardless of the plausibility of such connections. My intent is to go beyond the generic recognition of *Le nozze*’s affiliation with postmodernism, which transpires occasionally in the criticism of this text.<sup>4</sup> Through a detailed study of *Le nozze*’s representations of literature, I will unearth a wealth of thematic and formal clues, all revealing Calasso’s fascination with poststructuralism – a philosophy of textuality and reading practice which deeply affected postmodernism.

I will devote particular attention to demonstrating that Calasso’s text betrays both on a formal and a thematic level a dialogue with Jacques Derrida, despite the complete silence on this thinker throughout Calasso’s work. The influence of Derrida will be detected by highlighting a number of shared thematic concerns, which include: the treatment of ‘difference’, the theme of the ‘undecidability’ of meaning, the post-Nietzschean development of the concept of metaphor, the celebration of the absolute

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<sup>4</sup> For example Roger Downey, ‘Books Quarterly: All the myths of India in one book’, *Seattle Weekly*, 3 March 1999, <http://www.seattleweekly.com/1999-03-03/food/books-quarterly-all-the-myths-of-india-in-one-book.php> (visited 21/09/2007).

power of writing, the reversal of traditional hierarchical opposition, through the relevance given to figures of outsiders/wanderers and women and his feminisation of language. I will also propose that even from a formal perspective the influence of poststructuralism can be perceived in Calasso's writing. I will maintain that even Calasso's choice of re-writing Greek mythology could be read as an attempt to deconstruct its traditional readings. I will further propose, by juxtaposing his book with some of Derrida's best-known passages, that *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia* can be read as an attempt to clarify the limits of *mythology* ('discourse on/of myth') in relation to the twilight of 'logocentrism', and of the 'metaphysics of presence'<sup>5</sup>.

Because of Calasso's Marxist formation, it is likely that an acknowledgement of a shared ground with critical positions which celebrate literature, through a paradoxical demolition of literature's status of great meta-narrative, may have required a long journey of emancipation. My analysis will demonstrate that both Calasso's progressive detachment from the Marxist background and his formulation of free literature were inspired by his acknowledged influences, as well as by a rich and constant dialogue with Derrida's poststructuralism. I will show that Calasso's *letteratura assoluta* – the theorization through which he emancipates himself from Marxism and political engagement in general – is dependent precisely on that celebration of the power of textuality, which informs Derrida's best-known pages.

In tune with Calasso's own favorite image of the return of the gods in literature and with the Warburgian approach he himself favours, I will build my argument through a discussion of the representation of the gods in *Le nozze*. In addition to providing a tool for investigating his dialogue with poststructuralism in textual and figurative terms, this approach, of re-reading the text through its presentation of the gods in it, will enable me

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<sup>5</sup> Both these terms, regularly employed by Derrida, will be discussed later in the thesis. For 'logocentrism' see page 159, for 'metaphysics of presence' see page 168.

to highlight that a poststructuralist attitude affects Calasso's approach to the ancient deities, revealed to him by Warburg's texts. I will review the scenario of 'difference', conjured up by the simultaneous representation of different gods, together with the version of reality they symbolise, and the multi-faceted, subversive and in many ways matriarchal image of literature that emerges from this 'undecidability'.

## **II. Methodological premises**

The dissertation will be structured in two parts: a more general one which traces Calasso's emancipation from Marxism and the impact on his view of literature of his acknowledged literary and philosophical influences; and a second part which is strongly focused on the text of *Le nozze*, subjected to close scrutiny in order to demonstrate the analogies between Calasso and Derrida's themes and concerns.

When discussing works by modern authors, I have adopted the following criteria. For works in Italian, English, French and German, I have kept the titles in original language. In other cases, including classical authors, I have given the title in the accepted English translation.

When quoting excerpts from texts, I have kept to the original language for Italian, English and French texts, and to English translation for other languages.

However, when dealing with texts translated either by Calasso or by his publishing house Adelphi, I have chosen to quote, whenever possible, from such translations. Calasso constantly emphasizes the significance of the reception and translation of texts. Thus, the translations legitimised by the author, performed either directly by him or

within Adelphi, enable us to appreciate Calasso's own reception and interpretations of these texts.

I have faced a tough challenge when quoting from Derrida. Like Nietzsche's, Derrida's texts are very difficult to quote from, without simplifying or betraying his thoughts. His writing is a journey, and therefore every statement taken out of the context of this journey fails to render the power of his thought. I have tried to overcome this problem by either quoting very extensive sections of his texts or by providing a short quotation in the context of a summary of a longer text.

As for other French authors, in quoting from Derrida, I have mainly used original texts. This is also in recognition of the fact that the translation of Derrida's texts into English, and their importance to the reception and interpretation of Derrida in the Anglo-American context – certainly an important theme within cultural history of the latter half of the twentieth century – may not have had a direct impact on Calasso. I have chosen to quote from Italian translations of Derrida, when the translations were carried out for Adelphi and thus under the direct influence of Calasso.

I have quoted from Calasso consistently in Italian. I have chosen to quote in Italian even from the text of *La follia che viene dalle Ninfe*, which was only available in French when I started this work. It seems important to me to emphasise that the text was left unpublished in Italian for over a decade, and I have attempted to draw some conclusions as to the possible reasons for its "concealment" from the Italian readership. In all examples, I have opted for uniformity of language when quoting from Calasso.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> A comparison of the two versions shows that the translation into Italian is close to its original, without significant omissions or additions - even though its publication in Italian alongside an essay on the nymph in Nabokov ('La sindrome Lolita') widens the landscape of his representation of the nymph precisely in that postmodern direction, which Calasso appears keen on dismissing from his work. See 'La follia che viene dalle Ninfe' and 'La sindrome Lolita', in *La follia che viene dalle Ninfe*, Milan, Adelphi, 2005, pp. 11-45 and pp. 45-50 respectively.

When rendering the names of the Greek gods, heroes, and historical personalities, I have used the current English version. This is to remain faithful to Calasso's position, his emphasis on the reception and the re-writing of mythology taking place in *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia*. For reference, however, I have inserted a bilingual list of the mythological characters I discuss in appendix.

When quoting from *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia*, I have chosen to quote from the first edition, rather than the second one published in 2004. This is a choice based on the consideration that the cover of the first edition adds important elements to my discussion in this work, particularly to chapter IX.

## **PART I**

### **ROBERTO CALASSO IN CONTEXT**

**Calasso's role in Italian culture. Education, influences, and works.**



## Chapter I

### After *autarchia* – Calasso and postwar Italian culture

#### I. Calasso's education and learning

Roberto Calasso was born in Florence on the 30<sup>th</sup> of May, 1941, into a family of the local upper class that was well connected with some of the greatest Italian intellectuals of their time. His maternal grandfather Giovanni Codignola was a professor of philosophy at Florence University. Codignola created in Florence a new publishing house called La Nuova Italia, in Florence, just like his friend Benedetto Croce had done in Bari with Laterza. His uncle Tristano Codignola, *partigiano* during the *Resistenza*, after the war joined the political life of the new Republic, and was for a while Minister of Education. His mother Melisenda Codignola – who gave up a promising academic career to raise her three children – was a scholar of German literature, and had worked on Hölderlin's translations of the Greek poet Pindar.<sup>1</sup> His father Francesco was a law professor, first at Florence University and then in Rome, where he eventually became dean of his faculty.

The whole family was politically active, and strongly left-wing.<sup>2</sup> In 1960's and 1970's Italy, having a political affiliation was seen as the duty of any serious intellectual. Trauma in Calasso's childhood may partially explain his refusal to take sides, despite the demands of the cultural climate. Francesco Calasso was amongst the members of the leftwing *intelligentsia* arrested by the Fascists in 1944 in retaliation for the murder

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<sup>1</sup> She will also work as translator for Adelphi.

<sup>2</sup> Andrea Lee, 'The Prince of Books', in *The New Yorker*, April 26, 1993, pp. 43-51, p. 45.

of Giovanni Gentile, the philosopher of the *regime*. Even though Gentile's own sons interceded to save him, the Calassos, forced into hiding, could only resume a normal life after the liberation of Florence.

Calasso's learning in the Florentine years is based on challenging readings, in a small world formed by three book collections – his family's, his grandfather's, and the prestigious private library of the *Gabinetto Scientifico Letterario Viesseux*. During Calasso's childhood, his father was a member of the board of the Viesseux, whose director was Eugenio Montale. Montale, whose broad cultural interests seemed to anticipate Calasso's own, was also a friend of Bobi Bazlen, who would become Calasso's mentor. Founded in 1819 by the Geneva merchant Giovan Pietro Viesseux, and inspired by principles of cosmopolitanism, the *Gabinetto* was a unique institution, in its offering to Italian intellectuals. In opposition to the predominant provincialism and self-enclosure of much of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, the *Gabinetto* was a gateway to European culture.<sup>3</sup> The role of this library, called by Montale, in a memorandum to the prefect of Florence, 'la più ricca raccolta di libri stranieri moderni esistente in Italia e la più vasta biblioteca circolante in Europa'<sup>4</sup> had become even more important under the *regime*, with its drive towards linguistic and cultural *autarchia*.

The principles of the Viesseux appear to agree with Calasso cultural interests. Calasso developed a keen interest in foreign languages, and, alongside the Latin and Greek taught at his 'liceo classico',<sup>5</sup> he learnt French, English and German. Soon, Calasso began to find himself at home in modern and ancient literatures alike, just like Montale.

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<sup>3</sup> Amongst its members were Leopardi, Manzoni, Stendhal, Schopenhauer, James F. Cooper, Thackeray, Dostoevskij, Twain, Zola, Gide, Kipling, Huxley, D.H. Lawrence, Montale, Gadda, Carlo Bo.

<sup>4</sup> 'Promemoria del 22 Novembre 1935 al the prefetto di Firenze' in Paolo Bagnoli, *Montale e il Gabinetto Viesseux*, [http://www.viesseux.fi.it/bilio/cronologia/1933\\_1940.html](http://www.viesseux.fi.it/bilio/cronologia/1933_1940.html). (visited 10 November 2003).

<sup>5</sup> The 'Torquato Tasso' in Rome. See the article by Dino Messina, 'Le nozze fra un editore e internet', at [http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/2001/maggio/25/CALASSO\\_nozze\\_fra\\_editore\\_Internet\\_co\\_0\\_0105255641.shtml](http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/2001/maggio/25/CALASSO_nozze_fra_editore_Internet_co_0_0105255641.shtml), (visited 1/7/2009).

His official education merely sealed the openness to literary and cultural influences, which had been a distinctive trait of his upbringing. Calasso's intellectual curiosity did not stop at the universe of the classics, which he seems to confront repeatedly in his work, and of past and contemporary Italian literature, nor delve into the more accepted French culture, nor into the politically fashionable Russian literature, but stretched as far as Indian, Middle and far Eastern texts.

Calasso's cultural formation and academic choices would have a significant effect on his later intellectual activity. Calasso grew up in the *dopoguerra*, a time he defined as characterized by an 'inveterata angustia culturale'<sup>6</sup> in Italy. Instead of following the typical path of young postwar intellectuals, who would go from a *liceo classico* diploma on to a degree in Italian, classics, philosophy or law, Calasso chose to study for a degree English and German literature, which clearly confirmed his vocation as a "babelic" reader, in the trail of the Borges of the 'Biblioteca de Babel'.

At university in Rome Calasso studied under Professor Praz, who supervised his *tesi di laurea* on 'I geroglifici di Sir Thomas Browne', and introduced the young Roberto to his own academic interests, including Romantic literature, and the Victorian essayists: Lamb, De Quincey, and Pater.<sup>7</sup> Praz's life-long influence on Calasso is best appreciated when we consider that Calasso would later become Praz's publisher at Adelphi.

If Praz influenced his taste in English literature, Bobi Bazlen introduced Calasso to the golden age of Mitteleuropa, from Freud to Kraus and Kafka. A much earlier – and remarkable – influence, as far as German culture goes, had been his mother, Melisenda Codignola. She introduced him to the great Romantic poets of the early nineteenth century (repeatedly discussed in Calasso's critical pieces), and also to the German philosopher with whom the Western world, from the end world war II to the '80s, has

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<sup>6</sup> Roberto Calasso, *Cento lettere a uno sconosciuto*, Adelphi, Milan, 2003, p. 152.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

entertained the most complex relationship: Friederich Nietzsche. Melisenda Codignola's interest in Nietzsche may appear surprising, given her belonging to a family of the leftwing *intelligenzia*, and the problematic reception of his work in postwar Italy, which I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter. Calasso's fascination with the *Dionysian*, which leaves a deep mark on his writings, can also be seen as a sign of the times. It is a strong common influence he shares with Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher who, in the same years as the Italian intellectual, also comes to terms the great German and Greek philosophical traditions. To use Harold Bloom's terminology, Derrida and Calasso thus share the same precursor.<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, Calasso's own interpretation of Nietzsche insists on his being a writer of 'sostanza filosofica'<sup>9</sup> rather than a philosopher – he points to Heidegger as the thinker responsible for the travesty of Nietzsche into a philosopher. Calasso's writings reveal not only his fascination with Nietzsche's thought, but also that he finds in his themes and images a source of literary inspiration. For example, a single sentence in Nietzsche's 'Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinn' (1873) seems to contain *in nuce* the subject of *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia*:

Quando ogni albero può una volta parlare in quanto Ninfa o quando un dio in figura di toro può trascinare via delle vergini, quando la stessa dea Atena può esser vista mentre su un bel cocchio attraversa i mercati di Atene accompagnando Pisistrato – e ciò credeva l'onesto Ateniese – allora in ogni momento tutto è possibile, come in un sogno, e la natura intera

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<sup>8</sup> Bloom famously discusses the importance of tradition and precursors in the creative process in his seminal *The Anxiety of Influence*. See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, Oxford University Press, London and New York, 1973.

<sup>9</sup> Roberto Calasso, in an interview with Antonio Gnoli. See Antonio Gnoli, 'Quel pensiero nella terra di nessuno', <http://lgxserver.uniba.it/lei/rassegna/000801b.htm> (visited 10 November 2003).

ciama intorno all'uomo, come se non fosse altro che la mascherata degli dei, che giocano a ingannare l'uomo assumendo ogni sorta di forme.<sup>10</sup>

The Nietzschean reflection on the manifestation of the gods appears to inspire Calasso's undertaking. Furthermore, *Le nozze* gives us a self-reflexive insight into this undertaking by narrating precisely the same episode alluded to by Nietzsche, that of the return of Peisistratus to Athens. According to a tradition recorded by Herodotus, Peisistratus before re-entering Athens would have identified a young flower-seller whose stature and majesty made her look like a copy of the goddess Athena, and would have entered the city on his chariot, with the Athena look-alike standing next to him. Just as Nietzsche had done, Calasso treats this episode as extremely meaningful. Comparing the Herodotean and Aristotelian renditions of this episode<sup>11</sup>, he reflects that Aristotle's interpretation can be seen as fully modern, and explains his 'modernity' in the following terms:

Il più sobrio Aristotele vedeva già, invece, con occhio pienamente moderno. E appunto per questo non esprimeva alcuna perplessità sui fatti, riconoscendo il quel ritorno guidato della dea-fioraia un'ultima apparizione di un mondo perduto, dove la linea di separazione fra gli dei e i mortali era ancora avventurosa e fremente.<sup>12</sup>

If Nietzsche, in whom 'si trova tutto e si può partire verso tutto'<sup>13</sup> is a constant influence on Calasso's own *Weltanschauung*, other literary and cultural influences surfaced over the years, often originating from his indefatigable work as a reader for Adelphi.

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<sup>10</sup> This is Calasso's own translation, see Roberto Calasso, *La letteratura e gli dei*, Adelphi, Milan, 2001, pp.153-4. Nietzsche's original text can be accessed at Friederich Nietzsche, 'Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinn' (1873), <http://www.textlog.de/456.html>, visited 19/08/2008.

<sup>11</sup> Roberto Calasso, *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia*, Adelphi, Milan, 1988, pp. 269-271.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 1988, p. 271.

<sup>13</sup> Gnoli, 'Quel pensiero nella terra di nessuno', <http://lgxserver.uniba.it/lei/rassegna/000801b.htm>.

## II. Adelphi in the Italian culture of the '60s.

Together with strongly influencing his work as a critic, and his interpretation of reality, Nietzsche appears to mark some crucial events in Calasso's own life.

In 1962, the left-wing publishing house Einaudi was at the forefront of Italian intellectual life. The Turinese publishing house had managed to survive during the *regime* and, thanks to a reading committee made up of figures such as the philosopher Norberto Bobbio, and the writers Cesare Pavese, Natalia Ginzburg and Elio Vittorini,<sup>14</sup> it had emerged from World War II as a champion of anti-fascism.<sup>15</sup> If, as Luisa Mangoni argues in her detailed study of the role of Einaudi in Italian society from the 1930s to the 1960s, 'solo nelle collane trasversali, *I millenni e I saggi*, si può cogliere quanto la Einaudi stessa percepisse gli umori nuovi, ancora solo accennati, nella società italiana,'<sup>16</sup> a look at the titles published in the '50s and '60s gives us an idea of the role played by Einaudi in those years.

After the war, and particularly after the defeat of the Communist Party at the first democratic elections, Pavese and Bobbio had endeavoured to keep the publishing house close to the party, but also religiously devoted to a catalogue of works 'di largo impegno e di lunga durata,' in Bobbio's words.<sup>17</sup> Classics such as works by Sophocles, Hemingway and Homer, as well as the *Thousand and One Nights*, had been championed for publication by Pavese and came out alongside works by Gramsci, edited by Palmiro Togliatti, and a number of 'libri documento' on the *Resistenza*, chosen for their methodological thoroughness.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Luisa Mangoni, *Pensare i libri. La casa editrice Einaudi dagli anni '30 agli anni '60*, Boringhieri, Torino, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> Einaudi could even boast two anti-fascist martyrs in Giaime Pintor and Leone Ginzburg.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 807.

<sup>17</sup> Mangoni, *Pensare i libri*, p. 462.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 701.

Pavese's cultural and political independence as a reader and writer – his tormented relationship with the Communist Party is well documented – played a pivotal role in shaping the Einaudi catalogue along lines of quality, of 'incidenza culturale di più lunga durata'. But the influence of the philosopher Bobbio on Einaudi's approach should also not be discounted. At the end of the 'guerra intestina' between Pavese and Vittorini, which coincided with the 1948 elections, and again in 1951, after Pavese's death, Bobbio insisted that the question of government and of the *direzione della cultura* should be seen 'più come esigenza che come immediata possibilità', and that Einaudi's main duty should be 'la preliminare necessità di una sprovincializzazione della cultura italiana.'<sup>19</sup> Without neglecting the Italian contemporary cultural scene, Einaudi embarked on the translation of a number of fundamental critical and literary works. Whilst some were picked from within Soviet culture – with which Einaudi had enjoyed a privileged relationship since the 1930s – or other Socialist countries, a remarkable part of the texts chosen for publication were more or less forgotten works, originating from the Western literary tradition, as well as from China and the Middle East. On the literary front, Einaudi became the first publisher of Borges's *Ficciones*,<sup>20</sup> and following on almost predictably from its publication of Vladimir Propp in the 1930s released, in *I millenni*, the *Fiabe italiane* by Italo Calvino (who had returned to Einaudi and joined the reading committee in 1950).<sup>21</sup>

As far as history is concerned, together with the first attempts at a critical interpretation of fascism and *Resistenza*, Giulio Einaudi himself had enthusiastically welcomed the proposal of the historian Chabod to publish medieval writers from Eastern Europe, ranging from Anna Comnena and Ibn Khaldun, to Muslim historians of the Crusades.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 435-436.

<sup>20</sup> Proposed by Solmi, its publication had been warmly supported by Calvino. Ibid., p. 668.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 707.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 709.

From the standpoint of literary criticism and philosophy, things were a bit more complex. In the postwar decades the Turinese publishing house, through an innovative programme, had played a pivotal role in introducing to the West the Russian intellectuals of the early twentieth century, particularly the formalists. Einaudi had been, for example, the first translator of the linguistic work of Jakobson and of the critical works of Skhlovsky, the theorist of *ostranenie* – thus paving the way for many further developments of European cultural history, particularly Marxism and French structuralism. Furthermore, on Gianfranco Contini's suggestion, Einaudi had organised the first publication in Italy of seminal texts such as Leo Spitzer's *Meisterwerke der romanischen Sprachwissenschaft*, Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* and Auerbach's *Mimesis*.<sup>23</sup> In the 1960s, on Solmi's recommendation, Einaudi would publish a number of key Marxist texts by Lukacs, Horkheimer and Adorno (*Dialektik der Aufklärung*), and Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution*.<sup>24</sup>

However Einaudi's political allegiances were seriously tested when it found itself at the centre of the dilemma of whether to publish or not the first translation in Italian (and first critical edition in Europe) of the complete works of Nietzsche. It has to be said that in 1961-1962 Einaudi was going through a complex phase of redefinition. It was still dealing with the events of 1956, which had shaken many a left-wing conscience; the repression in Hungary, and the publication of the Khrushchev report. The left-wing *intelligentsia*, which Einaudi embodied, was trying to deal with the sense of disorientation, which followed the break with the PCI, while preserving their Marxist affiliation.<sup>25</sup>

But the Nietzsche *affaire* is also a clear symptom of the difficulty of approaching

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 723-724.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 821.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 883.



German culture critically rather than emotionally in postwar Italy, and of the taboo still attached to a part of German philosophy. The edition of Nietzsche, edited by Giorgio Colli,<sup>26</sup> was refused for ideological reasons. As Cesare Cases suggests: ‘Il consiglio editoriale, composto in massima parte da marxisti e da liberalsocialisti, aveva forti riserve ideologiche, non tanto contro il nome di Nietzsche quanto contro l’idea di pubblicarne l’opera omnia da mettere accanto a quella di Gramsci, come se fossero classici che avevano militato sotto la stessa bandiera.’<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche appeared as an extreme right-winger to a part of the Marxist audience, and, like Heidegger, was suspected of having cultural responsibilities in the formation of a German nationalist ideology.

Colli had already experienced a similar sense of critical unease from the reading committee of Einaudi, at the prospect of the publication of a German philosopher. In 1949, his proposal to publish Nietzsche’s early works had been turned down,<sup>28</sup> and in the ‘50s Solmi had refused Colli’s proposal to publish Heidegger’s *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, under the justification that ‘vi si parla, come se niente fosse, del Führer, e della missione rivoluzionaria della Germania (cioè della Germania nazista).’<sup>29</sup>

Colli, who believed that ‘i pensieri più preziosi di Burkhardt sono raccolti da Nietzsche’,<sup>30</sup> must have finally felt closer to his goal when he succeeded in publishing<sup>31</sup> Burkhardt’s *Griechische Kulturgeschichte*.<sup>32</sup> He then decided to propose directly to Luigi Einaudi an ambitious and very prestigious project, the first-ever critical edition in

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<sup>26</sup> As Mangoni observes, Colli had emerged at Einaudi during the years 1952-4, a time of crisis for the ‘Biblioteca di Cultura Filosofica’, because of tensions on the direction of the series between Bobbio and Balbo. Ibid., p. 756.

<sup>27</sup> See Luciano Campioni, ‘Focus: Nietzsche’, <http://www.adelphi.it/Focus/Nietzsche/Materiali2/storie.ASP> (visited 10 February 2008).

<sup>28</sup> Mangoni, *Pensare i libri*, p. 757.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 760-761.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 759.

<sup>31</sup> In the new series ‘I classici della filosofia’, created by Balbo and co-directed by Balbo, Bobbio and Colli. Ibid., p. 759.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 757.

original language of Nietzsche's complete works and letters.<sup>33</sup> Einaudi initially turned down a critical edition in the original language, but accepted the idea of a translation, to be published either in *I millenni* or in *I classici della filosofia*. However, despite lengthy negotiations during which Luciano Foà acted as intermediary,<sup>34</sup> Einaudi retreated. Disappointed by this decision, Foà decided to leave the Turinese house and create a new one, whose debut on the publishing scene was to publish the critical edition of Nietzsche by Colli that Einaudi refused.

When Foà left Einaudi<sup>35</sup> in July 1961, he involved Bobi Bazlen in the founding of his new publishing house. Bazlen was a genuine *triestino*: in Elémire Zolla's words, 'aveva estratto l'essenza da quel turbine di incontri e di scontri che poteva essere la società triestina',<sup>36</sup> the same multicultural society, which had left a mark on James Joyce. Half German-half Italian, Bazlen had already played a role in promoting the works of Italo Svevo outside Trieste. He was the first Italian translator of Freud (starting with *Die Traumdeutung*), and the first to publish in Italy Freud, Jung, and Kafka.<sup>37</sup> He shared with his good friend Montale the urge to transcend the provincialism of Italian culture of his time, and to renew it through new influences. Nowadays Foà and Bazlen are recognised as important contributors to the struggle towards the *sprovincializzazione* of Italian culture, which in the 1960s 'was still squeezed between the political limits of Marxist criticism and neorealism.'<sup>38</sup>

Because of its location in Milan, Adelphi was likely to be exposed to a less polarised environment than Einaudi – which in Turin was soon going to have to deal with the growing power of FIAT, and the *lotte operaie*. Milan, with its sheer number of

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<sup>33</sup> The Nietzsche-Archiv in Weimar, closed during the war, had just recently re-opened. *Ibid.*, p. 765.

<sup>34</sup> Brought to Turin by Pavese in 1949 as a reader for literature. *Ibid.*, pp. 459-461.

<sup>35</sup> The history of these eventful dates is well recounted on the Adelphi website, see Campioni, 'Focus: Nietzsche', <http://www.adelphi.it/Focus/Nietzsche/Materiali3/storie.ASP>.

<sup>36</sup> Elémire Zolla, quoted in Valentino Cecchetti, *Roberto Calasso*, Cadmo, Fiesole, 2006, p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> Lee, 'Prince of Books', p. 48.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

publishing houses, from Feltrinelli to Rizzoli and Bompiani, offered Adelphi a better opportunity to carve its own niche without being necessarily labelled as opposition to another publisher, and therefore its ideology.

But Milan could offer more than just the anonymity of numbers. In the immediate postwar era, Lombardy had witnessed a couple of interesting publishing experiments. Both Rizzoli, with BUR (Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli) and the PCI, indirectly, through the co-operative venture of the Universale Economica del Canguro<sup>39</sup> had adopted the strategy of publishing ‘un libro alla settimana contro l’oscurantismo’,<sup>40</sup> printing classic literature from all over the world for the mass market at low prices.

In the early 1960s, Milan had also witnessed the Feltrinelli experience, a story of publishing freedom well recounted in Carlo Feltrinelli’s *Senior service*. Giangiacomo Feltrinelli was an industrialist, but also a committed member of the PCI – he was one of the main financial supporters of the Canguro venture. In 1949 he created the Biblioteca Giangiacomo Feltrinelli,<sup>41</sup> devoted to collecting rare Marxist and Soviet documents. In 1955 he bought out Canguro and started publishing in his own name.<sup>42</sup>

Deeply shaken by the Hungarian crisis, Feltrinelli chose to remain ideologically on the left – he would soon get involved with anti-colonial politics,<sup>43</sup> and become the first publisher in Italy of Fidel Castro’s writings and Althusser’s reading of *Das Kapital*<sup>44</sup> – but discontinued funding the Communist party.<sup>45</sup> He also started taking publishing decisions free from ideological constraints, as famously illustrated by his choice of

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<sup>39</sup> Originally an offshoot of *Milano Sera*.

<sup>40</sup> Carlo Feltrinelli, *Senior service*, Feltrinelli, Milan, 1999, p. 84.

<sup>41</sup> Later renamed ‘Istituto Giangiacomo Feltrinelli’, and currently ‘Fondazione Feltrinelli’. For a history of the ‘Fondazione’, see its website, especially <http://www.fondazionefeltrinelli.it/it/info/la-fondazione.html> (visited 10 February 2008).

<sup>42</sup> Feltrinelli, *Senior service*, p. 84.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 290.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

smuggling into Western Europe and publishing Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* (1957) – despite heavy pressure from the Krushev administration via his comrades in the PCI. In the early 1960s, with an already rich catalogue of discoveries destined to become modern classics, such as *Il gattopardo*, the first Italian translations of Borgés's *El Aleph*, Blixen's *Out of Africa*, Doris Lessing's *The Habit of Loving* and Henry Miller's controversial *Tropics*, Feltrinelli, through the publication of *Fratelli d'Italia* (1963), became one of the two main supporters – together with Bompiani – of the literary innovation promoted by *Gruppo 63*. Anticipated by Anceschi's review *Il Verri, Gruppo 63*, which found its manifesto in Eco's essay 'L'Opera in movimento e la coscienza dell'epoca' (1959), soon to appear in *Opera aperta* (1962), could be seen as the first conscious attempt to break with a culture squeezed between the political limits of Marxism and what by now had become the formal and thematic prison of neorealism.

Given the spirit of innovation and freedom which seemed to circulate on the Milanese publishing scene, then, it was no surprise that Foà and Bazlen decided on Milan as the home of Adelphi. Soon Foà was able to secure financial support for his editorial vision; in 1962 he won the financial backing of the Olivetti group, then in 1965 of the Falck steel dynasty, and in 1968 of the publisher Carlo Caracciolo, brother-in-law of the then FIAT president, Gianni Agnelli. When Caracciolo passed his shares to the financial arm of the Agnelli group, Adelphi found itself commercially in what seemed like an ideal position. Able to retain their editorial freedom, as they were still majority

shareholders, the still small publishing house could now exploit the solid distribution channels of Fabbri, a “popular” publishing house that was also part of the group. Being visibly linked to the Agnelli family, though, had its downsides in mid ‘70s Italy. The *Brigate Rosse*, the extreme left-wing terrorists responsible for many “political” assassinations in the 70’s, listed Adelphi amongst their enemies.

The interest of the *Brigate Rosse* betrays an awareness that Adelphi’s editorial programme – which had been, from the very beginning, one of remarkable intellectual freedom – was in opposition to any political orthodoxy. The offshot of a political dilemma at Einaudi, Adelphi had over the years stayed faithful to its principle to identify and publish excellent books, both by well-known and less well-known authors, be they Italian or foreign, ancient or modern, without being influenced by prejudices of political correctness or allegiance to either the right or the left.

It is easy to see how these ideals, and their publishing programme, would fit with Calasso’s own vision, as it had been shaped by his literary interests, his education, and his upbringing. When he joined forces with Foà, Bazlen brought along the then twenty-one year old Roberto Calasso, already a friend of his and mentored by him.<sup>46</sup> Calasso reminisces:

Luciano Foà aveva lasciato l'Einaudi e insieme a Roberto Olivetti aveva fondato questa nuova casa editrice, il cui programma era in gran parte nella mente di Roberto Bazlen. Foà era amico di Bazlen, e voleva fare con lui certi libri che altrimenti non si riuscivano a fare. Quanto a me, venni coinvolto nel 1962, quando il nome Adelphi non era ancora stato trovato.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> They had been introduced by Elémire Zolla. See Cecchetti, *Roberto Calasso*, p. 18.

<sup>47</sup> Enrico Regazzoni, ‘Così nel nome di Nietzsche l'Italia scopri lo snobismo editoriale’, *La Repubblica*, 19 September 2003, p. 44.

Calasso never left Adelphi. In 1971 he became *direttore editoriale*, responsible for choosing the texts for publication, then in 1990 he was made *consigliere delegato*, and finally in 1999 he became *presidente*. After over four decades at the prestigious Milanese publishing house, where he strives to follow the work ethics of the Venetian Renaissance publisher Aldo Manuzio,<sup>48</sup> Calasso's name has become almost synonymous with that of Adelphi.

### III. Publisher, reader, author

Per quel che riguarda la letteratura, il vuoto era enorme. Si era in un'epoca in cui perfino la categoria del fantastico suonava sospetta, non so se mi spiego. Per questo facemmo subito *L'altra parte* di Kubin e il *Manoscritto trovato a Saragozza* di Potocki. C'era solo l'imbarazzo della scelta.<sup>49</sup>

Adelphi never radically changed its programme, so throughout his lifetime with the Milanese publishing house, Calasso's interest in all sorts of cultural traditions, Western and non-Western, high and low, was kept alive and stimulated by the richness and variety of his readings. The words Calasso used to describe his mentor Bazlen's role of 'infaticabile scopritore e suggeritore d'opere, di autori'<sup>50</sup> can easily be applied to Calasso himself, defined by Rushdie as a 'straordinario talento transculturale' and a

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<sup>48</sup> 'Infatti, se vi dicessi senza mezzi termini che a mio avviso un buon editore dei giorni nostri dovrebbe semplicemente tentare di fare quel che faceva Manuzio a Venezia nell'anno primo del sedicesimo secolo, voi potreste pensare che stia scherzando – mentre non scherzo affatto.' See Roberto Calasso, 'L'editoria come genere letterario', *La follia che viene dalle Ninfe*, Adelphi, Milan, pp.115-129, p. 121.

<sup>49</sup> Calasso, interviewed by Enrico Regazzoni, see Regazzoni, 'Nel nome di Nietzsche', p. 44.

<sup>50</sup> Id., *Cento lettere*, p. 152.

‘monumento vivente al valore delle peregrinazioni interculturali.’<sup>51</sup> Calasso’s interest in the mystical traditions of the East, Zen Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, went hand in hand with the discovery of “alien” literary forms. His *Cento lettere a uno sconosciuto* (2003) – a selection of a hundred book blurbs of texts he had introduced for Adelphi over the years – reveals the breadth and width of these interests, which configure in the readership not only the idea of ‘un programma editoriale’, but also of ‘un mondo possibile.’<sup>52</sup> This ‘mondo possibile’ appears to be an accurate description of Calasso’s approach to reading, and of his hunger for new horizons and new experiences. He reviews texts ranging from the *Histoire de la philosophie islamique* by Henry Corbin, to *La pensée chinoise* by Marcel Granet, to the *Essays in Idleness* by the Japanese Zen monk Kenko, to Arthur Schnitzler’s *Casanovas Heimfahrt* and Wedekind’s *Lulu*.

The breadth of his readings and publishing choices evokes Jorge Luis Borges’s emblematic ‘library of Babel’. When, in 1997, Calasso secured the copyright in Italy for the *opera omnia* of Borges – an author he has come to see as ‘l’immagine della letteratura stessa’<sup>53</sup> –, he celebrated the Argentine with words that reveal him in Calasso’s mind to be both a literary precursor, and an inspiration for the Adelphi programme as ‘un mondo possibile’: ‘è stato innanzitutto colui che ha dimostrato, con tutta la sua opera, che tutto può essere letteratura – e che la letteratura può essere tutto.’<sup>54</sup>

This journey into cultural traditions is no solipsistic self-indulgence. Calasso and the late Bazlen translated and published, often for the first time in Italy, an amazing range of ‘libri essenziali del nostro tempo’, which only ‘in un paese di inveterata angustia

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<sup>51</sup> Salman Rushdie ‘Ecco gli scrittori che mi hanno influenzato’, *La Repubblica*, 10 March 1999, <http://www.repubblica.it/online/fatti/khatami/rushdie/rushdie.html?ref=search> (visited 13 March 2008).

<sup>52</sup> Calasso, *Cento lettere*, back cover.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>54</sup> Matteo Collura, ‘Calasso: Così ho conquistato la Biblioteca di Borges’, *Corriere della Sera*, 14 February 1997, p. 31.

culturale' had for such a long time appeared as 'eccentrici'.<sup>55</sup> Without discounting the role of Einaudi (particularly through authors and readers like Pavese and Calvino), Bompiani, and Feltrinelli, as discussed above, we can say that Calasso and Adelphi were one of the forces responsible for taking Italian culture on a path of exploration, which also became one of conscious self-renewal.

Calasso has shaped the Adelphi's catalogue into a prime example of 'arte dell'editoria', an art that can be judged:

[...] con gli stessi criteri, il primo e l'ultimo dei quali è la forma: la capacità di dare forma a una pluralità di libri come se essi fossero i capitoli di un unico libro. E tutto ciò avendo cura – una cura appassionata e ossessiva – della veste di ogni volume, del modo in cui esso viene presentato. E infine anche – e non è certo il punto di minore importanza – di come quel libro può essere venduto al più alto numero di lettori.<sup>56</sup>

It could also be argued that Calasso's readings as a publisher provided the inspiration for his own literary creations, as a number of the authors published by Adelphi seem to have left a mark on his creative imagination. Adelphi published the neoplatonists Porphyry and Salust, which seem to be Calasso's main influences from late antiquity, and two of the filters through which he re-reads the classics. Other filters whose names stand out in the Adelphi catalogue are Giorgio Colli – not only for his work on Nietzsche, but also on Greek philosophy and Heidegger – and the ground-breaking art criticism of Aby Warburg.

The culmination of his career in the publishing industry – the presidency of Adelphi in 1999 – was followed by a prestigious recognition of his work as a writer and critic by

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<sup>55</sup> Calasso, *Cento lettere*, p. 152.

<sup>56</sup> Id., 'L'editoria come genere letterario', pp. 123-124.



Oxford University two years later. He was awarded the Weidenfeld Chair of Comparative European Literature. His Oxford lectures, later collected in *La letteratura e gli dei* (2001), throw a revealing light on his complex relationship with the classics, and particularly on his view of the pagan gods, which is crucial when trying to understand some of his earlier texts, such as *Ka* (1996) and *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia* (1988). The gods, reduced to mere forms in the seventeenth century, did come back and re-manifested themselves, starting from the poetry of Hölderlin and Novalis,<sup>57</sup> and culminating in Mallarmé, the poet who ‘notificava che la letteratura, uscita dalla porta della società, rientrava da una cosmica finestra, dopo aver assorbito in sé nulla meno che tutto.’<sup>58</sup> This new ‘letteratura’ of the gods is ‘assoluta’ in both senses of the world. It rules sovereign, having assimilated everything, and it is, according to its Latin etymology, free of ties:

[..] già all'inizio dell'Ottocento la parola aveva assunto certe connotazioni che oggi subito riconosciamo in essa: soprattutto le più azzardate e le più esigenti, che lasciano dietro di sé l'antica costruzione della retorica come una sorta di Kindergarten da abbandonare per sempre, fuggendo verso un sapere che trova fondamento in se stesso e si espande ovunque come una nube, capace di avvolgere ogni profilo, incurante di ogni confine. Questo nuovo essere, che apparve un certo giorno imprecisato e abita ancora tra noi, può essere definito letteratura assoluta.

Letteratura, perché si tratta di un sapere che si dichiara e si pretende inaccessibile per altra via che non sia la composizione letteraria; assoluta, perché è un sapere che si assimila alla ricerca di un assoluto – e perciò non può coinvolgere nulla meno del tutto; e al tempo

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<sup>57</sup> Id., *La letteratura*, p. 20.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 118-119.

stesso è qualcosa di ab-solutum, sciolto da qualsiasi vincolo di obbedienza o appartenenza, da qualsiasi funzionalità rispetto al corpo sociale.<sup>59</sup>

Parallel to his careers as publisher and critic are his achievements as an original writer, as a novelist and essayist, which make him, with Eco, one of the best-known Italian writers, both at home and abroad.

His first literary work, the novel *L'impuro folle*, a typical postmodern re-writing, inspired by Freud's and Jung's studies on paranoia, was published by Adelphi in 1974.

He is certainly better known as the author of a work in progress, which he started in 1983 with the publication of *La rovina di Kasch*, whose title is inspired by an African legend found by Calasso in the works of the German ethnologist Frobenius,<sup>60</sup> and which according to Calvino's review, 'tratta di due argomenti: il primo è Talleyrand, il secondo è tutto il resto'.<sup>61</sup> It focuses on the figure of the French diplomat, one of the key participants at the Congress of Vienna, who managed to survive unscathed the turbulent French history of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, serving first the cause of the *ancien régime*, then the *République*, then Napoleon, and finally the Restoration, 'l'unico che abbia saputo tradire tutto, ma non lo stile.'<sup>62</sup> In this portrayal of the French nobleman, Calasso seems to embody his own vision of 'absolute literature'; what attracts him to Talleyrand is the latter's appearance of a free ('ab-solutus') man, devoted only to form.

*La rovina di Kasch* was followed by *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia* (1988), which is dedicated to Greek mythology. This work, certainly his most popular to date, was recognised by great Italian and international intellectual figures (Brodskij, Rushdie,

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>60</sup> Cecchetti, *Calasso*, p. 23.

<sup>61</sup> Roberto Calasso, *La rovina di Kasch*, Adelphi, Milan, 1983, back cover.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

Chatwin, Citati, Manganelli to name a few),<sup>63</sup> as an important and meaningful book. Translated into over twenty languages, it was awarded a number of international awards, including the «Premio internazionale Federico Nietzsche» (1989), the «Prix européen de l'essai Charles Veillon» (1991) and the «Prix du meilleur livre étranger» (1992). If *Kasch* was focusing on 'la fine del mondo ciclico e rituale, il mondo dei sacrifici e degli dei',<sup>64</sup> *Le nozze* can be seen as 'la versione del mondo che è stato distrutto nella *Rovina di Kasch*.'<sup>65</sup>

*Le nozze* was followed by *Ka* (1996), a challenging re-writing of Indian mythology, in which Calasso focuses on the ritual origin of literature, and then in 2002 by *K.*, on Kafka.

The genre of this work-in-progress, in which Calasso seems to indulge in an almost metaphysical obsession with the letter 'K' – three of the six texts published so far explicitly begin with this letter, the title of the fourth refers to the marriage of Cadmus, which was spelt 'Kadmos' in Greek – defies classification. The first three texts of the work-in-progress published so far betray a will to confront and re-write, almost encyclopedically, a whole civilization: Hindu culture from the Veda to Buddha is the object of *Ka*; Greek culture from Homer to the Byzantine Nonnus is the theme of *Le nozze*; and the span of modern culture, from the end of the Enlightenment to Romanticism and thence decadence, which sees of the return of the gods in the modern, forms the content of *La rovina di Kasch*.

The trend for encyclopedic reviews of whole civilizations appears to have come to an end with *K.*, which focuses on a single author, Kafka. The choice of author, though, suggests a less obvious confrontation with Jewish and Mitteleuropa literature, which

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<sup>63</sup> All the foreign authors in this list know Italian.

<sup>64</sup> Cecchetti, *Calasso*, p. 25.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

had also haunted *L'impuro folle*. The years between the publications of these texts saw the release of two more traditional collections of essays: *I quarantanove gradini* (1991) – which contain an essay on Nietzsche ('Monologo fatale'), and focuses predominantly on the Jewish authors at the core of the *finis Austriae* culture, and the already mentioned *La letteratura e gli dèi*. His collaboration with Bruce Chatwin, whose works he published in Italian, resulted in the book *Sentieri tortuosi* (1998), a posthumous celebration of his friend.

2005 saw the publication of *La follia che viene dalle ninfe*, a collection of essays, which opens with the translation into Italian of 'La folie qui vient des Nymphes.' This brief text initially appeared in French,<sup>66</sup> and can be seen as his attempt to guide his readers in the interpretation of *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia*, as well as his first attempt at confronting the gods in the same manner as Warburg. The fifth text in the work-in-progress is *Il rosa Tiepolo* (2006), which is again, like *K.*, a confrontation with a single author, Tiepolo, a painter rather than a writer. On the trail of his beloved Warburg, Calasso, through a book where over eighty images achieve 'una sorta di osmosi fra parola e figure',<sup>67</sup> attempts to re-write the Venetian painter's work, which he celebrates as the last appearance in painting of that 'Olimpo dell'apparenza', which haunts his whole production.

In 2008, Calasso received two further prestigious international awards, both sanctioning the importance of this work at international level. In February he was awarded the Warburg Prize by the Warburg-Haus in Hamburg, for his contribution to the arts and the human sciences. In March of the same year, he was made *Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur e Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* by the French government.

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<sup>66</sup> Roberto Calasso, 'La folie qui vient des Nymphes', *Res* 26, Autumn 1994, pp. 125-132.

<sup>67</sup> Roberto Calasso, *Il rosa Tiepolo*, Adelphi, Milan 2007, back cover.

2008 also saw the release of the sixth, and to date the last, part of his work in progress, *La folie Baudelaire*. Despite the title, this work does not limit his focus to a single author but expands it to the whole cultural climate of the Paris of the second half of the nineteenth century. The great writers, from Baudelaire to Mallarmé, possibly to pay homage to the birth of photography, as well as to Baudelaire's interest in picture, are made object of narrative snapshots, and discussed together with the great impressionist painters of their time. Whilst the discussion of paintings continues the Warburgian trend of *Il rosa Tiepolo*, the book revisits and develops themes already familiar to the reader of the essays in *La letteratura e gli dei*.

The recognition of the intellectual importance of his work by such diverse intellectual audiences raises a fundamental question. Is Calasso's extremely complex work perceived as important because of the ideas he explicitly professes as a critic? Or is there something in his texts that, possibly unacknowledged by the author, speaks to educated contemporary audiences, accustomed to the writings of Borgés and his postmodern inheritors? To answer these questions, Calasso's texts need to be analysed, in search of clues to a relationship with postmodernism, and also with French poststructuralist theory, whose influence on postmodernism is widely acknowledged.

#### **IV. Between *destra* and *sinistra*: Calasso and Italian culture in the 1960s and 1970s**

As shown in the review of Italian publishing in the 1960s, Calasso is not the only Italian intellectual striving to 'deprovincialise' Italian literature, and open it up to new influences; therefore his work should be analysed in the context of the debate between

the right and the left; the great divide which marked Italian culture in the postwar decades. The postwar years, with the ideological homage to the cultural values of the *Resistenza*, saw the affirmation of a generation of writers whose heroes were the great American writers of the 1930s, such as Steinbeck, Faulkner and Hemingway. This generation of *neorealists*, like Pavese, Vittorini, Fenoglio, even the early Calvino, not only contributed to reinforcing the mythology of the *Resistenza* – in which they had often taken direct part –, but endorsed, within and without their writings, Marxist values such as social equality and atheism.

In addition to the writers, as the discussion on the Italian publishing scene will have suggested, the majority of critics were either openly Marxist or subject to Marxist influence. Lukacs, published by both Einaudi and Feltrinelli, was one of the most revered post-war critics, for far more than providing the critical framework for the theorisation of *neorealism*. In the 1960s, other strands of Marxist thinking emerged from Germany, namely Adorno and the Frankfurt school. Both were well-known to Calasso, as he had met Adorno as a young man in Rome – his first published work was an essay on Adorno and surrealism.<sup>68</sup>

It was not only orthodox communist intellectuals who were influenced by Marxism. The tormentedly religious Pasolini combined the almost mystical intensity of his faith with the egalitarian aspirations of left-wing intellectuals. Even a deeply “literary” writer like Calvino – who, when moving on from the neorealist beginning of *I sentieri dei nidi di ragno*, had encountered his fair share of criticism from fellow readers at Einaudi because of what they saw as an excess of imagination in his books – paid homage to the theme of the *classe operaia* in texts like *Marcovaldo* (1963).

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<sup>68</sup> Lee, ‘Prince of Books’, p. 50.

In this cultural scenario, Calasso's rejection of political commitment stands out. His comment is that 'when you know a thing from the inside, when you can see clearly what functions and what does not function in a political stance, it loses its power of enchanting.'<sup>69</sup> Through a number of reflections in *La rovina di Kasch*, the books where he appears more willing to engage in reflections on politics, Calasso gives us sufficient clues to elaborate on this remark. Calasso proceeds to a thorough examination of Marx's ideas, and gives him credit not for his egalitarian utopia, but for his theorization of *das Kapital*, which to Calasso is just another name for what Adorno-Horkheimer called *Aufklärung*, Nietzsche called *Nihilismus*, Heidegger *Nihilismus* and *Metaphysik*.<sup>70</sup>

Marx non ci soccorre per quelle sue grossolane, umanistiche, repellenti, tronfie, dopolavoristiche concezioni della società giusta, che dovrà venire, ma per la sua descrizione insostituibile della società della sostituzione, dello scambio, quale essa è – oggi, ora, ovunque, nella fissità della sua perenne espansione.<sup>71</sup>

This credit to Marx's theories is confirmed by Calasso's adoption of some of Marx's vocabulary as a tool to reading the role of art and literature today. Marx and Nietzsche display in his view a common will to react to Stirner,<sup>72</sup> the German author presented as the anti-Talleyrand in *La rovina di Kasch*, and to whom Calasso devotes one of the longest essays in *I quarantanove gradini*.<sup>73</sup> However, Calasso does not see in the Russian actualization of Marxism the fulfillment of Marx's utopia, but rather 'la

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>70</sup> Calasso, *Kasch*, pp. 287-288.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 313.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 331.

<sup>73</sup> Id., 'Accompagnamento alla lettura di Stirner', in *I quarantanove gradini*, Adelphi, Milan, 1991, pp. 371-416.

fisionomia occulta' of his arch-enemy Stirner. The Russian revolution, claims Calasso, was conducted by 'de-classati', rather than 'la classe operaia.'<sup>74</sup>

Even after having dissociated Marx from the Soviet incarnation of communism, Calasso remains unwilling to associate himself with either the right or the left: to him, both communism/socialism and capitalism are merely 'forms':

Da sempre avvinghiati, protervi infanti, capitalismo e socialismo giocano lo stesso gioco, seppure con acri contrasti di stile, «forme gemelle e rivali di una sola e identica fede».<sup>75</sup>

His disenchantment with the left did not therefore result in any great affection for the right wing. Calasso noted that there is a 'fraterna solidarietà fra Marx e i teorici freddi e crudeli che si pongono dalla parte del capitalismo',<sup>76</sup> and explained in detail what he meant by these statements:

Capitalismo: è il nome economico di un immane rivolgimento nel cervello, il predominio raggiunto dallo scambio, quindi dalla digitalità, su tutto; ogni altro principio diventa un'isola al suo interno, così come all'interno del mercato planetario vi sono isole tribali. Il socialismo stesso, fratello nemico del capitalismo, dal capitalismo dipende come un volantino di propaganda dell'Esercito della Salvezza si riconduce ai versetti di Isaia. Questo nella teoria. Quando poi il socialismo si applica, per correggere le malignità intrinseche del capitale, produce subito ancora maggiori malignità, senza per altro intaccare quelle che avversa. E questa volta sono malignità più odiose, perché più umane. Nella crudezza del capitalismo permane un elemento di ordalia: il denaro. Nel socialismo, che ha la mira più inetta: mettere tutto nelle mani dell'uomo, non c'è più un oscuro elemento discriminante extra-umano, qual'è il denaro. Al suo opposto appaiono nuovi sacerdoti: le spie.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Id., *Kasch*, p. 344.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 287.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 306.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 320-321.



Given these views, it seems inevitable that Calasso chose to remain independent: too secular and culturally hostile to capitalism, which ‘chiude la porta al regno delle immagini’,<sup>78</sup> to align himself with the cultural forces of the right; too critically independent to side with the ‘sacerdotal-orthodox’ aspect of Marxist culture, which in the case of Einaudi he had seen capable of posing a serious threat to the independence of cultural choices. Interestingly, in *La rovina di Kasch* he will also accuse leftwing culture of being allied with snobbism.<sup>79</sup>

Calasso was able to turn his isolated position in the political debate into an intellectual advantage, and used his independence from the extremes of both schools of thought to devote himself to his only real faith, namely the excellence of books and form. A clue in this sense is in his risvolto on Landolfi in *Cento lettere*, where he laments the ‘perenne vocazione italica per il “politicamente corretto”, che obbligò per almeno trent’anni dopo la guerra a tacciare di dannuzianesimo tutto ciò che sapesse di *decadence*, quindi di letteratura.’<sup>80</sup>

The pleasure with which Calasso recounts, in *La Letteratura e gli dei*, how the Hindu gods owed their immortality to the protection of the poetic meters,<sup>81</sup> reveals clearly that his political allegiance lies not with the ‘forms’, such as capitalism or socialism, but with ‘Form’, with the beauty of literature, and specifically of ‘absolute literature’, ‘la letteratura nella sua forma più acuminata e intollerante di qualsiasi bardatura sociale.’<sup>82</sup>

Reflecting on the power of meter, Calasso even puts forward the idea of the divinity of form itself: ‘Forse i metri non soltanto conducono presso gli dei, ma i metri sono dei.’<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 315.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>80</sup> Id., *Cento lettere*, p. 197.

<sup>81</sup> Id., *La letteratura*, pp. 123-124.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

In this religion of form, of literature, siding with any orthodox right or left would mark the end of the freedom implied in the definition of ‘letteratura assoluta’. Calasso confers on writers the exclusive right and ability to interpret ‘absolute literature’:

Non certo agli storici, che devono ancora oggi prendere atto di ciò che è accaduto; e raramente ai puri critici [...] Quasi soltanto gli scrittori sono in grado di aprirci i loro laboratori segreti. [...] Quando leggiamo i saggi di Baudelaire o di Proust, di Hofmannsthal o di Benn, di Valéry o di Auden, di Brodskij o di Mandel'stam, di Marina Cvetaeva o di Kraus, di Yeats o di Montale, di Borges o di Nabokov, di Manganelli o di Calvino, di Canetti o di Kundera, avvertiamo subito – anche se ciascuno poteva detestare l'altro, o ignorarlo o muovergli contro – che tutti parlano della stessa cosa. Non per questo sono ansiosi di nominarla. [...].Quella specie di letteratura è un essere che basta a se stesso.<sup>84</sup>

Calasso anticipates the criticism, which could be aimed at his view, particularly from politically engaged intellectuals. ‘Self-referentiality’ does not mean, in his view, that literature should be relegated to a modernist ivory tower, having cut loose all links with life and society:

Non si può sensatamente dubitare che la letteratura sia autoreferenziale: come potrebbe non esserlo una forma? Ma al tempo stesso è onnivora, simile allo stomaco di certi animali, dove si incontrano chiodi, cocci e fazzoletti. Talvolta intatti, insolenti memento che qualcosa è successo, laggiù, in quel luogo composto di molteplici, divergenti e mal definiti realia, che è l'alveo di tutta la letteratura. Ma anche della vita in genere.<sup>85</sup>

On the contrary, ‘self-referentiality’ can put us in touch with the true sense of the human

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., pp. 145-146.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

condition. In a move that seems right out of a textbook of Eastern philosophy, Calasso seems to point to our knowledge only being possible through immanence, rather than transcendence. But the immanence he is positing is ironical. Form can only be known through form, literature through literature, and yet this knowledge of literature from within, from a self-enclosed self-referential universe, seems to be the one experience which enables us to attempt the interpretation of life. ‘Di forma si può parlare in modo persuasivo soltanto attraverso altre forme.’<sup>86</sup> Yet, as we have just seen on the previous page, in the author’s lay religion, form is another name for the divine, for the measure of life. Should Calasso’s focus on “unfashionable” topics such as the relationship between the human and the divine, and his celebration of the absoluteness of literature – in an age of doubt in the referential powers of language and writing – be seen as an anti-postmodern and anti-theory statement? Or should ‘absolute literature’ be seen as a postmodern, and poststructuralist, statement?

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

## Chapter II

### From Marx to the gods

#### [Abstract]

This chapter will illustrate how Calasso, in a progressive emancipation from Marxist theory, comes to articulate his notion of ‘absolute literature’, and what influences lay behind this formulation.

‘Gli orfani del «Politecnico»’, an essay in which Calasso reflects on Vittorini’s *rivista* as a missed opportunity for regenerating Italian culture, will enable me to unearth the artistic reasons behind for Calasso’s rejection of left-wing ideology, in its Sovietic and Communist incarnations. I will however demonstrate that the thought of Marx does retain a meaningful role in Calasso’s view of art and creativity, and that some of his most original ideas on ‘absolute literature’ are expressed in a language influenced by Marx’s vocabulary. From page 54, I will discuss this element of Calasso’s work mainly through the essay ‘Déesses entretenues’, which reveals in his view of ‘absolute literature’ a creative combination of Marxist and Warburgian ideas.

## I. Communists, *Politecnico*, and Marx

Alongside the reflections in *La rovina di Kasch*, just discussed, Calasso provides interesting clues to the reasons for his progressive detachment from Marxism in the essay ‘Gli orfani del «Politecnico»’, published by *Il corriere della sera* in 1975, and later collected in *I quarantanove gradini*. In the essay, Calasso recognises the formal modernity of *Il politecnico* in terms of layout and acknowledges Vittorini as ‘uno straordinario impresario culturale,’<sup>1</sup> who, in the difficult cultural climate of postwar Italy, dared to profess allegiance to culture, rather than to the Communist party, even when this entailed clashing with Togliatti. Calasso quotes Vittorini’s remark that ‘la linea che divide, nel campo della cultura, il progresso dalla reazione, non si identifica esattamente con la linea che li divide in politica,’<sup>2</sup> and views Togliatti’s ‘perfido intervento’, which halted the magazine, as coherent with Togliatti’s political agenda:

Basta conoscere un po’ la vita di Togliatti, la storia della politica culturale del PCI e, in genere, la storia dei rapporti tra partiti comunisti e letteratura perché la cosa appaia del tutto naturale. Certo, si può rimpiangere che Togliatti si comportasse come un Mazzarino travestito da professore di liceo umanista (o viceversa) e non dimostrasse il genio critico e polemico del Trockij di *Letteratura e rivoluzione*. Ma non si può negare la perfetta coerenza del suo intervento con la costruzione politica che da anni stava preparando.<sup>3</sup>

The mistrust of orthodox Communism is evident here. Furthermore, the ironic comparison between Togliatti and Cardinal Mazzarino confirms that for Calasso left-wing, right-wing, and Catholic culture are all interchangeable, as all are equally capable

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<sup>1</sup> Roberto Calasso, ‘Gli orfani del «Politecnico»’, in *I quarantanove gradini*, Adelphi, Milano, 1991, pp. 179-285, p. 282.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 284.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 281.

of crushing freedom of expression in the name of an ideology. In one of his Nietzschean moments, Calasso would argue that all these positions are mere ‘ipostasi’,<sup>4</sup> to be demolished by critical analysis.

Calasso credits *Il politecnico* with an avant-garde role. He notes that, in a typical ‘beffa della storia’, the debate started by Vittorini’s review will trigger the renewal of that ‘ottusa cultura degli anni '50’, responsible for the magazine’s premature closure. However, he concludes that Vittorini’s method of generating debate (posing questions to the readership, thus introducing themes in terms of issues, and eliciting a yes/no reaction), in his view ‘a coazione alle inutili scelte’,<sup>5</sup> was also its limit, and undermined the common sense stance used by Vittorini against Togliatti.

The author notes that Franco Fortini’s *pièce* on Kafka, printed by *Il politecnico* in October 1947,<sup>6</sup> had given Vittorini the opportunity – which he had either failed to see, or chosen not to seize – to make the magazine’s contribution to Italian culture all the more significant. Fortini had written that ‘Kafka, o Leopardi, Dante o Dostoevskij non sono né con noi né contro di noi: sono evidentemente *con i migliori*.’<sup>7</sup> Calasso remarks that, at the time of his essay (1975), Italian left-wing culture still had trouble with any approach that did not entail explicitly taking sides with ‘questo’ against ‘quello’. This not only precluded the acknowledgement of the presence of positive elements in both ‘questo’ and ‘quello’, but also the ability to see beyond the opposition, and understand that ‘la struttura stessa del «questo e quello» è inutilizzabile e vacua, non più un aiuto, ma un incombente ostacolo. Perché «i migliori» di cui parlava Fortini non sono né «questo» né «quello».’<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Id., *Kasch*, p. 195.

<sup>5</sup> Id., ‘Gli orfani del «Politecnico»’, p. 284.

<sup>6</sup> Franco Fortini, ‘Capoversi su Kafka’, *Il Politecnico*, Ottobre 1947, pp. 10-15.

<sup>7</sup> Calasso, ‘Gli orfani del «Politecnico»’, p. 284.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285.

The inability to go beyond the political *aut/aut* is therefore the main limit of *Il politecnico*. Even though ‘su quelle pagine non ritroviamo soltanto il tracciato di quella che sarebbe diventata la più truce cultura degli anni '50, ma anche una grande curiosità per tutto quell’*altro* che non vi avrebbe avuto pieno diritto di cittadinanza,’ the review ‘non riusciva a convogliare, se non in piccola parte, quel che di veramente nuovo i primi quarant’anni del secolo avevano dato.’<sup>9</sup> This particularly affects the review’s ability to appreciate the authors dear to Calasso’s heart, such as the theorists and practitioners of ‘*absolute literature*’:

Si parla di Kafka e di Joyce, di Schoenberg e (addirittura) di Heidegger, di Nietzsche e di Freud, ma stranamente, ogni volta che si tratta di questi (e molti altri) nomi, sembra che ci sia bisogno di giustificarli, si sente un’esitazione, un goffo dubbio: saranno o non saranno dalla nostra parte? Non saranno una trappola del nemico?<sup>10</sup>

This negative view of postwar Italian left-wing culture is explicitly linked to its unease with ‘free’ literature. In this light, Calasso’s choice to pay homage to Karl Marx, and treat the German philosopher as the most lucid analyst of the capitalist world and of the conditions which bring about the current incarnation of literature, appears remarkable. Any mistrust of Marx’s twentieth century epigones does not seem to have affected his admiration for Marx himself, defined as the ‘founding father’, ‘il più prodigioso produttore di fantasmi entro il discorso economico’<sup>11</sup> and a ‘grande visionario, maestro dello humour nero.’<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 283.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 283.

<sup>11</sup> Id., ‘Déesses entretenues’, in *I quarantanove gradini*, Adelphi, Milan, pp. 243-278, p. 254.

<sup>12</sup> Id., ‘Un cannibale celeste’ in *I quarantanove gradini*, Adelphi, Milan, 1991, pp. 287-289, p. 287.

Calasso's writing, like Derrida's, reveals three German forebears: Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. While Nietzsche and Heidegger are a relatively recurring presence in his critical reflections (with Heidegger surfacing mainly as a commentator of Nietzsche), the spectre of Marx in Calasso's theory surfaces only occasionally. However, Calasso admits to 'particolari tenerezze'<sup>13</sup> towards Marx's thought. He claims that Nietzsche and Marx were fighting the same war against the *ipostasi*, vague names of great ideals ('Ragione', 'Libertà', 'Umanità', 'Causa')<sup>14</sup> which had survived like hollow signifiers the fall of the gods, and which are epitomised in Stirner. This concept may sound familiar to readers of the Russian intellectual Aleksandr Herzen – who, according to the book blurb of the Adelphi edition of his *From Another Shore*, 'da socialista illuminato, scrisse a caldo la più formidabile, chiaroveggente, devastante liquidazione del socialismo'<sup>15</sup> and of the philosopher Isaiah Berlin, also published by Adelphi.

Furthermore, for Calasso, Nietzsche and Heidegger call *Nihilismus* what Marx calls *Kapital*. If we take *Nihilismus* to signify all the social and cultural constructions, which force humanity to lead a purely negative life, to simply "carry a weight", like the Ass in *Als sprach Zarathustra*, one can see the analogy with Marx's *Kapital*, and the capitalist world as the force condemning humanity to still carry this weight, even after the fall of all other hypostases.

However, in *La rovina di Kasch*, Calasso proceeds beyond this interesting equivalence. Calasso defines money as 'il segno del rappresentare, [...] del predominio raggiunto dal sistema del rappresentare, quindi: della convenzione, della sostituzione, dello stare per, dell'intercambiabile – sul sistema del corrispondere, quindi: dell'analogia, del

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<sup>13</sup> Id., 'Congiure del Tao', in *I quarantanove gradini*, Adelphi, Milan, 1991, pp. 199-205, p. 204.

<sup>14</sup> Id., *Kasch*, p. 195.

<sup>15</sup> Translated as *Dall'altra sponda*. See the Adelphi *risvolto* to Aleksandr Herzen, *Dall'altra sponda*, Adelphi, Milan, 1993.



simbolo nel senso misterico, della non discorsività, dell'associazione, dell'unicità.' He then relies on this definition to link Marx with a crucial discovery:

La scoperta di Marx a questo si riferisce: al passaggio del valore di scambio da potenza periferica e marginale a potenza primaria e centrale del mondo moderno, il suo passaggio a potenza *capitale*.[...]Basta dire che si vive *nel segno* del valore di scambio, e che il valore di scambio è il *nome* economico di una potenza che altrimenti si manifesta nella sostituzione, nella convenzione, nel rappresentare in genere, in tutte le sue forme.<sup>16</sup>

In agreement with the assessment of Western recent philosophy, money, *Kapital*, is presented as the great power of our times, and as almost synonymous with *sostituzione*. Slowly, Calasso moves the reader towards the idea of a *fetish*, then of a *god*. He first draws an analogy between *Kapital*/money and a crystal:

La luce del cristallo, rifrangendosi, impone queste *sue* caratteristiche a tutto ciò che in essa mira a trasformarsi. E, con questo passaggio, muta radicalmente il regime delle immagini nella circolazione: da *feticci*, concrezioni uniche, insostituibili e irriducibili della potenza, diventano cose innanzitutto sostituibili, la cui virtù è appunto la sostituibilità. Eppure – e qui la magia nera agisce ancora una volta – l'incanto del feticcio non scompare: ora esso avvolge non più le singole immagini circolanti, ma la totalità del processo.<sup>17</sup>

Culturally, therefore, capitalism sanctions 'lo strapotere dell'immagine, che giunge addirittura a trasformarsi in cosa, mentre prima era pura presenza mentale invisibile. Ma, dal momento in cui quella cosa esiste, si chiude la porta che dà sul regno delle immagini.'<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Calasso, *Kasch*, pp. 321-322.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 315.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 315.

The sources of literature are destroyed when reality becomes too real, Calasso seems to imply, when mathematical equivalence replaces metaphor. Calasso's 'analogy' is another word for what Baudelaire called 'correspondances', in the well-known homonymous sonnet in *Les fleurs du mal*, where nature becomes a temple.<sup>19</sup> Calasso explains that in an 'analogia' or 'corrispondenza' the sense of a link between the two objects put in correlation is much stronger than in a 'substitution,' where one may replace the other regardless of any relationship between the two. 'Analogia', in Calasso's theory, has to be understood through the idea of 'sacrificio.' In a sacrifice, a being is so closely related to another that an action on the first, or by the first, triggers a corresponding action on or by the other. The loss of the sense of the sacred, enshrined in sacrifice, brings the modern West to paralysis.

Ogni sacrificio è il riconoscimento di un Altro. Alla fine di tutte le emancipazioni l'Occidente non può riconoscere altro che se stesso. La sua paralisi, che si cela dietro l'esagitarsi della prassi, consegue al non sapere più a chi darsi. Caduti gli dei, non sono però cadute le ipostasi: allora il mondo finisce per darsi a quel goffo, sinistro corteo che Stirner aveva descritto: alla Ragione, alla Libertà, all'Umanità, alla Causa. Ma il risveglio da quelle ipostasi è amaro, più che da qualsiasi altra superstizione.<sup>20</sup>

This concept, which may sound familiar to readers of Herzen, also appears to have implications for literary theory and practice. The loss of 'analogy,' and its replacement by 'substitution,' seems to mark the death sentence of all literature still aspiring to generate valuable and legitimate meaning through that permanent gap between signified and signifier, emblemized in metaphors. The way out of this desolate state is shown to

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<sup>19</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'Correspondances', in *Les fleurs du mal*, <http://fleursdumal.org/poem/103>, visited on 12 February 2008. This sonnet is referenced specifically by Calasso when discussing analogy in *La folie Baudelaire*, pp. 23-29, particularly at p. 26.

<sup>20</sup> Calasso, *Kasch*, p. 195.

Calasso by Marx, the same master, who unveiled this grim state of affairs to the world. To find this way out, he puts the German thinker's thought through an analysis, whose depth, as Calasso is a reader of Benjamin, could be called "exegetic", and in a place that, at first glance, appears inappropriate.

## II. Marx and the nymphs

*I quarantanove gradini* devotes ample attention to Marx, and to thinkers of Marxist affiliation, such as Adorno and Benjamin. This collection of essays could be read simultaneously as an anthology of reflections on the great names of the culture of the *finis Austriae* and as Calasso's way of dealing directly, outside the frame of his pseudo-novelistic work-in-progress, with political issues. As in the work-in-progress, if we exclude *Kasch*, such issues tend to be pushed outside the reader's frame of reference, *I quarantanove gradini* is one of the most enlightening works by Calasso. On the basis of the clues scattered in 'Gli orfani del *Politecnico*', I will propose that these essays are read as both a collection of reflections on the culture of the *finis Austriae*, and as political texts. I believe they can also be read as a *monologo fatale*, enabling Calasso to establish, with a simultaneously inward and outward motion, the places occupied in his mind and in current cultural perception by the "founding fathers" of contemporary culture – from the psychologists, to the philosophers and the writers. In a fashion typical of this author, there is no positivistic/Aristotelian need for schematising or subdividing these thinkers and artists into respective categories; they all naturally belong to both categories.

Another possible reading of *I quarantanove gradini* would be to treat it as Calasso's first and richest confrontation with Judaism. This confrontation continues in his work-in-progress, with *K.*, a re-writing of the works of the Jewish Kafka. This reading of *I quarantanove gradini* is encouraged not only by the fact that the majority of essays are devoted to Jewish authors, such as Freud, Marx, Benjamin, Kafka, Adorno and Kraus, but even more by the title of the collection which, as Calasso states twice in the text, is a reference to a sentence written by Walter Benjamin in 1931, in a letter to Max Rychner: 'Io non ho mai potuto pensare e studiare se non in senso teologico, se così posso dire, e cioè in accordo con la dottrina talmudica dei quarantanove gradini di significato di ogni passo della Torah.'<sup>21</sup> In 'Pratica dell'illuminazione profana', Calasso uses this quotation to stress that Benjamin's theological analysis was applied mainly to non-Jewish texts: 'Tutti i luoghi si adattavano a quell'eminente Commentatore di Scritture più dei luoghi reali della Sacra Scrittura.'<sup>22</sup> It could be argued that, in this book, Calasso, whilst trying to make sense of mainly Jewish texts through the critical filter of Western culture, deliberately takes the opposite route. One of the key words in this sentence seems to be 'teologico': even though his theology clearly differs from Benjamin's, in that the unique Jewish God is explicitly replaced by a number of pagan deities, Calasso's notion of divine literature, and of the divinity of form, finds an echo in Benjamin's attempt to read literary texts with the same tools and attention dedicated to the word of God. Calasso finds a kindred spirit in Benjamin, the Marxist who had never read Marx and found reading Bucharin a disastrous experience, but who nevertheless felt that 'la più consunta *platitude* marxista ha in sé più gerarchie di significato che non l'odierna

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<sup>21</sup> This sentence, taken from a letter to his editor Max Rychner, is translated and discussed by Calasso. See Id., 'I quarantanove gradini', in *I quarantanove gradini*, Adelphi, Milan, 1991, pp. 125-128, p. 126, and 'Pratica dell'illuminazione profana', in *I quarantanove gradini*, Adelphi, Milan, 1991, pp. 343-347, p. 345. For the original text see Theodor Adorno and Gershom Scholem eds., *Walter Benjamin, Briefe*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 1966, vol. 2, p. 254.

<sup>22</sup> Id., 'Illuminazione profana', p. 345.

profondità borghese, che ha sempre un significato solo, quello dell'apologia.<sup>23</sup> They do not only agree in their view of Baudelaire as a turning point in literature. First of all, Benjamin's reflections on art in the age of mass reproducibility find an echo in the analysis of contemporary culture which emerges in Calasso's reading of Marx. In particular, Benjamin's concept of *aura* resonates with Calasso's discussion of the discrepancy between substitution and analogy, and with the latter's belief in the godlike aspect of literature. Thirdly, Calasso seems to find in Benjamin almost the complement to his own theory: Benjamin's exegetic readings, striving to unravel innumerable layers of meaning in a literary text, and to approach it with the devotion normally reserved to the Holy Scriptures, seem to require by definition an 'absolute reader:'

Se, come suggeriva Adorno, il pensiero di Benjamin non si svolge «nell'ambito dei concetti», [...] il suo vero ambito [...] è un luogo che si può riconoscere solo se vi si entra. [...] Per varcare quella soglia non è richiesta una particolare disciplina speculativa, ma piuttosto è indispensabile aver cercato, e incontrato, un'esperienza che ha la paradossale singolarità di essere al tempo stesso pienamente esoterica e pienamente profana.[...] Il lettore, il pensatore, colui che è in attesa, il *flâneur* sono tipi dell'illuminato come il mangiatore d'oppio, il sognatore, l'ebbro.<sup>24</sup>

Reading is simultaneously an esoteric and profane experience, and the ideal reader of 'absolute literature', an 'illuminato', sees relationships between words, images, and texts, not as examples of 'substitution' but rather as Baudelairean 'correspondences', as an analogy between terms, in which each term has a value in its own right in addition to the value created by the analogy.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 345-346.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 347.

In 1968 Roland Barthes famously declared the ‘death of the author.’<sup>25</sup> What he meant by this statement was the end of the conception of the author as godlike. Barthes believed that the text should replace the persona of the author as the focus of criticism. Barthes’ criticism demolished the myth of authorship, by declaring that the meaning intended by the author is irrecoverable in a text, and that the interpretation of a text is an antitheological activity of release of the potential innumerable meanings contained in the text itself. Calasso reacts to the issues posed by ‘the death of the author’, with a glorification of the role of the reader, an operation in which Benjamin offers him invaluable support.

Calasso reviews Marx thoroughly. This review, being performed by a man of letters, rather than a philosopher, and therefore without specific background in a speculative discipline, produces an ‘absolute reading,’ an experience both esoteric and profane. I use the word ‘experience’ to stress that Calasso not only analyses Marx’s terminology and its meaning, but also tackles Marx’s thought like a mystic experience, ‘un luogo che si può riconoscere solo se ci si entra’, almost like Plato’s cave.

Even more than through the condensed comments in *Kasch*, Calasso’s ‘absolute’ reading of Marx is best discussed through his essay ‘Déesses entretenues’, also included in *I quarantanove gradini*. First published in 1975, the same year of the essay on *Il politecnico*, this text was the introduction to the Adelphi edition of Wedekind’s *Mine-Haha*. *Mine-Haha* is part of an unfinished tetralogy, to which Calasso feels that critics have so far not paid sufficient interest, leaving aside ‘l’ombra di febbrile nostalgia che passava nello sguardo di Adorno quando lo nominava, forse la stessa che abita le sue parole su Albertine addormentata.’<sup>26</sup> However, his review of Wedekind turns out to be a

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<sup>25</sup> See Roland Barthes, ‘La mort de l’Auteur’, in *Le bruissement de la langue*, Seuil, Paris, 1984, pp. 61-67.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249.

reading of Marx, who is discussed throughout the introduction at much more length than Wedekind himself. Calasso also similarly uses this text to confront Aby Warburg. Therefore, following Calasso's trail, I will not focus on how he re-reads Wedekind, but rather on how he uses Wedekind as an opportunity for re-reading Marx and Warburg. Dr. Schreber (Freud and Jung's case study on paranoia, who had taken centre stage in Calasso's first novel, *L'impuro folle*, a year earlier) sets the scene for the essay on *Mine-Haha*, and introduces 'le fanciulle-uccello',<sup>27</sup> also present in *L'impuro folle*. This incipit rings irreverently anomalous: the critic introduces a character from his own fiction – even though a historical one – into a work devoted to another author. This self-reflexive operation is however indicative of the importance Calasso attaches to this text. It signals his intention to read it for private reasons, rather to assist Wedekind's audience in their reading of this author.

*Mine-Haha* is devoted to the theme of the education of girls<sup>28</sup> brought up in a park, isolated, like Kraus's 'Chinese Wall', from the outside world. The only contact of the inhabitants of the park with the outside world is with other infants who arrive to be educated there, and the money flowing into the park – paid by external spectators of the theatre show, through which the girls are sold/initiated to the outside world before returning to it – and destined to fund the education of a new wave of girls.

After introducing us to the theme of the book, Calasso likens *Mine-Haha* to a crystal<sup>29</sup> – an image also present in the discussion of Marx in *Kasch* – and explicitly suggests that the text should be read through Marx, Klossowski, Mauss, Elwin, Baudelaire and

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 244.

<sup>28</sup> In Wedekind's intentions, this text should have been the first in a planned tetralogy, of which the second and third part would be dedicated to the sacrificial rituals of spring and autumn, and the fourth to the education of boys.

<sup>29</sup> Calasso, 'Déesses entretenues', p. 249.

Benjamin.<sup>30</sup> However, his reading focuses predominantly on Marx and *Mine-Haha* is presented as the literary embodiment of the notion of ‘fantasmagoria delle merci’:

Appena evoca la fantasmagoria delle merci, Marx si abbandona a una proliferazione delle immagini, eppure non offre una costruzione critpomitologica che sia adeguata a rappresentare la totalità di quel mondo, a meno che essa non coincida con tutto l’immenso, debordante edificio incompiuto del Capitale. Anni dopo, invece, un minuscolo, precisissimo emblema di quel mondo sarebbe apparso, una miniatura velata da quella luce opalescente che, dicono i libertini, è appunto un peculiare prodotto del «misticismo del mondo delle merci»: il parco di *Mine-Haha*.<sup>31</sup>

Calasso’s decision to read Wedekind’s text as an emblem of the literary work that Marx had not produced seems irreverent both towards Wedekind – whose text is not treated as sacred but analyzed in place of a non-existent one, conjured up by Calasso through a series of quotations from Marx, and towards Marx himself – who may well have had theoretical reasons for not writing literature. The title of the essay refers to the girls as goddesses, which, in Calasso’s language, seems to point to Wedekind as a practitioner of ‘absolute literature’. However, these goddesses are scrutinized through the philosophical lens of an atheistic thinker and turned into prostitutes, albeit sacred ones. The reference to the goddesses may also sound irreverent towards the atheist Marx, who, in Calasso’s essay, becomes the quasi-author of a fictional work on pagan deities. Calasso, however, seems to believe in a ‘dimensione teologica del capitale.’<sup>32</sup> Calasso’s analysis of the second corollary of ‘post-storia’ supports this interpretation. The author,

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 251.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 255-256.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 272.



for example, highlights Marx's use of mystical terms: 'I commentatori le hanno spesso evitate, come fossero uno sviante barocchismo.'<sup>33</sup>

I would also draw attention to the fact that Calasso describes the literary work Marx could have composed to illustrate 'il misticismo del mondo delle merci' as 'costruzione criptomitologica'. As Calasso credits Marx with using mystical language with great ease, it is unclear why his mythology should be 'cripto', or 'hidden'.

One reason why Calasso may feel that mythology should be 'concealed' in Marx, could lie in his difficulty to reconcile sacrifice and substitution. The difference between economic exchange and gift/sacrifice lies, as outlined above, in the fact that 'scambio' is a figure of substitution, between two entities treated as equivalent. Instead, 'dono' or 'sacrificio' are figures of analogy, they foreground a correspondence between two entities or actions which are never identical, nor commensurable. The difference between the two actions or figures in a sacrifice allows for the analogy to be meaningful, for the sacrifice to be successful, and for the chain sacrifice-divine action to continue its existence.

However, Calasso notes that 'l'equivalenza è sempre presente nel sacrificio e lo corrode,' and credits Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialektik der Aufklärung* with the determination of 'il punto di sutura tra il sacrificio e lo scambio delle merci' in 'la sostituzione sacrificale.'<sup>34</sup> This is the 'astuzia fondatrice [...] che permette di instaurare il regime dell'equivalenza'. Whilst this thought is post-Marxian, Calasso observes that Marx condemns exchange, and yet seems to find no way out of it. Even the physical disappearance of money in the banking system, only succeeds in turning man's body into an extension of the body of money.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 272.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 263.

La «produzione di merci» non è dunque soltanto una fase storica, ma la storia stessa in quanto corrosa al suo interno dal nichilismo, che è innanzitutto la pratica della sostituibilità, la furia algebrica, la negazione di ogni incommensurabile, la metaforicità-improprietà radicale.<sup>35</sup>

This could justify Calasso's belief that all Marx could write was not a mythology but a 'cryptomythology'. A mythology of substitution may also have required a degree of irony, to be conveyed through parody, particularly as today 'navighiamo nella fluida equivalenza di tutto con tutto e ogni cifra è manifesta: parodia del Verbo, *per speculum in aenigmate*.'<sup>36</sup> Calasso calls our times *post-storia*, 'quella parte di storia che viene messa in scena nel laboratorio sperimentale del nichilismo.'<sup>37</sup> While in *Kasch* he dates *post-storia* as starting at the end of World War II, in 'Les déesses entretenues' he claims it started with Hegel's claim that history was over, 'quando, inavvertitamente, il nichilismo' (another name for *Kapital*) 'ebbe divorato le ultime forme sussistenti.'<sup>38</sup> Regardless of his dating of the end of history, Calasso believes that 'alla post-storia non appartiene l'utopia, ma la parodia e l'inversione.'<sup>39</sup>

A 'hidden' mythology may also appear as the correct strategy to adopt in order to highlight another element of the culture of substitution:

Divenuti materiale, «gli emblemi ritornano come merci», constata Benjamin, mentre l'epoca si svela sempre più avida di diffondere forme sul mercato, riempiendo di fantasmi la scena abbandonata dagli ordini dell'analogia e del simbolo – in breve: dalle corrispondenze.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 266.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 270.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 270-271.

<sup>39</sup> Id., 'Dell'opinione', in *I quarantanove gradini*, Adelphi, Milan, 1991, pp. 103-123, p. 105.

<sup>40</sup> Id., 'Déesses entretenues', p. 268.

The ghost, lacking body, like a hollow signifier without a signified, is certainly more aptly represented by a ‘crypto-mithology’ than a ‘mythology.’ One could argue that the lack of signified beneath the signifier vanifies the mythologisation, either public or secret, of the signifier. Calasso seems to disagree. Although he indicates that the fetish should not be seen as a god, in his reflection on the crystal of Kapital in *Kasch*<sup>41</sup> he reveals that the age of substitution does not cause the disappearance of the enchantment of the fetish. Rather, this enchantment is no longer generated by individual images, but by the whole process:

Ciò implica un sottile mutamento nello statuto delle immagini. Se infatti, ormai, nella prospettiva dello scambio, gli esseri sono innanzitutto fantasmi, i fantasmi godranno a loro volta dell’autonomia di soggetti, sottraendosi a ogni giurisdizione. Quel distaccarsi della cosa dalla persona, che Freud contrassegnava come patologia del feticismo, è ora il presupposto di ogni percezione e di ogni uso dei fantasmi, che non rimandano ormai se non a se stessi e al proprio potere latente: tanto maggiore in quanto nel loro essere singolare e parziale comprendono la totalità del processo di scambio, come una singola moneta condensa la totalità della circolazione economica. I feticci permettono così il formarsi di una nuova *lingua adamica*.<sup>42</sup>

When explaining what he means by *post-storia*, Calasso lists its three corollaries. First of all, ‘la lettera è soltanto spirito’, and, with the dissolution of appearance, what appears is ‘indefessa tautologia, reiterazione dei nomi divini, scambio costante di incorruttibili merci mistiche, siano esse parole, corpi, immagini, fantasmi o oggetti.’<sup>43</sup>

Whilst the synonymy between *spirito* and *fantasma* further reiterates the concept of substitution, this corollary seems to deny the possibility of the formation of a ‘nuova

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<sup>41</sup> Id., *Kasch*, p. 315.

<sup>42</sup> Id., ‘Déesses entretenues’, p. 269.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp. 271-272.

lingua adamica'. This possibility seems further precluded by the second corollary: 'lo scambio comune è lo scambio mistico', therefore equivalence reigns over difference. Whilst Calasso feels that this is what allows Marx to employ mystical terminology throughout *Das Kapital*, it seems difficult to generate a language without the power of difference, the leap of meaning made possible by metaphors. The last corollary – and here the essay goes back to Wedekind's work – is that:

Il carattere teatrale della post-storia, il suo essere vuota di qualsiasi sostanza e continuamente bisognosa di assorbirsi in una fantasmagoria che plachi il suo irrimediabile bisogno di feticci, spiegano il ritorno sulla scena abbandonata di tutte le immagini del passato storico. Così, dietro la «moneta viva» delle abitatrici del parco, traspaiono e premono molti altri esseri, che di quella moneta rimandano l'immagine, a specchio, dall'origine.<sup>44</sup>

Despite belonging to the lower realm of substitution and equivalence, rather than to that of analogy and difference, Calasso believes the 'abitatrici del parco' can still mirror the origin, and in the process mirror all images of the historical past, of which they are substitutes. In the current philosophical and literary scenario, it may have been difficult for Calasso to expect a new 'Adamic language' – and 'absolute literature' – to arise from the nightmare of a horizontal mirroring of copies (all belonging to the same historical time or to the same *post-storia*). However, a vertical game of sign mirroring through different historical times enables the manifestation of this absolute language and literature. To fully appreciate it, one needs also to bear in mind Calasso's reiterated belief that what cannot be given back by the individual figures in a game of substitution, can be given back by the totality of the process: it is not the images reflected in the

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 273.

mirror which give the modern artist the opportunity to carry on creating ‘absolute literature’, but the process of sign-mirroring. To the skeptics, who could argue that this type of literature seems an artificial game of art for art’s sake, Calasso has already responded, when he claims that Marx’s concept of ‘abstract labour’ is ‘fondamento comune di Mallarmé e della catena di montaggio.’<sup>45</sup>

The importance to Calasso of the passage on the images of the historical past is confirmed by the further reference to the bird-girls, with whom he had made his fictional character Schreber open the essay. The continuation of this passage allows us further reflections. We can identify in it a first clue to the identity of the hidden precursor, whom Calasso relies upon to shore ‘*absolute literature*’ against its ruins, in the *Waste Land* of substitution.

In quanto «acqua ridente», in esse riconosciamo le onde che scorrono verso Soma, nel mare atmosferico, le Apsaras dai seni tondi e dagli occhi vacui, le inesauribili ancelle celesti, *ultronea creatio* che appare e scompare nel laghetto del parco, lo stagno dove il Rg Veda ci mostra la bella Urvasi che sguazza con le compagne Apsaras, uccelli d’acqua. [...] É il crepuscolo delle ninfe, le piccole *déesses entretenues*, di cui Heine e Marx avevano visto balenare le forme fuggenti in cripte cristiane, ancora visitate dalle più antiche custodi degli antri.<sup>46</sup>

Remarkably, Aby Warburg is not mentioned amongst the filters through which the text should be understood, even though one of Warburg’s key images – the nymph – is and key concepts are clearly present. Together with offering a further interpretation of Wedekind’s text, Warburg’s themes and beliefs seems to indicate to Calasso his way back to the origin, and the ‘Adamic language’ he dreams of.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 267.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 273.

When, at the start of the essay, Calasso had drawn the line between the girls and the exposed children of mythology, by stressing that the exposed children normally become heroes, unique beings, creatures of analogy and metaphor, and the girls of the park are educated to ‘la permutazione senza fine’, ‘l’intercambiabile’, ‘l’equivalenza’, ‘la grande pratica occidentale della sostituzione’,<sup>47</sup> he had gone on to argue not only that ‘una lettura attenta alla tessitura economica di *Mine-Haha*’ reveals that the girls are ‘commodities,’ and ‘money,’ and specifically the *crystal* of money, all terms clearly echoed in *Kasch*, but also that ‘una lettura attenta alla tessitura psichica del Capitale rivela che la merce è innanzitutto donna.’<sup>48</sup> One could conclude, purely from this sentence, that Calasso ultimately treats *Das Kapital* like a work of art to be decoded with Warburg’s method and turns his essay on *Mine-Haha* almost into a covert reading of Warburg.

From the development of the equivalence between ‘woman’ and ‘commodity’, it becomes clear that a more appropriate name for this woman is ‘nymph’. This is confirmed by another comment, when Calasso eventually reverts to talking about Wedekind rather than Marx. When the girls appear on stage, we are witnessing not only their ‘sacrifice,’ or ‘ritual prostitution’ – both are recurring concepts in Calasso –, but also the painful end of their life as nymphs:

Chi ha conosciuto una volta l’ebbrezza di essere «moneta vita», merce esclusa, merce di tutte le merci, luogo delle metamorfosi, non può accettare la degradazione di ritrovarsi persona, cioè donna stretta dalle pinzette di un ordine sociale che pretende di ignorare di

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

essere fondato sulla esaltante fluidità della prostituzione universale ed esige che ciò non sia detto.<sup>49</sup>

The nymph is a crucial theorisation in Aby Warburg's work as an art critic. In his seminal essay on Botticelli,<sup>50</sup> which influenced a number of art historians throughout this century, the nymph is associated with a concept of fluidity and with water - in Calasso she returns as 'acqua ridente'. Even the suspicion that Marx and Heine may have found representations of nymphs in Christian crypts, presumably on Roman sarcophagi, can easily be traced back to Warburg, who mapped the figures of nymph-like creatures in Renaissance painting back to Greco-Roman sarcophagi.

The nymph is also, almost by definition, 'site of metamorphosis', as a number of nymphs underwent metamorphosis after a love encounter with a god. Warburg believed that 'knowledge through metamorphosis' would concentrate itself in one place, which was simultaneously a spring, a serpent, and a nymph.<sup>51</sup> While the serpent is not an obvious presence in this essay, it does surface elsewhere in Calasso's work,<sup>52</sup> and always in terms clearly echoing Warburg's symbolic reading of it as feminine, rather than as a Freudian phallic symbol. Warburg's triad is therefore consistently present in Calasso's theory, as well as in his literary inspiration.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 275.

<sup>50</sup> Aby Warburg, 'The Primavera and Birth of Venus by Botticelli' in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 1999, Getty Research Institute for the Arts and Humanities, Los Angeles, 1999 (1932), pp.89-156.

<sup>51</sup> See Kurt Forsters' 'Introduction' in Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, Getty Research Institute for the Arts and Humanities, Los Angeles, 1999 (1932), pp. 1-75, p. 21.

<sup>52</sup> For example in *Le nozze*.

### III. The nymph and ‘absolute literature’

As mentioned earlier, the nymphs surface in Calasso’s first book, the novel *L’impuro folle*, where paranoid President Schreber – whose insanity is partly explained with a wish to become a woman – tells of being surrounded by ‘ancelle,’<sup>53</sup> who ‘gli svolazzavano intorno,’<sup>54</sup> and ‘di nulla sapevano se non della voluttà fluttuante – e tentavano solo di conservare, giusto per poco, la loro labile presenza, soffiando frasi precostruite.’<sup>55</sup>

Warburg linked nymphs to water, through the images of the spring and the snake, but also to air and movement. For example, in his analysis of *La nascita di Venere*, he maps out a line of influence for the tale of the rape of Europa in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*,<sup>56</sup> which is re-written by Poliziano, and later passed from Poliziano to Botticelli. Discussing the two Renaissance artists, Warburg notes that Poliziano lingers on the motif of the dress and hair of Europa, which are in movement.<sup>57</sup> He observes that ‘a succession of works related by content: Botticelli’s painting, Poliziano’s poem, Francesco Colorno’s archeological romance, the drawings from Botticelli’s circle, and Filarete’s ekphrasis has revealed the tendency, shaped by what was then known of antiquity, to turn to the arts of the ancient world where life was to be embodied in outward motion.’<sup>58</sup> This outward motion is detectable in the group of Flora and

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<sup>53</sup> Roberto Calasso, *L’impuro folle*, Adelphi, Milan, 1974, p. 95.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>56</sup> Ovidio, *Metamorfosi*, UTET, Turin, 2000, 2.873, 2.927. For an English version see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1955.

<sup>57</sup> Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, Getty Research Institute for the Arts and Humanities, Los Angeles, 1999, p. 98. In the opening scene of *Le nozze*, Calasso will also insist on the fleeting clothes of Europa. See Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 17: ‘Lei si volta indietro: con la destra si tiene a un corno, con l’altra si appoggia alla bestia. L’aria mossa le fa tremare le vesti.[...]Poi, già in mezzo alle onde, con una mano si aggrappava al grande corno, con l’altra teneva sollevato e stretto al petto il bordo del peplo. E, dietro le sue spalle, il peplo si era gonfiato in una vela purpurea.’

<sup>58</sup> Warburg, *Pagan Antiquity*, p. 108.



Zephyrus in the *Venere*, where again a young woman is portrayed in a windy landscape, with fleeting hair and clothes.<sup>59</sup> Warburg's conclusion is that movement reconnects to the nymph.<sup>60</sup>

Even though the choice of words, both in the passage from *L'impuro folle*, and in the quotations from 'Déesses entretenues', echoes Warburg's, Calasso only makes a couple of explicit references to the German critic throughout his production, in *La letteratura e gli dei*,<sup>61</sup> in *I quarantanove gradini*,<sup>62</sup> and in a recent article for *La Repubblica*.<sup>63</sup> However, when, in *La letteratura e gli dei*, he explains that the gods of antiquity resurfaced in Renaissance Florence, this appears to echo Warburg's theory on the rebirth of ancient paganism in Renaissance Florence:

The history of the influence of antiquity, as observed through the transmission, disappearance, and rediscovery of its gods, has some unexplored insights to contribute to a history of the meaning of anthropomorphic thought. In the transitional age of the early Renaissance, pagan-cosmological causality was defined in classicizing terms through the symbols of the gods; and these were approached in due proportion to their degree of saturation with human quality: from a religious daemon-worship at one extreme to a purely artistic and intellectual interpretation at the other.<sup>64</sup>

The theme of the return of the gods in Renaissance Italy, and the possibility of their further returns, had been a self-defining obsession for nineteenth century German culture - haunting Hölderlin and Nietzsche during their breakdowns. Calasso makes a number of references to how it affects both thinkers, and the return of the gods from

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>61</sup> See Calasso, *La letteratura*, pp. 33-35.

<sup>62</sup> Id., 'Il sonno del calligrafo, in *I quarantanove gradini*, pp. 73-96, p. 82.

<sup>63</sup> Roberto Calasso, 'Il ritorno del mito. Warburg, la ninfa e il serpente', *La Repubblica*, 16 December 2003, p. 42.

<sup>64</sup> Warburg, *Pagan Antiquity*, pp. 664-665.

Hölderlin to Decadentism is the main theme of *La letteratura e gli dei*. It could be argued, therefore, that recourse to Warburg is not needed to explain his comments above. However, even the detailed description in *La letteratura* of the pattern of transmission, disappearance and rediscovery of the gods is in Warburg's text, and so is the likening the gods to pagan 'fugitives.'<sup>65</sup> The main difference between Calasso's view of the return of the gods and Warburg's seems to lie in the fact that Warburg appear to maintain a certain continuity in the cultural transmission of the images of the gods,<sup>66</sup> as evident in his references to the twelfth century monk Albricus, author of *De deorum imaginibus libellus*, a treatise on painting, 'whose directions of the depiction of twenty-three deities powerfully influenced their visual treatment throughout the later Middle Ages and the early Renaissance.'<sup>67</sup> Calasso, on the contrary, seems to present each return like a dramatic, almost destabilising event.

Calasso's reticence to explicitly mention Warburg is nowhere more obvious than in the only piece of writing explicitly dedicated to him by Calasso, the essay, 'La follia che viene dalle Ninfe'. Considering that it is an extremely interesting piece of work, providing useful insights, for example, into the themes of *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia*, it is remarkable that the Italian release of this essay, published in French in the 1990s, only occurred in 2005.<sup>68</sup> This may be a deliberate move, aiming almost at protecting Calasso's 'laboratorio segreto' (see page 42) from the intrusion of readers and critics.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 564.

<sup>66</sup> 'Evidence of the survival of the ancient gods was of two kinds. Firstly, they survived in the austere guise of moral allegories, in medieval descriptions culled from late antique sources and prefixed to allegorical interpretations of Ovid. A second, consistent iconographic tradition existed in astrology. All images of the gods in the Italian early Renaissance derive to some extent from these lists of gods compiled in late antique times and after. Even Botticelli, in his 'Birth of Venus', is recasting medieval illustrative conventions in the light of rediscovered antiquity.' Ibid., p. 564.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 561.

<sup>68</sup> It was included in the omonymous collection of essays *La follia che viene dalle Ninfe*. See Calasso, 'La follia che viene dalle Ninfe', pp. 11-50.

Having made Wedekind a pretext for reflecting explicitly on Marx and covertly on Warburg in ‘Les déesses entretenues’, in this essay on Warburg Calasso appears to also turn the German art critic into an opportunity to speak about something else. Only at the end of the essay, after seven pages without a single reference to the subject of his essay, Calasso conducts the reader explicitly back to Warburg. However, a covert homage to Warburg can be detected in his approach. Calasso undertakes a reading of the Homeric hymn to Apollo, making use of all of Warburg’s concepts and images, and rather than explicitly discussing Warburg’s concepts through direct textual analyses of the German critic’s texts, he applies Warburg’s method to his hymn of choice. There is an almost circular rhetorical movement in his analysis, as all elements under discussion in the Homeric hymn seem roads leading back to Warburg’s key concepts. This seems appropriate for a reading inspired by the serpentine knowledge of the nymphs.

The essay opens with a detailed analysis of the Homeric text, through which he stresses, as in *Le nozze*, that the first being Apollo spoke to was a nymph, Telphusia.<sup>69</sup> Having drawn a similitude between the nymph and a ‘sacra sorgente’,<sup>70</sup> without referring to Warburg, Calasso moves on to highlight the fate of another element of Warburg’s triad; the snake. Calasso observes that the dragon/serpent, which Apollo kills at Delphi, is female (‘draghessa’<sup>71</sup>). The possibility of the femininity of Python has long haunted the author’s imagination; the soothsayer Tiresias underlined this femininity in *L’impuro folle*, where Tiresias is said to have a nymph-like young daughter, Manto, ‘dai capelli serpentinei’.<sup>72</sup>

The Homeric hymn tells that, when Apollo arrived at Delphi, Telphusia plotted against him to retain her power. She deceitfully sent the god to Python, so that the snake-god

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

would kill him. But Apollo defeated the snake and discovered the nymph's scheme. In revenge he stole her name, becoming 'Apollo Telfusio'.

The god then proceeded to replace the Thriai, who inhabited the mountains around Delphi, and became devoted to Hermes, with the Muses. Calasso comments that 'Verso Telfusa come verso le Thriai, Apollo seguì lo stesso impulso: deprezzare, umiliare esseri femminili portatori di un sapere a lui precedente.'<sup>73</sup> This pre-Apollinean knowledge is, if we have to trust Plutarch, the knowledge of Dionysus, master of Delphi before Apollo's arrival.<sup>74</sup>

Calasso notes that, in the hymn, Apollo addressed the same words to the Nymph and to Python and manifested his will to establish an oracle, for the gods who inhabit Europe. If Python and Telphusia are interchangeable, Apollo twice found a source and a Nymph/Serpentess, and both times he stole her power: 'In tutti i rapporti tra Apollo e le Ninfe – rapporti tortuosi, di attrazione, persecuzione e fuga [...] rimarrà questo sottinteso: che Apollo è stato il primo invasore e usurpatore di un sapere che non gli apparteneva, un sapere liquido, fluido, al quale il dio imporrà il suo metro.'<sup>75</sup>

This 'sapere liquido', 'l'acqua ridente delle Apsaras' of the essay on Wedekind, is the echo of Warburg's crucial concept of the 'mnemonic wave,' rapidly acknowledged by Calasso in *La letteratura*, where he reflects on a similar concept found in the Neoplatonist Porphyry:

Porfirio nell'*Antro delle Ninfe* cita un inno a Apollo, dove si parla delle «noerōn udaton», delle «acque mentali» che le ninfe presentarono in dono ad Apollo. Conquistate, le Ninfe

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>74</sup> Plutarch, 'The ε of Delphi', translated as 'L'ε di Delfi' in Plutarco, *Dialoghi delfici*, Adelphi, Milan, 1983, 389, F, p.145 and ff.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., pp. 13-14.

offrivano se stesse. Ninfa è la fremente, oscillante, scintillante, *materia mentale* di cui sono fatti i simulacri, gli *eidola*. Ed è la materia stessa della letteratura. Ogni volta che si profila la Ninfa, vibra quella materia divina che si plasma nelle epifanie e si insedia nella mente, potenza che precede e sostiene la parola. Dal momento in cui quella potenza si manifesta, la forma la segue e si adatta, si articola secondo quel flusso.<sup>76</sup>

As the a-formal content of the images of the artists, this ‘mental water’ remains suspiciously similar to Warburg’s ‘mnemonic wave.’ In both formulations, the emphasis is on movement which can be linked to the most obvious form of change in the divine world; that of metamorphosis.

The author stresses that, in the time of the children of Zeus, metamorphosis stopped being a normal state of manifestation, and migrated to the realm of the invisible, becoming knowledge: ‘E quella conoscenza metamorfica si sarebbe addensata in un luogo, che era insieme una fonte, un serpente e una Ninfa [...] tre modalità di un solo essere.’<sup>77</sup> Going round in circles, once again, this concept is Warburg’s.<sup>78</sup> However, Calasso chooses to make a ‘bandhu’, a Vedic connection, ‘la fonte è il serpente, ma la fonte è anche la Ninfa, quindi la Ninfa è il serpente,’<sup>79</sup> rather than refer to his precursor. Both Porphyry’s ‘mental waters’ and Warburg’s ‘mnemonic wave’ bring in other associations. The rest of the essay is a reflection on *follia*, ‘possession’, which starts with a passage of Plutarch’s *Life of Aristide*, where he speaks of *nympholeptoi*, ‘possessed by the nymphs’,<sup>80</sup> and likens them to *theoleptoi*, ‘possessed by the gods’,<sup>81</sup> on the basis of Aristotle’s *Ethic to Eudemos*, where they are compared, ‘come se il sistema delle Ninfe e il sistema degli dei fossero in qualche modo equivalenti, per lo

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<sup>76</sup> Id., *La letteratura*, p. 37.

<sup>77</sup> Id., ‘La follia’, p. 16.

<sup>78</sup> Forsters, ‘Introduction’, p. 21.

<sup>79</sup> Calasso., ‘La follia’, p. 18.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

meno in rapporto alla qualità degli effetti che producono.<sup>82</sup> Similarly in Warburg the presence of a nymph-like creature in Renaissance art signals the return of the pagan gods.

It is easy to perceive an echo of Warburg's 'wave', or Porphiry's 'invasion' of the mind by water, in the concept of *possessione*. Calasso's declaration of *possessione* as an ancient form of knowledge unavoidably drives the reader to this make this link. In another passage brimming with Warburg's vocabulary and images, Calasso highlights the presence of a nymph (Iynx) at the origin of 'possession'. Nymphs are the element of 'possession': 'sono quelle acque perennemente increspate e mutevoli dove improvvisamente un simulacro si staglia sovrano e soggioga la mente. E questo ci riconduce al lessico greco: *nýmphē* significa sia «fanciulla pronta alle nozze» che «sorgente».<sup>83</sup> Quoting Faistos's claim that the sight of a source brings delirium to human beings, Calasso seals this point with another image of the 'mnemonic wave': 'Il delirio suscitato dalle Ninfe nasce dunque dall'acqua e da un corpo che ne emerge, così come l'immagine mentale affiora dal continuum della coscienza.'<sup>84</sup>

A further association generated by the 'mnemonic wave' is with movement. As we saw previously, Calasso believes that in the realm of substitution and fetishism, while the individual figures lose their magic to the leveling urge of equivalence, the process of vertical mirroring of these figures through time transfers the magic from the figures to the process. Warburg therefore is the precursor, which leads us out of the nightmare of the proliferation of copies brought about by *Kapital/Nihilismus*.

The discussion of *The cave of the Nymphs* above states that the Nymphs offer as a gift to Apollo the '*noerōn udaton*', the 'acque mentali', that are the nymphs themselves.

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

These mental waters, Calasso highlights, are ‘la materia stessa della letteratura’. A first interpretation of this sentence would be that, in the detachment between ‘signified’ and ‘signifier,’ the nymphs are the ‘signifier’ that is recovered and comes back into literature. ‘Ogni volta che si profila la Ninfa’, continues Calasso, ‘vibra quella materia divina che si plasma nelle epifanie e si insedia nella mente, potenza che precede e sostiene la parola. Dal momento in cui quella potenza si manifesta, la forma la segue e si adatta, si articola secondo quel flusso.’<sup>85</sup> As ‘mental waters’ are a power that precedes words, it would appear that Apollo, god of meter, simply puts the shell of form around the fluid knowledge, the mnemonic wave of images mirrored to us from their distant divine origin.

However, if we take up Calasso’s invitation to follow Benjamin and apply a number of readings to the same text, we can come to a more complex conclusion. All throughout ‘Déesses entretenues’, Calasso stresses an equivalence between ‘merce’ and ‘donna’, which makes of woman an image of the power of *sostituzione*. Yet we have seen that Calasso believes in the capability of the process of ‘substitution’ to take us back to the origin and to a new ‘Adamic language’.

The essay on Warburg also insists on the importance of the femininity of Apollo’s opponents. As we have seen, the knowledge of these feminine beings evokes a source, a snake, a wave, wind – all figures of movement, apt to represent a process, rather than a status. Furthermore, both the snake, either its eye or its skin, and water have a reflecting, mirror-like character. The feminine knowledge of the source, which challenges Apollo, could be the way back out of the nihilistic traps of capitalism to the ‘origin’ and even to the new ‘Adamic language’, of which Calasso speaks.

We have briefly touched upon the relevance of applying to knowledge the character of ‘possession.’ This reflection can take us further. ‘Possession,’ in the Greek

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<sup>85</sup> Id., *La letteratura*, p. 37.

culture Calasso cherishes, is normally female knowledge. It is embodied in the sacerdotal icon of the Delphic priestess, a woman who prophesizes sitting on the tripod, burial place of the bones of the dragon/dragoness Python, and in the Maenads, followers of Dionysus.

In *L'impuro folle*, the nymph-like daughter of Tiresias, the seer, himself half woman, who obsessed T. S. Eliot, is called Manto, and is thus etimogically connected to divination. Calasso also tells us that, having seized his power, Apollo replaced the Thriai with the nine Muses, but stresses that at their first manifestation in literature, when they introduced themselves to Hesiodus at the beginning of the *Theogony*, the Muses were only three, just like the Thriai. Furthermore, the Muses declared themselves to Hesiodus like 'enunciatrici sia della verità che della menzogna, esattamente come le Thriai.'<sup>86</sup>

'La follia' also contains a meaningful reflection on the noun 'fata', Italian for 'fairy'. This noun should be reconnected to the Nymphs, as it comes from 'Fata' ('Parchae') and from certain obscure divinities called 'Fatuae'. However, Calasso stresses that their name, before giving origin, in both French and Italian, to the word 'fatuità', was connected to 'fari', 'to speak prophetically.'<sup>87</sup>

While Calasso warns us that the nymphs are 'deinai', a Greek word meaning 'wonderful and terrible' at the same time, his analysis points more and more to the nymphs not only as custodians of a knowledge, a content waiting to be framed into the form of meter (the Pythian priestess famously spoke in hexameters), but as a language in itself, a language which could lie or tell the truth, depending on the circumstances, as exemplified by the Thriai, or by the double meaning of the prophecies of the Pythia of which the Herodotean *Histories* are full. This language, consistenly indicated as prophetic, could

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<sup>86</sup> Id., 'La follia', p. 15.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 30.



still carry the weight of referentiality, of an analogy between ‘signified’ and ‘signifier,’ which existed in the ‘Adamic language’ – even though it may take all of Benjamin’s forty-nine exegetic steps to decipher it.

As hinted by Calasso, Apollo thinks he has defeated female knowledge and power through the imposition of form, and does not realise that his Muses are still nymphs. This could point to a belief that literature results not simply from the mirroring back of the origin from nymph to nymph through a mnemonic wave, but also from the constant mirroring between Apollo and the nymphs. This hypothesis should be tested further, also with regards to language.

Calasso also reminds us that Plutarch was aware that another god had prophesied at Delphi before the coming of Apollo: his opposite and alter ego Dionysus. However, the role of Dionysus in Calasso’s thought cannot be fully appreciated without a discussion of the second of his German precursors, the one to which he is more openly indebted, Friederich Nietzsche, philosopher of the ‘Dionysian.’

Before we step into Nietzschean territory, I would like to draw some final conclusions. As we have seen in the course of this chapter, Calasso has dealt with the Marxist influence in a very original manner. Rather than the inspirer of a choice of left-wing *impegno politico*, Marx for Calasso has become the critic providing him the vocabulary and the theoretical framework for formulating his notion of *letteratura assoluta*. Whilst his immediate predecessors and contemporaries on the literary scene were mainly finding in Marx the idea of atheism and the foundations of a materialistic philosophy, Calasso relies on a combination of Marxian and Warburgian approaches to release the gods back into literature. The most original outcome of these influences can be detected in the development of the theme of a connection between nymph and ‘absolute literature’. This connection, and the other influences which lay behind his theorisation

and thematisation, will form the topic of chapter X, but it is worth underlining that, in my view, even simply on the basis of the review of Marx and Warburg's influence on Calasso's thought, we can put forward an interpretation of the nymph/woman as language, and as playing a fundamental role in the creation of literature.

## **Chapter III**

### **Nietzsche or the truth of simulation**

#### **[Abstract]**

This chapter will investigate Nietzsche's influence on Calasso's theory and literary practice. I will outline the cultural scenario behind his reception of Nietzsche and illustrate the crucial role played in Calasso's view of literature by Nietzsche's concept of theatre, and his notion of the 'Dionysian'. I will finish by showing how both these Nietzschean formulations contribute to the development of one of Calasso's crucial concepts, that of metaphor, and how a Dionysian – and therefore suggestively Nietzschean – influence, may also be at play in his development of the idea of the nymphidic language, discussed in the previous chapter.

## I. Re-reading Nietzsche: the Colli Montinari edition

In the early 1960s, Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari had put together the first critical edition of the works of Nietzsche, which they aimed to publish simultaneously in Italian, German and French. The importance of their monumental philological effort was not only in their assessment of the texts of the published works, but also in their recovery of the previously unpublished writings and letters stored in the Nietzsche archive in Weimar. Along with providing abundant material for a historical and psychological reading of the philosopher's work, these proved instrumental for a critical re-assessment of the published texts and backed the detachment from a fascist reading. The notes to Calasso's only published essay on Nietzsche, 'Monologo fatale', show that his interpretation of *Ecce homo* relies heavily on these previously unpublished works.

'Si può misurare il grado di senso storico che un'epoca possiede da come essa fa traduzioni e cerca di assimilare in sé epoche e libri del passato.'<sup>1</sup> This passage from the Italian translation of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* is an apt commentary on the role of the Colli-Montinari edition itself, both as translation and criticism. As translation theory stresses, criticism itself is simply a form of translation, a way of reading and therefore adapting a text for a different audience or a different era. In this sense, the importance of Colli's work in 1960s' and 1970s' Italy should not be underestimated.

After the war Nietzsche had come to be seen as such an embarrassing thinker that, as the Einaudi *affaire* clearly indicates, a lot of the postwar *intelligentsia* had trouble associating with him. As Calasso and Colli both observe, in Nietzsche one can find 'tutto e il contrario di tutto.'<sup>2</sup> Although the thinker does not make any great professions

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<sup>1</sup> Friederich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, translated as *La gaia scienza*. Friederich Nietzsche, *La gaia scienza*, Adelphi, Milan, 2003, p. 119. For the text in German see Friederich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, 83, at <http://www.textlog.de/21254.html>, visited on 22 August 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Giorgio Colli, *Dopo Nietzsche*, Adelphi, Milan, 1974, p. 196.

of love for democracy, it is remarkable that this author of strongly anti-German books and statements, such as ‘La Germania, dovunque arriva, corrompe la civiltà’<sup>3</sup> came to be seen as prophet of the *Führer* and the ‘razza eletta’. Nietzsche explicitly condemned the racist attitudes in the Germany of his day, he cast himself as a ‘senza patria’ and a ‘European’:

Noi senza patria siamo per razza e provenienza troppo multiformi e ibridi, come “uomini moderni” e di conseguenza scarsamente tentati a prender parte a quella mendace autoammirazione e libidine razziale che si mette in mostra oggi in Germania, quale indice di sentimenti tedeschi, e che suona doppiamente falsa e indecorosa nel popolo del “senso storico”. Noi siamo in una parola – e deve essere, questa, la nostra parola d’onore! –, *buoni Europei*.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that despite such statements he came to be seen as an inspirer of Nazism evidences the implicit power of translation and criticism to manipulate the reception of a text for political purposes.

The ‘nazification’ of Nietzsche was made possible by the appropriation from the nazifascist propaganda machine of the ideas of *Wille zur Macht* and *Übermensch*. A cursory comparison of a fascist and a postwar interpretation of Nietzsche shows the extent of this appropriation, and the toughness of Colli and Montinari’s struggle to make Nietzsche acceptable again.

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<sup>3</sup> Friederich Nietzsche, *Ecce homo*, the title was not changed in Italian. Friederich Nietzsche, *Ecce homo*, Adelphi, Milan, 2000, p. 41 and p. 45. For the German original see Friederich Nietzsche, *Ecce homo*, at <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/8ecce10.txt>, visited on 22/08/2008.

<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche, *Gaia scienza*, p. 314. For the original text see: Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, 377, at <http://www.geocities.com/thenietzschechannel/dfw7.htm>, visited on 22/08/2008.

Mario Ferrara's *Machiavelli, Nietzsche e Mussolini*,<sup>5</sup> published through Vallecchi on the eve of the war in 1939, shows at first glance obvious methodological limits. These are clear indications both of its unreliability as a critical source and of the challenges facing any "fascistization" of Nietzsche. For example, while Ferrara makes constant references to pages in his primary texts, his book does not contain a bibliography, nor states which edition works discussed and referred to come from. Another obvious critical limit is that the discussion is based on quotes out of context from Machiavelli and Nietzsche's texts. Whilst this practice may work with certain authors or philosophers, the context is extremely important for the correct interpretation of both Machiavelli and Nietzsche, as both authors make large use of irony and share a tendency to challenge the reader by initially pretending to hold an extreme position, while their real view is only unveiled as their reasoning unfolds.

Colli warns against such an approach: 'Un falsario è chi interpreta Nietzsche utilizzando le sue citazioni, perché gli fa dire tutto quello che vorrà lui, aggiugnando a suo piacimento parole e frasi autentiche. Nella miniera di questo pensatore è contenuto ogni metallo: Nietzsche ha detto tutto e il contrario di tutto.'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Mario Ferrara, *Machiavelli, Nietzsche e Mussolini*, Vallecchi, Florence, 1939. I have chosen to review his text as exemplary of all the worst vices of propagandistic fascist writings. Norberto Bobbio dismissed this text as 'ciarpace che può incuriosire lo storico del costume', see Norberto Bobbio, 'La cultura e il fascismo' in Guido Quazza ed., *Fascismo e società italiana*, Einaudi, Turin, 1973, p. 231. For fascist views on Machiavelli, see also Achille Norsa, *Il principio della forza nel pensiero politico di Niccolò Machiavelli*, Hoepli, Milano, 1936. The article by Domenico Fazio 'Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche e Benito Mussolini attraverso documenti inediti dell'Archivio Nietzsche', is extremely useful context to appreciate the reception of Nietzsche in the Italy of the fascist *ventennio*. Following the trail of Delio Cantimori's entry on Nietzsche in the *Dizionario di politica*, it concludes that 'mentre nella sfera dell'alta cultura, anche di quella ufficiale, l'accostamento tra Nietzsche e il fascismo e tra Nietzsche e Mussolini godette dunque, anche durante il Ventennio, di un credito assai scarso, a livello della propaganda politica e del senso comune la Vulgata di un Nietzsche fascista, diretto ispiratore del Duce, ebbe grandissima diffusione.' See Domenico Fazio 'Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche e Benito Mussolini attraverso documenti inediti dell'Archivio Nietzsche', in Fabio Minazzi, Demetrio Ria eds., *Realismo, illuminismo ed ermeneutica: percorsi della ricerca filosofica attuale*, Angeli, Milan, 2004, pp. 179-199. See also Delio Cantimori, 'Nietzsche' in *Dizionario di Politica*, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, Rome, 1940, vol iv, p. 275. From 'alta cultura', in the *Ventennio*, came also antifascist interpretations of Nietzsche, such as Antonio Banfi's.. See Antonio Banfi, *Introduzione a Nietzsche. Lezioni 1933-1934*, Isedi, Milan, 1974.

<sup>6</sup> Colli, *Dopo Nietzsche*, p. 196.

In Ferrara's case, this practice leads to a lot of simplifications. For him, Zarathustra's message is that 'un eroe del male' is better than 'un inetto con intenzioni positive.'<sup>7</sup> This Mussolinian 'superuomo', hostile to 'quel tipo di stato in cui predomina la ricerca del comodo e del tiepido benessere, e in cui si rifugge con paura dalla realtà cruda, dal fatto "guerra", da tutto ciò che è pungolo e stimolo ad andare avanti, a non stagnare, a non contentarsi delle mezze virtù e delle mezze conquiste,'<sup>8</sup> is a political leader ready to take on any war in order to advance himself and get himself out of stagnation and mediocrity. Nowadays, its methodological limits make it difficult to take Ferrara's book as anything but a propagandistic text. However, it was with the prejudices created against Nietzsche by this kind of reading that Colli and Montinari, as well as Deleuze – another critic who fought to dissociate Nietzsche's reputation from its nazifascist reception – had to contend to make his work acceptable again.

Whilst their choice to present Nietzsche as a serious philosopher to a mainly left-wing postwar *intelligentsia* cannot be seen as free of political implications, these authors come across as more faithful Nietzschean readers. They are willing to accept his work with its complexities and contradictions, rather than simplify it for their own ends; to negotiate his texts through a close reading approach, rather than through artificially abstracting a handful of sentences. For them, the *Übermensch* is a human being capable of stretching himself, and overcoming the self-imposed limits and the boundaries normally associated with life as a man.<sup>9</sup> 'Le surhomme, ou le type et le produit de

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<sup>7</sup> Ferrara, *Machiavelli, Nietzsche e Mussolini*, p. 51.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>9</sup> Zarathustra's first explanation of the meaning of the *Übermensch* centers on the idea that man should be 'superato' ('überwunden'). See Friederich Nietzsche, *Als sprach Zarathustra*, translated in Italian as *Così parlò Zarathustra*. Friederich Nietzsche, *Così parlò Zarathustra*, Friederich Nietzsche Adelphi, Milan, 2007, p. 5. For the original German text see Friederich Nietzsche Adelphi, Milan, 2007, p. 5. See Friederich Nietzsche, *Als sprach Zarathustra*, at <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/8zara10.txt>, visited on 22/08/2008, for the original German text.

l'affirmation,<sup>10</sup> is the higher being, the man who has learnt to transcend nihilism, and to say yes to Dionysus.

Focusing in particular on *Als sprach Zarathustra*, Deleuze claims that Nietzsche would see in the Nazi leadership just another embodiment of *nihilismus*, not 'surhommes' but slaves:

Quelle que soit la complexité de Nietzsche, la lecture devine aisément dans quelle catégorie [...] il aurait rangé la race des «maîtres» conçues par les nazi. Quand le nihilisme triomphe, alors et alors seulement la volonté de puissance cesse de vouloir dire «créer», mais signifie: vouloir la puissance, désirer, dominer (donc s'attribuer ou se faire attribuer les valeurs établis, argent honneur, puoivoirs). Or cette volonté de puissance là, c'est précisément celle de l'esclave.<sup>11</sup>

Ferrara and Fascism had made the link between Nietzsche's concept of 'Wille zur Macht', Machiavelli's *virtù*, and Mussolini's imperialistic tendency.<sup>12</sup> Deleuze's passage above exemplifies the antithetical way in which an antifascist critic could read 'Wille zur Macht': rather as a creative urge than as an urge to dominate. Another passage by Deleuze on the 'will to power' clearly confirms this:

Ce principe ne signifie pas (du moins ne signifie pas d'abord) que la volonté *veuille* la puissance ou *désire* dominer. Tant qu'on interprète volonté de puissance au sens de «*désir de dominer*», on la fait forcément dépendre de valeurs établies, seules aptes à déterminer qui doit être «réconnu» comme le plus puissant dans tel ou tel cas, dans tel ou tel conflit. Par là, on méconnaît la nature de la volonté de puissance comme principe plastique de toutes nos valuations, comme principe caché pour la création de nouvelles valeurs non

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<sup>10</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche*, Presse Universitaire de France, Paris, 1997, p. 41.

<sup>11</sup> Id. *Nietzsche*, p. 27.

<sup>12</sup> Ferrara, *Machiavelli, Nietzsche e Mussolini*, p. 9.



réconnues. La volonté de puissance, dit Nietzsche, ne consiste pas à convoiter ni même à prendre, mais à créer, et à donner.<sup>13</sup>

Convinced that Nietzsche had been the victim of an interpretative sabotage, Deleuze goes as far as pointing the finger at Nietzsche's sister, Elisabeth Foerster-Nietzsche, for the re-packaging of Nietzsche into a nazifascist thinker.<sup>14</sup> The French theorist adds that Elisabeth had married an extreme right-winger, whom she had followed to Paraguay to found an Arian colony there, but Nietzsche had been against the match, and some of his remarks showed his disagreement with the couple's views.<sup>15</sup>

Colli is a lot more reticent than Deleuze when it comes to defending, or even just interpreting, Nietzsche's political views. 'Nietzsche non ha bisogno di interpreti. Di se stesso e delle sue idee ha parlato lui quanto basta, e nel modo più limpido.'<sup>16</sup> In his books on the German thinker, he prefers to focus on the shortcomings of Nietzsche's thought – amongst which politics is not discussed – or on other aspects of his philosophy, such as the *Dionysian*. The only exception is his reading of Nietzsche's view of the state, which is diametrically opposite to the fascist one. Ferrara claimed that 'non bisogna pensare che Nietzsche sia avverso a ogni tipo di Stato, come potrebbe far credere una affrettata lettura di "Zarathustra".'<sup>17</sup> He said that Zarathustra's attack on the state should rather be seen as 'una ricerca appassionata delle fondamenta di un grande stato,'<sup>18</sup> and concluded by making of the German thinker a great admirer of the Roman

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<sup>13</sup> Deleuze, *Nietzsche*, p. 24.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>15</sup> After stressing his unhappiness about Elisabeth's match, Deleuze tells that around the same time Nietzsche had sent the following response to another racist: 'Veuillez cesser de m'envoyer vos publications, je crains pour ma patience.' *Ibid.*, p. 13. Fazio's article agrees on the role played by Elisabeth in promoting a fascist interpretation of Nietzsche. See Fazio, 'Elizabeth Förster-Nietzsche e Benito Mussolini attraverso documenti inediti dell'Archivio Nietzsche', pp. 179-199.

<sup>16</sup> Colli, *Dopo Nietzsche*, p. 26.

<sup>17</sup> Ferrara, *Machiavelli, Nietzsche e Mussolini*, p. 104

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

empire.<sup>19</sup> Colli instead finds Nietzsche hostile to political ideologies and to the intrusion of general ideas in the political sphere,<sup>20</sup> ‘Nietzsche sputa sulla politica, è l’antipolitico per eccellenza. La sua è la dottrina del distacco totale dell’uomo dagli interessi sociali e politici. Questa sua natura Nietzsche volle mascherare, e allora parla con trasporto di politica.’<sup>21</sup>

Given Calasso’s own ‘anti-political’ views, discussed in the previous chapter, it can be concluded that Calasso finds in Nietzsche, as interpreted by Colli and Deleuze (fundamentally an artist, rather than a philosopher/political theoretician) a kindred spirit. It is no surprise therefore that some of Nietzsche’s theoretical and formal discoveries are used by Calasso to support and integrate his own view of literature.

## II. ‘Monologo fatale’ – Calasso’s dialogue with Nietzsche

Soltanto in Nietzsche gli dei greci riapparvero con intensità paragonabile a quella di Hölderlin.<sup>22</sup>

If, as seen at page 48-49, Calasso credits Marx with highlighting the end of the world of ‘analogy’ and the beginning of the world of ‘substitution’, he pays this much grander homage to Nietzsche. Both Marx and Nietzsche are leading actors in the fall of the great metanarratives, in which Lyotard sees the ultimate character of the contemporary world. However in Calasso’s opinion their lead role is the result of diametrically opposite

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<sup>19</sup> Ferrara concludes: ‘È dunque una razza dominatrice, ordinata in rude disciplina e precisa gerarchia, quella che Nietzsche può vedere configurata in uno stato’. Ibid., pp. 104-105. See also p. 121.

<sup>20</sup> Giorgio Colli, *La ragione errabonda*, Adelphi, Milan, 1982, p. 131.

<sup>21</sup> Id., *Dopo Nietzsche*, p. 193.

<sup>22</sup> Calasso, *La letteratura*, p. 65.

thinking. Marx is credited with recognising the cultural phenomenon, which ultimately brings about the destruction of ‘absolute literature’, and Nietzsche, as discussed from page 94, is credited with keeping ‘absolute literature’ alive. Calasso develops this position on the basis of Nietzsche’s choice to make form an integral part of his philosophical practice, rather than on the basis of the content of Nietzsche’s philosophy.

Before reflecting on this, I would like to mention that the comparison between Nietzsche and Hölderlin above is present in Colli, who points to Hölderlin as the only modern who ‘realizza la forma greca,’<sup>23</sup> but remarks that he had been ‘rimesso in auge da Nietzsche.’<sup>24</sup> Calasso also credits Nietzsche with the critical rediscovery of Hölderlin, and even points to Nietzsche as the next creative artist, after Hölderlin, through which the gods reappear.

As a premise to the discussion of ‘Monologo fatale’, Calasso’s essay on Nietzsche, I would like to stress that I find his choice of writing on *Ecce homo*, as opposed, for example, to *Als sprach Zarathustra*, or *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, remarkable in itself. First of all, since *Ecce homo* is a highly autobiographical text, it is one whose interpretation largely benefits from the wealth of unpublished material unearthed by the Colli-Montinari edition. Out of seventy Nietzsche quotations used by Calasso to back up his interpretation, thirty-one are from previously published works, and thirty-nine are from either the letters or the ‘Frammenti postumi’ ordered and published for the first time by Colli and Montinari. Secondly, the autobiographical nature makes *Ecce homo* an anomalous text in Nietzsche’s production, while, once again, requiring autobiographic material, such as the letters, to assist in its interpretation. Thirdly, *Ecce homo* is not autobiographical in the strictest sense, but it is rather Nietzsche’s literary autobiography, a presentation and justification of all his published works. Going back to

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<sup>23</sup> Colli, *La ragione errabonda*, p. 89.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

my view that Calasso is attracted to Nietzsche because of his inclusion of literary elements as simultaneous tools and ends of his philosophical practice, I would argue that Calasso's choice of writing on *Ecce homo* is already an indication that he is attracted to Nietzsche more as an artist than as a philosopher. The focus on the artistic practice of Nietzsche can suffice to explain why Calasso credits him with keeping 'absolute literature' alive; he would be one of its practitioners. However, Calasso finds deeper reasons, a number of which, interestingly, are also outlined in the critical works of Colli.

In my reading of 'Monologo fatale', I will try and adopt the same approach as Calasso, particularly as he claims it to be Nietzsche's preferred approach to any text, 'bisogna fare un passo indietro, riprendere le spoglie minacciose delle prime domande che Nietzsche stesso si poneva di fronte a qualsiasi scritto: chi parla in queste parole? Quale necessità parla in queste parole?'<sup>25</sup> To answer this question, a detailed review of Calasso's organisation of the text may be needed.

After noting that the condemnation of self-knowledge in his other works had gone hand in hand and had been a corollary of the condemnation of any meta-knowledge,<sup>26</sup> Calasso stresses that Nietzsche, differently from Goethe, who with a choice of 'ipocrisia sublime' had saved the 'io' he doubted, had spent his best years 'in obbedienza a una regola di monaco guerriero', 'nella disciplina dello scalzare ogni riferimento, nella pratica della «magia dell'estremo»'.<sup>27</sup> However, *Ecce homo* is an autobiographical text, in which Nietzsche, 'nonostante la sua «incoercibile diffidenza verso la possibilità della conoscenza di sé» [...] si inoltra dunque in una ricognizione di sé come soggetto',<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Roberto Calasso, 'Monologo fatale' in *I quarantanove gradini*, Adelphi, Milan, 1991, pp.15-64, p. 17.

<sup>26</sup> 'Nel tentativo di conoscere i propri strumenti il pensiero necessariamente si autodistrugge.' Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

even though the answer, like the enterprise itself, ‘non potrà che essere paradossale.’<sup>29</sup> Considering that *Ecce homo* is a late work, Calasso is aware that this is an anomaly to be reckoned with, as it would potentially throw all our interpretation of Nietzsche as the destroyer of the metanarrative of the subject into discussion. This also makes it important to ask – and attempt to answer - the question ‘*chi dice io* in questa impresa di spiegazione di sé?’<sup>30</sup> But this question should be extended to Calasso himself. Is it Calasso the critic or Calasso the writer who attempts this interpretation of Nietzsche? Having highlighted the close proximity and the interdependence of the works written by Nietzsche in 1888 (*Ecce homo* and *Der Fall Wagner*), Calasso justifies the German thinker’s choice of putting his ‘io’, whose demolition had just been accomplished in *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, at the centre of *Ecce homo*. The justification, however, appears to be based more on artistic than on philosophical grounds: ‘Ognuna di queste opere è retta dallo stesso gesto, l’irrompere di una selvaggia teatralità, il presentarsi sulla scena raccogliendo nella forma più intensa tutto il proprio essere,’<sup>31</sup> observes Calasso, who continues: ‘Il primo, immenso problema che si pone a Nietzsche all’inizio della sua primavera torinese è quello del teatro, l’accettazione della scena. Dopo aver pensato per tutta la vita *intorno* al teatro, ora Nietzsche si trova di fronte all’imperativo di *praticarlo*.’<sup>32</sup> Not only does Nietzsche have to “face” his obsession for the theatre, but he has to do so by moving out of ‘theory’ into ‘practice,’<sup>33</sup> from being the viewer (‘teoresi’, and ‘teoria’ etimologically hint at the link between thinking and seeing) to being viewed, to being on show, as an actor, or as playwright, or both. This view was, interestingly, also held by Colli, who sees a similarity between Nietzsche and

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

Shakespeare as ‘mattatori teatrali’: ‘C’è in lui l’attitudine [...] a rivivere il passato dell’anima umana con un’intensità che è l’immedesimazione dell’attore.’<sup>34</sup> Colli also notes the importance given by Nietzsche to the ‘preparazione scenografica’ of all his works as a symptom that the thinker is, and considers himself as being, a ‘commediante’:

Quanto Nietzsche sia stato commediante già in cuor suo, come aspirazione, lo si vede dai suoi quaderni, dove egli amava tracciare frontespizi per i libri futuri [...] vergava in bella scrittura titoli e sottotitoli. L’attore prepara il quadro esterno della futura rappresentazione: questo rituale favorisce la sua immedesimazione.<sup>35</sup>

At first, this emphasis on Nietzsche putting himself at the centre of the stage could appear to indicate that Calasso sees him as still needing to hold on to his ‘io’, for the purposes of this work. However, while he stresses that the practice of theatre, even in its minimal form as a monologue, requires a character or a persona to appear on the scene, Calasso is quick to state that it is not Nietzsche himself who goes on stage. The persona is not the ‘io’, nor the physical actor, but a personality enacted by the actor by wearing a mask. Calasso observes that in the last pages of *Ecce homo*, Nietzsche has ‘i propri tratti fissati per l’ultima volta *in una parte*.’<sup>36</sup> Furthermore he notes that the book is entitled *Ecce homo*, referring to the words spoken by the Roman legionnaires when they scornfully crown Jesus with thorns as king of the Jews. So, Calasso’s first answer to Nietzsche’s methodological question ‘chi parla in questo testo?’ is that it is not Nietzsche himself, but a persona, or rather a number of personas, of masks, which Nietzsche, simultaneously playwright and actor, both puts on stage and plays.

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<sup>34</sup> Colli, *Dopo Nietzsche*, pp. 120-121.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>36</sup> Calasso, ‘Monologo fatale’, p. 24.

Like Colli, Calasso sees Nietzsche as a ‘commediante’, he draws attention to one of the *Frammenti postumi*, which shows that the modern artist ‘non è più una persona, al più un rendez-vous di persone [...] Appunto per questo è un grande commediante’.<sup>37</sup> The *comedian* is a crucial figure in Nietzsche. Initially presented negatively as the opposite of the Dionysian man, from Zarathustra onwards he evolves into a positive figure. The driving force behind this change of interpretation lies in Nietzsche coming to terms with the idea that not only the ‘io’, but all representation is nothing but a simulation or reality. The *comedian*, as the simulator par excellence, becomes the unconscious vehicle of representation, and ultimately of knowledge:

Alla fine [...] non è più il commediante a crescere parassitariamente sul ceppo dell’uomo dionisiaco, ma al contrario è l’uomo dionisiaco che può manifestarsi solo a patto di indossare le vesti del commediante.[...] Nietzsche ci rivela che la conoscenza è commedia della conoscenza.<sup>38</sup>

Like Nietzsche, both Calasso and Colli are well aware that in its earliest known literary representation, Euripides’s *Bacchae*, Dionysus was already displaying the traits of an actor, and an artist’s alter ego. This comedian, showing a different side of his personality to each of the play’s characters, thus playing a number of different roles, adopting different masks, seems an apt description of the contemporary man of letters, who resists the ‘death of the author’ by offering to critics/readers its fragmented and multiform textuality. It is unsurprising, in this light, that he may have exerted such an

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<sup>37</sup> Nietzsche, quoted in Calasso, ‘Monologo fatale’, p. 57. This is one of the *Frammenti postumi*, organized and published by Colli-Montinari for Adelphi. According to Colli-Montinari’s classification, this is fragment 16[89], from Spring Summer 1888. Calasso makes a point of reminding the reader that he is quoting in accordance with the Colli-Montinari edition. See ‘Monologo fatale, note 3, p. 24. For the original German text see: Friederich Nietzsche, ‘Nachlass’ 16 [1-89], at <http://thenietzschechannel.fws1.com/index2ger.htm>, visited on 22/08/2008.

<sup>38</sup> Calasso, ‘Monologo fatale’, p. 34.

influence on Calasso. We can now attempt to respond to the question Calasso says Nietzsche would ask of any text, and establish who speaks in ‘Monologo fatale’. ‘Chi parla’<sup>39</sup>, appears to be Calasso the artist, rather than the critic, willing to draw attention to Nietzsche as the artist, or at least as the philosopher who ‘si rivolge alla speculazione col caparbio preconconcetto dell’artista.’<sup>40</sup>

Tout est masque, chez Nietzsche. Sa santé est un premier masque pour son génie; ses souffrances, un second masque, à la fois pour son génie et pour sa santé. Nietzsche ne croit pas à l’unité d’un moi, et ne l’éprouve pas: des rapports subtils de puissance et d’évaluation, entre différents «moi» qui se cachent, mais qui expriment aussi des forces d’une autre nature, forces de la vie, forces de la pensée. [...] Wagner, Schopenhauer, et même Paul Rée, Nietzsche les a vécus comme ses propres masques.<sup>41</sup>

Parmi les plus hauts moments de la philosophie de Nietzsche, il y a les pages où il parle de la nécessité de se masquer, de la vertu et de la positivité des masques, de leur instance ultime.<sup>42</sup>

Deleuze, Colli, and Calasso all seem to agree on Nietzsche’s obsession with theatre and masks being the highest point of his gnoseology, ‘tutto fuorché una questione di estetica. In essa, se mai, si apre la questione stessa della conoscenza.’<sup>43</sup> However, this ‘questione della conoscenza’ cannot be dealt with with the tools of philosophy. ‘Prima sotto la specie del suo doppio Zarathustra, poi presentando *se stesso in quanto doppio*, con *Ecce homo*, Nietzsche ha abbandonato il sentiero della filosofia con un gesto brusco.’<sup>44</sup> Calasso reminds his reader of one of the earliest Nietzschean texts: ‘Über

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>40</sup> Colli, *Dopo Nietzsche*, p. 82.

<sup>41</sup> Calasso, ‘Monologo fatale’, p. 44.

<sup>42</sup> Deleuze, *Nietzsche*, p. 10.

<sup>43</sup> Calasso, ‘Monologo fatale’, p. 32.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 39.



Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinn' (1873). There already 'La simulazione [...] è affermata già dall'inizio come forza dominante dell'intelletto: «l'intelletto come mezzo per la conservazione dell'individuo dispiega le sue forze principali nella simulazione»: la maschera, la scena il rappresentare vi sono subito riconosciuti come elementi costitutivi del conoscere.'<sup>45</sup>

Since he was a classical philologist, and the author of *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, Greek tragedy must have affected the development of Nietzsche's view of theatre, and his gnoseology. The Greeks saw theatre, the art form connected with Dionysus, as a form of knowledge. However, this knowledge could not be achieved through theoretical speculation, but through the experience of representation. *Māthos pathei*, learning by experiencing, as Aeschylus had said.<sup>46</sup> This meant attaining knowledge through artistic simulation in the theatre.

Regardless of the content of this knowledge, Calasso along with Nietzsche stresses the fact that truth is to be achieved through representation, through the language and gestures of actors, in one word through form. This "theatrical" practice, which Calasso sees as associated with 'l'eterno ritorno', is a practice of 'as if': 'Noi non siamo fatti per sapere, ma per agire come se sapessimo.'<sup>47</sup> 'Per avvicinarsi alla necessità il pensiero ha bisogno della simulazione [...] come ne aveva avuto bisogno per difendersi dalla necessità stessa. Il mondo è bifronte in ogni punto: i suoi elementi restano costanti, il loro uso è perennemente doppio. Forse mai come in Nietzsche questo sospetto ha raggiunto l'evidenza, non a caso in forma teatrale.'<sup>48</sup> Form and content coincide in Nietzsche to make even this message double. Having demolished in his attack on

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>46</sup> Aeschylus, 'Agamemnon' in David Grene and Richmond Lattimore eds., *Greek Tragedies*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1991, pp. 1-60, vv. 176-178.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

*nihilismus* all metanarratives, Nietzsche has shown us a way to knowledge through literature.

I mentioned above that Calasso links ‘eternal return’ and theatrical practice. Whilst I find convincing the interpretation of ‘will to power’ as ‘will to create’, I believe Calasso’s observations on the link between creativity and ‘eternal return’ deserve a few more comments. Calasso reads yet another posthumous fragment as Nietzsche’s best definition of ‘eternal return:’

Noi non dobbiamo volere *un solo* stato, bensì dobbiamo *voler diventare* esseri *periodici*: diventare cioè uguali all’esistenza [...] La successione che ora si apre è quella della totalità delle simulazioni [...]: l’uomo, che è natura, ma per natura nega di esserlo, deve simulare la natura per riscoprire che egli stesso è natura. L’essere che è diventato uguale all’esistenza genera il mondo da se stesso.<sup>49</sup>

This passage alone summarises three of Nietzsche’s main attractions for Calasso: the belief that knowledge is possible only through simulation, through exhausting all roles (as in the tale of Dionysus, or of Proteus); the need for metamorphosis, as suggested by the reference to the simulation of nature; the idea that this type of artistic knowledge may turn man into god, as adumbrated in the last sentence. But Calasso is silent on another artistic aspect of the ‘eternal return,’ which I believe is very important to him: the recurring return of the gods in art and literature can also be seen as a type of the ‘eternal return,’ as the ultimate outcome of the will to create, which brings about the return. We have appreciated, in Calasso’s discussion of Marx, a belief that there may be a chance of survival for ‘absolute literature’ in the world of ‘substitution.’ Having

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<sup>49</sup> The fragment is Colli-Montinari 1[70], July-August 1882, quoted in Calasso, ‘Monologo fatale’, p.61. See Friederich Nietzsche, *Frammenti postumi 1882-1884*, vol. I, Adelphi, Milan, 1982, 1[70]. See Friederich Nietzsche, ‘Nachlass’ 1[70], at <http://thenietzschechannel.fws1.com/nachd1.htm>, visited on 22/08/2008 for the original text.

stressed ‘il carattere teatrale della post-storia’, therefore inserting this interpretation in the same setting as ‘Monologo fatale’, Calasso had stressed that the hollowness of signified in *post-storia* had enlarged its need for ‘signifier’,<sup>50</sup> but that images move from being ‘*feticci*, concrezioni uniche, insostituibili e irriducibili della potenza, to ‘cose [...] la cui virtù è appunto la sostituibilità.’<sup>51</sup> What cannot be given back by the individual figures in a game of ‘substitution’ can be given back by the totality of the process. The process of sign-mirroring, rather than the images reflected in the mirror, give the modern artist the opportunity to carry on creating ‘absolute literature’. The ‘eternal return’ also seems to be a process of ongoing creation of substitutes, and its movement (‘la totalità della simulazione’) therefore may be seen as keeping literature alive in its complexity. Fascinating as this hypothesis may sound, I believe Calasso stopped short of making it his only or main means of justifying the survival of ‘absolute literature’ in the realm of ‘substitution.’ In my opinion, he also sees in the ‘eternal return’ of the gods in literature further opportunities for generating meaning through the metaphorical interplay between each image of the god returning and the creative energies at play in his return.

Before concluding this section, I would like to comment on Calasso’s decision to entitle the essay ‘Monologo’; whilst I initially dismissed it with the thought that monologue is arguably the most ancient and simplest form of theatre, the development of Calasso’s essay made me reconsider this. By choosing the word *monologo*, Calasso can stress that *Ecce homo* for Nietzsche was both a public and a private piece of writing. His art is ‘il giocare da soli’, ‘in un costante nesso erotico col linguaggio’, until all is left is ‘il

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<sup>50</sup> ‘Il carattere teatrale della post-storia, il suo essere vuota di qualsiasi sostanza e continuamente bisognosa di assorbirsi in una fantasmagoria che plachi il suo irrimediabile bisogno di feticci, spiegano il ritorno sulla scena abbandonata di tutte le immagini del passato storico. Così, dietro la «moneta viva» delle abitatrici del parco, traspaiono e premono molti altri esseri, che di quella moneta rimandano l’immagine, a specchio, dall’origine.’ Id., ‘Déesses entretenues’, p. 273.

<sup>51</sup> Id., *Kasch*, p. 315.

labirinto del *monologo*, l'inseguirsi senza fine delle voci interne.'<sup>52</sup> Again, we can compare this to a passage by Colli:

Un pensatore moderno, condannato all'elaborazione interiore, deve tuttavia, se davvero vuol essere razionale, sforzarsi di imitare un modo di procedere dialettico, e poiché gli mancano gli interlocutori deve costruirseli. Gli è indispensabile quindi avere altresì un talento artistico, essere un creatore drammatico, tale da invitare i personaggi che gli possono ribattere, e un attore autentico, tale da immedesimarsi nelle voci che lo contrastano.<sup>53</sup>

Colli is more explicit about the reason why Nietzsche needed to be a monologist. It was a way of simulating dialectic, therefore of attaining philosophical knowledge through the channel and the form of art. Calasso stresses the labyrinthine nature of the monologue, signalling the difficulty of its interpretation for the reader, and of the communication of its content for the writer. Monologue therefore almost seems another name for the philosophical cave in which Nietzsche claimed to be during his madness.

The idea of the cave, from Plato's onwards, has become in Western metaphysics a reminder of reality's mendacious nature. So has the mask. All the Nietzschean symbols, which Calasso picks on, and all the figures he brings into the discussion, such as the labyrinth, have a more or less obvious undertone of simulation, and therefore of untruth.

Colli was well aware of the importance of Nietzsche's use of these symbols, when he observed that for Nietzsche, not only is art a lie, but so is all philosophy, including his own. He had also noted a paradox between Nietzsche's view that you can only become

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<sup>52</sup> Id., 'Monologo fatale', pp. 53-54.

<sup>53</sup> Colli, *Dopo Nietzsche*, p. 84.

a philosopher by writing (*'homo scribens'*),<sup>54</sup> and his belief that 'La filosofia è scrittura e ogni scrittura è falsificazione. Nietzsche ha liberato lo sguardo in questa direzione, anche se le premesse che lui stesso ha stabilito minano tutte le sue parole stampate.'<sup>55</sup> It would appear that Nietzsche has brought Plato's damnation of writing<sup>56</sup> to its ultimate conclusion. Plato had used his philosophical dialogues to foreground the distance between writing and reality, thus denouncing writing's mendacious nature. Nietzsche has used Plato's premises against philosophy, to demonstrate that philosophy itself, being written, is subject to the same limitations as any other type of writing. But the paradox of Nietzsche's philosophy is that by making writing the path to knowledge he has simultaneously declared himself trapped in the cave, and shown the way out of it. Is the alphabet the first lie or the first metaphor, or both? Is meaning to be found/represented through the separation of signified and signifier, or through its union? As his comments on the labyrinthine nature of monologue indicate, Calasso is aware of the paradoxical conclusion to which Nietzsche's thought may lead. However, the awareness that Nietzsche only comes to philosophical conclusions through the practice of art reassures us that despite its *auto-referenzialità* the world of writing does lead to truth, whether through the process of sign-mirroring between different images, masks and ideas, or through an analogical relationship between a mask and a hero.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>56</sup> The best-known expression of Plato's condemnation of mimetic writing is *The Republic*, particularly Book III and X. See Platone, *La repubblica*, BUR, Milan, 2007. For an English translation see Plato, *The Republic*, translated by George Anthony Maximilian Grube, Hackett Publishing, Indianapolis, 1992. Poets are banned from Plato's ideal city (see *The Republic* X, 605b) as art is concluded to be 'third form truth' (*The Republic*, X, 597e). Plato's position on writing is in reality a lot less clear-cut. Still in book X of *The Republic*, Socrates reserves the right to change his mind if mimetic art defends itself convincingly from his conclusions (*The Republic*, X, 607b and ff.), and a more positive judgement is expressed in *Phaedrus* (276a-b), however philosophical and literary traditions have consistently felt the need to respond to the objections raised in *The Republic*.

Colli himself noted that Nietzsche, *homo scribens*, ‘il dissacratore per eccellenza, non ha saputo dissacrare l’attività dello scrittore.’<sup>57</sup> In Calasso’s view, he probably came as close to consecrate it as a man of *post-storia* possibly can. When Jesus is masked as king of the Jews by the legionnaires, he is forced into simulation, into an ironic moment of comedy, yet his performance manages to reveal truth on a different level. Similarly the act of writing can truthfully wear the mask of the ‘path to knowledge’, even if the truth behind this mask may simply be that writing leads to knowledge by a game of sign-mirroring, a simulation played between a multi-faceted, metamorphic signifier and an ever-slipping, never fully expressed signified. Truth may come through the illusory, fleeting figures brought back by the mental waters of literature.

These observations bring us back to where Calasso left us with his essay on *Mine-haha*: to the topic of the power of language and the role of literature, which constantly flows through his works. So does the reference to the erotic nexus between author and language, emerging from Calasso’s words on *monologue*. His reading of Nietzsche should enrich the interpretation of his reading of Marx and Warburg.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

### III. Dionysus and metaphor

“Dio è morto”, ha detto Nietzsche, con una frase troppo celebre. Ma gli dei sono ancora vivi, almeno alcuni di essi. E questo perché Dio “era” eterno, un gelido idolo prodotto e distrutto dalla ragione, mentre gli dei vivono “una lunga vita”, secondo le parole di Empedocle.<sup>58</sup>

Calasso opens ‘Monologo fatale’ by asking who (‘Chi’) is speaking in *Ecce Homo*. Whilst a fully legitimate question, it also suggests a few correlations with his works. The translation of ‘chi’ in Sanskrit is ‘Ka’,<sup>59</sup> which is the title of Calasso’s re-writing of Hindu legends. Calasso reveals that ‘Ka’ is both an interrogative pronoun, and the name of the father of the Hindu gods, Prajapati,<sup>60</sup> a deity, who has a lot in common with the Greek Dionysus-Zagreus, remembered by Nietzsche in *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. Both end up dismembered, and are figures of scapegoats, who demand sacrifices. We have seen that Calasso draws a distinction between the world of analogy (see page 49-50), in which objects are in relation to each other and the capitalist world of substitution, in which objects are replaceable. We have also seen in the earlier section (from page 85) that he believes that knowledge for Nietzsche is only achieved through a practice of simulation (for a more detailed illustration of the theme of simulation in Calasso, see chapters VIII and IX). As mentioned, I do not believe that Calasso would rely on the ‘eternal return’ exclusively to indicate the power of ‘absolute literature’ to survive in the game of sign-mirroring between replaceable objects and figures, and completely discount the role of *analogia*. One of the elements which support this interpretation are the Nietzschean words, which Calasso picks to discuss the concept of simulation: ‘come

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>59</sup> See Calasso, *Ka*, p. 31

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

se.’ These words suggest a place for metaphor in Nietzsche’s gnoseological system and in Calasso’s reading of it. Calasso does claim that Nietzsche views ‘la verità stessa come «un esercito mobile di metafore»’, and adds that in Nietzsche:

L’uomo [...] si presenta come essere metaforizzante: «quell’istinto alla costruzione di metafore, quell’istinto fondamentale dell’uomo, che non possiamo togliere dal conto in nessun momento, perchè con ciò toglieremmo dal conto l’uomo stesso. [...]» Vi si afferma che la legislazione simulativa della conoscenza è già data nella costruzione del linguaggio, dove sono predisposte tutte le categorie – soggetto, predicato, causa, ecc. – che la conoscenza vorrebbe invece, mediante il linguaggio, fondare.<sup>61</sup>

I find this passage crucial. First of all, from the emphasis on truth as an army of metaphors, and on man as a metaphorsing being, we can argue that for Nietzsche and Calasso the highest knowledge can only be achieved by the saviour who best handles metaphors, thus by the artist. The mask and the metaphor are clues to the representative power of art. They signal representation as a way to truth, on condition of accepting both the limit and the power of simulation: the gap excavated by the ‘as if’ between image and reality. This conclusion itself could satisfactorily explain why Calasso claimed that ‘absolute literature’ after Hölderlin only came back in Nietzsche. If Nietzsche’s style and form can meet the criteria of ‘absolute literature’ because of its being a free, non-conditioned literary practice, with perfection as its only aim, then so does Nietzsche’s thought. Being formulated only through the artistic path of theatrical practice, we can apply to it Calasso’s definition of ‘absolute literature’ as well. ‘Absolute literature’ leaves behind the Apollinean ‘antica costruzione della retorica,’ ‘fuggendo verso un sapere che trova fondamento in se stesso e si espande ovunque

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<sup>61</sup> Calasso, ‘Monologo fatale’, p. 63.



come una nube, capace di avvolgere ogni profilo, incurante di ogni confine'; 'un sapere che si dichiara e si pretende inaccessibile per altra via che non sia la composizione letteraria; assoluta, perché è un sapere che si assimila alla ricerca di un assoluto – e perciò non può coinvolgere nulla meno del tutto.'<sup>62</sup>

In his discussion of Marx, Calasso had implied that the sources of literature are destroyed when reality becomes too real, when mathematical 'equivalence' – lacking the magical or quasi-religious undertone, which underlies a 'correspondence' – replaces metaphor. Here, through the mask of Nietzsche, he goes as far as almost suggesting that man needs to create metaphors to feel or stay alive.

The connection between life and metaphor can be discussed through the concept of sacrifice which lies at the heart of *Ka*, Calasso's text on Hindu mythology, as well as *Le nozze*. We have seen earlier that in the realm of 'analogy' the link between the two objects being put in correlation is much stronger than in a 'substitution,' where one may replace the other regardless of any relationship between the two. 'Per il vero poeta', had said Nietzsche, 'la metafora non è una figura retorica, bensì un'immagine sostitutiva che gli si presenta concretamente, in luogo di un concetto.'<sup>63</sup> The world of metaphor is the world of relation which is ultimately akin to the world of sacrifice. In a sacrifice, a being or thing is so closely related to another, that an action, or sometimes even an utterance, on the first, or by the first, brings about a corresponding action on or by the other. The difference between the two actions or figures is what allows for the analogy to be meaningful, for the sacrifice to be successful and for the chain sacrifice-divine action to continue its existence.

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<sup>62</sup> Id., *La letteratura*, p. 142.

<sup>63</sup> Friederich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, in the Giorgio Colli translation for Adelphi as *La nascita della tragedia*. See Friederich Nietzsche, *La nascita della tragedia*, Adelphi, Milan, 2007, p. 59. The original text can be consulted at Friederich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, at <http://www.zeno.org/Philosophie/M/Nietzsche,+Friederich/Die+Geburt+der+Trag%C3%B6die/Die+Geburt+der+Trag%C3%B6die+aus+dem+Geiste+der+Musik/1-10>, visited 22/08/2008.

The sacrifice requires a scene, action, actors, and viewers, and is therefore akin to theatre. Interestingly, Greek tragic theatre, which always includes an onstage killing, is put as early as Aristotle,<sup>64</sup> under the aegis of Dionysus, the supremely ambiguous – if we are to trust Euripides – god of masks and music, a god so connected with sacrifice and sacrificial victims, that despite his cruel side, he has even been associated with Christ.

This god, ‘for a long time the only hero present on the stage’,<sup>65</sup> is also the fugitive god rediscovered by Nietzsche. The philosopher had been haunted by Dionysus since his first published work, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. As Calasso remembers, when Nietzsche succumbed to madness he even signed some of his letters as Dionysus.

Whilst Calasso is well aware that Nietzsche’s thought evolved from his early work on the origin of tragedy, the definition of Apollo and Dionysus, their different influence on man, and the type of art and knowledge they represent, are a recurring framework in his reflections and literary production, as much as they are in Colli’s philosophical books.

In *Scritti su Nietzsche*, also published by Adelphi, Colli gives some elements of his reading of Nietzsche’s concepts of *apollineo* and *dionisiaco*. Analysing Nietzsche’s *Die dionysische Weltanschauung*, where ‘I concetti stessi di apollineo e dionisiaco [...] sono parificati come istinti “artistici”,<sup>66</sup> Colli, following the Platonic *Phaedrus*,<sup>67</sup> states that Apollo and Dionysus, who, ‘Prima d’ogni altra cosa, e in comune, possiedono l’uomo con la follia’, are tools for freeing human nature, ‘tramite il sogno e l’ebbrezza’.<sup>68</sup> Even though, ‘il sogno è identificato con il veicolo specifico della creazione artistica, cosicché la sfera dell’arte è tipicamente disegnata dal’apollineo’,<sup>69</sup> whilst Dionysus è

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<sup>64</sup> See Aristotle, ‘On the Art of Poetry’, IV, in p. 36.

<sup>65</sup> Nietzsche, *La nascita della tragedia*, p. 51.

<sup>66</sup> Giorgio Colli, *Scritti su Nietzsche*, Adelphi, Milan, 1980, p. 41.

<sup>67</sup> id., *La sapienza greca*, Adelphi, Milan, 1995, Vol. I, p. 25.

<sup>68</sup> Id., *Scritti su Nietzsche*, p. 27.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

più ‘interiorità pura’, Colli believes both elements to be necessary for Nietzsche, to enable artistic creation, and proposes an interesting reading of the *Die Geburt der Tragödie* as the inverted mirror through which we can detect the ‘inversion’<sup>70</sup> between today’s concept of ‘spettacolo’, and that of tragedy. Nietzsche, explains Colli, revealed that:

quanto lo spettatore ateniese vede laggiù [...] non è altro che uno spettacolo per il coro, una visione che appare al coro. Quindi chi agisce – l’attore sulla scena – non esiste, è soltanto uno spettacolo in assoluto, e quanto al coro, che agisce e contempla assieme, è spettacolo per lo spettatore. Costui guarda un’azione che è già spettacolo per chi agisce, non è spettatore direttamente, ma soltanto – per magia di Apollo–vede qualcuno che contempla uno spettacolo e glielo racconta.<sup>71</sup>

Apollo, god of form, the inventor of meter, is therefore credited with what a contemporary critic would call the metafictional element of Greek tragedy. However, an eminently Dionysian element can be detected in this reading of tragedy. Not only because tragedy is the art form specifically performed at the Dionysian festival, but because the revelation of the metafictional nature of tragedy is also a revelation of a deep link between spectator and god, achieved through experience and witnessing rather than directly through form, the quintessential Apollonian element. This mysteric element is deeply Dionysian. As a matter of fact, Colli concludes his reading with a question that clarifies this ‘mysteric’ aspect of Nietzsche’s reading: ‘E se la via dello spettacolo fosse la via della conoscenza, della liberazione, della vita insomma? Tale è la domanda posta da Nietzsche nella *Die Geburt der Tragödie*.’<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>72</sup> Id., *Scritti su Nietzsche*, p. 29.

According to ‘Monologo fatale’ the answer to Nietzsche’s question is yes. The analysis of the self-referentiality of tragedy has a clear ring in Calasso’s belief that self-referentiality can lead to knowledge, clearly stated in *La letteratura e gli dei*<sup>73</sup>, and discussed at 42-43.

#### **IV. The feminine language of Dionysus**

We have seen that, as the god of theatre, Dionysus is the god presiding over the relationship between the mask and the actor, and the mask and the hero. Dionysus is therefore also the god of metaphor. We have also seen that he is the Greek god most closely associated with sacrifice. Furthermore, we have seen that in Nietzsche’s world Dionysus is the god of music. If this makes it difficult to justify presenting him as a god of literature and of language, some of Nietzsche’s pages in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* make his task even more difficult. Here Nietzsche links music with poetry and declares that poetry originated out of the need to subjugate the gods: ‘Si tentava così di costringerli mediante il ritmo e di esercitare un potere su di essi: si gettava loro la poesia come un laccio magico.’<sup>74</sup> However, he makes it clear that Apollo, god of meter, is the divinity presiding over this attempt to seize power through words. Colli’s view that Nietzsche’s revelation of the metafictional nature of Greek theatre is due to the magic of Apollo, poses similar problems.

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<sup>73</sup> *La letteratura.*, p. 146.

<sup>74</sup> Nietzsche, *Gaia scienza*, p. 121. For the original text in German see Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, 84, at <http://www.geocities.com/thenietzschechannel/dfw4.htm>, visited on 22/08/2008.

However, in his view of Apollo, and therefore, indirectly, of Dionysus, Calasso seems to detach himself partially from Nietzsche, or from Colli's reading. This detachment takes place in his essay on Warburg, where he discusses the figure of the Nymph. Calasso quotes Norman Douglas – author of *Old Calabria*<sup>75</sup>, quoted by Joseph Fontenrose in his study *Python*<sup>76</sup> – as the first who had understood that the eye of the dragon is a source. Fontenrose, says Calasso, adds that a Hebrew word, 'ayin', means 'eye' and 'source.' Not only the water of the source is protected by the dragon, but is part of the dragon.

Per conquistare la sovranità sulla possessione, Apollo aveva dovuto battersi innanzitutto con un altro occhio, con uno sguardo che avrebbe incorporato in sé uccidendo Pitone, così come Atena portava sul petto, nell'egida, lo sguardo della sua vittima, la Gorgone.<sup>77</sup>

Whilst the lingering on the importance of eyesight reminds us of the Apollinean metafictional nature of theatre highlighted by Colli's reading of Nietzsche, the passage also reminds us subtly of the other god of Delphi, the one who used to occupy it during the winter months, as Calasso, remembering Plutarch, stresses in *Le nozze*. The god Dionysus, winter brother of Apollo, is more openly connected with snakes and dragons. During his ritual, the Maenads wear snakes around their neck, and snakes normally either precede or follow his apparition on the scene.

Whilst Dionysus is not directly associated with water, this god's snake-like nature can be linked to another element of Warburg's triad, the Nymph. The first followers of Dionysus as shown by Euripides' *Bacchae* are the Theban women, who take to the

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<sup>75</sup> Norman Douglas, *Old Calabria*, New York, Malboro Press, 1996

<sup>76</sup> Joseph Fontenrose, *Python: A Study of the Delphic Myth and Its Origins*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1959.

<sup>77</sup> Calasso, 'La follia', p. 17.

mountains with the god, live there for a while in harmony with animals and vegetations. Because of his clothing, and his physical features, Dionysus is described by the male characters of *Bacchae* as effeminated, and his first cruel revenge on his challenger Pentheus is when he manages to make him dress up as a woman. If we cannot see Dionysus as a nymph, we can certainly see him as an ally to the Nymph, or to the type of knowledge, which the Nymph represents. Both are natural and irrational beings, opposed therefore to the cultural god Apollo, master of *logos*, articulated discourse and thus logic and the orderly speech yoked by meter.

Nietzsche is well aware that Dionysus is also the god of *mania*, of a madness which can either lead to self-destruction, like in the case of the god's aunt Agave, or become a form of prophetic knowledge. As we have seen in the discussion of *Mine-Haha*, prophetic madness is the knowledge of the Delphic priestess, a knowledge, which she relates in the meter of Apollo. Her use of meter - which may be what allows the priestess to prevent her prophecy from driving her to madness - may, according to 'La follia che viene dalle Ninfe', be a simulation, a choice made in order to give Apollo the illusion of having appropriated a knowledge which, in reality, still escapes him. 'Certo, non già di una conoscenza che rimane disponibile come un algoritmo. Ma una conoscenza che è un *páthos*, come Aristotele definì l'esperienza misterica.'<sup>78</sup> Even though he makes no clear reference to Dionysus, his presence can be perceived in Calasso's discussion. He continues: 'Una conoscenza che non può presentarsi se non in termini erotici: *theólēptos* and *theóplēktos*, l'essere «presi» dal dio e l'essere «colpiti» dal dio, le due modalità fondamentali della possessione, corrispondono ai due modi delle epifanie erotiche di Zeus: il ratto e lo stupro.'<sup>79</sup> Calasso had earlier given us a list of all the types of possession, and had ranged *nympholēptos* next to *theólēptos* as the

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., pp. 28-29.

highest form of possession, ‘come se il sistema delle Ninfe e il sistema degli dei fossero in qualche modo equivalenti, per lo meno in rapporto alla qualità degli effetti che producono.’<sup>80</sup> Dionysus, as the god of *mania*, retains prophetic knowledge, whilst Apollo has to settle with leaving prophetic utterance to the priestess, who sits on the tripod in which, according to *Le nozze*, were collected the dismembered bones of Dionysus Zagreus.

I raised earlier the question of whether the prophetic utterances resulting from *mania* can be seen as an autonomous form of language, or as content dressed up in the language of Apollo, through meter. Calasso’s comment that possession is erotic knowledge seems to be a clue towards the first possibility. Possession could be seen as a *monologo*, and monologue, had stressed Calasso, was the erotic nexus between author and language.

In his discussion on ‘Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinn’, Calasso presented language, which is probably the most obvious type of metaphor used by man, as a house built on bricks of ‘as if,’ of analogies and simulations (see pages 95-96). Language is depicted as already ‘knowing through simulation,’ as already organised in all the structures and categories which knowledge aspires to create in it. This sentence appears almost as a dramatisation of the power struggle between Apollo, who tries to impose the light of categories and logic, the form of meter, on language, and another god (or goddess) who is happy with language as it is, with its capacity of knowing through simulation.

Dionysus, god of masks, seems the ideal candidate for this second role. If Apollo gives form and order to language, Dionysus as the god of ‘as if’ gives language not just content, but another hidden and perhaps self-sufficient order. His view of the gods and ‘absolute literature’ is what makes it more difficult for Calasso to draw a line between

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

these gods than it is for Colli or even Nietzsche. Calasso does not believe in a clear-cut division of powers, where Dionysus and Apollo have agreed to take one the realm of signified, and one the realm of signifier.

We can leave the content of the 'mnemonic wave', the 'mental waters' to Dionysus, and the form and meter to Apollo, but this would make metaphor, which is almost a bridge between form and content, signifier and signified, somewhat of a middle ground. If we can say that mask is a form we can legitimately say that this order does not relate simply to an imageless signified, but by making relationships between different orders is not only a way to knowledge through experience but also a symbolic language. This is where I believe Calasso, even though relying almost exclusively on their observations, finally goes beyond Nietzsche and Colli. His formulations on language and literature reach beyond the Apollinean signifier, to that middle ground where language touches reality through the power of masks, the power of metaphors. And yet this search for meaning cannot do away with Apollo and form.

In the discussion on the Nymph, I stressed that Calasso's repeated hints that Apollo thinks he has defeated female knowledge and power through the imposition of form, but is not aware that his Muses are nymphs going under a different name. This, I argued at the time, could point to a belief that literature results not simply from the mirroring back of the origin from nymph to nymph through a 'mnemonic wave' (see pages 68- 70), but also from the constant mirroring between Apollo and the nymphs. The middle ground of metaphor can be another symptom. 'Absolute literature' is after all a symbolic code, and as such does require the support of Apollinean form, together with the figures populating mental waters of the mnemonic wave. The middle ground of metaphor may be the locus where these are negotiating their meaning and their change in meaning.



I believe the analysis above has shown that Calasso does have a complex and problematic view of the relationship between Apollonian and Dionysian, and ultimately of the power of signification.

I want to reflect further on the fact that Calasso stresses that the Apollonian god of *logos* may be deluded in his belief that he has beaten the female powers of Delphi. Apollo may also be ignoring the relationship between the nymphs and Dionysus. Nietzsche's observation that, whilst Apollo belongs to culture, his alter ego belongs to nature, is an indication that both Dionysus and the nymphs partake of the same world. Their relation with snakes is another. Furthermore, the language of simulation seems very akin to the feminine language of the female snake Python, the alter ego of the Delphi priestess, and the first dissimulator who misled Apollo. When Apollo imposes meter on the nymphs, therefore on Dionysus, can we say that he imposes *logos* in the sense of language, or is he simply attempting a means of hierarchically ordering a previous, possibly less logical and structured type of communicative code, the feminine language of prophecy, of metaphor and symbol? All observations made so far cause me to lean towards this view. This feminine language, anterior – in the Delphic myth as recounted by Calasso – to Apollo's, inclines me to propose that metaphors may not only be the experiential way to knowledge, as suggested through the mask of Nietzsche; but perhaps even that 'Adamic language', that source language, which Calasso believes still possible even in the capitalist world of substitution. In metaphors, we have seen, a relationship between signified and signifier is still possible, even though it may be a dynamic relationship, a movement rather than a state, the mirroring between different orders in the middle ground where analogies are established.

The fluidity of the nymph makes her the ideal inhabitant of this middle ground. That the 'Adamic language', discussed at pages 59-60, or any language, may be feminine, may

sound like a surprising view for Calasso to entertain. Yet it appears deeply rooted in him. He had noted in *I quarantanove gradini* that one of his favourite *finis Austriae* authors, Karl Kraus, had also drawn an analogy between woman and language: ‘Con radicale arcaismo, Kraus vede nella donna e nella parola i due frammenti di natura che la società continuamente si scambia, e sassume nel proprio puro elemento, il denaro, senza mai riuscire, però, a cancellarne i tratti per sempre estranei.’<sup>81</sup> Even in substitution, something of woman and language remains free, *absolutus*, and therefore ready to take on new symbolic masks and let the mnemonic wave of literature back in. One of the most unforgettable moments of *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia* is when Calasso reveals that, according to a Bizantine source, Helen of Troy had woken up Homer one night to dictate the *Iliad* to him.<sup>82</sup> Nietzsche stresses in the *Die Geburt der Tragödie* that the human voice belongs to the realm of *dionisiaco*, and that Homer was the ultimate apollinean artist. But in *Le nozze* the poet is turned into a mere scribe, while the most feminine of beings, Helen, takes on the role of author, and brings back fugitive gods and fugitive heroes. Calasso therefore seems not only to suggest that the only language still capable of breaking out of ‘self-referentiality’ displays dionysian/feminine characteristics, but also, ironically, that ‘absolute literature’ may have had origin in the whim of a demi-goddess.

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<sup>81</sup> Id., ‘Una muraglia cinese’, in *I quarantanove gradini*, Adelphi, Milan, 1991, pp.137-191, pp. 157-158.

<sup>82</sup> Id., *Le nozze*, pp. 155-156.

## Chapter IV

### The God of the Book

#### [Abstract]

This chapter will investigate the influence on Calasso's work of a number of Jewish intellectuals, including: Adorno, Benjamin, Scholem, and Kraus, whose view of language Calasso appears visibly indebted to.

With the aid of Hillman's psychology, I will explore the difficulty of re-writing mythology within the constraints of a monotheistic culture. I will then reflect on the heightened view of reading typical to Jewish culture, and explore the contribution of Benjamin, Scholem, and Kraus to the definition of an 'absolute reader' – who deals successfully with the enigma of writing, reading critically and creatively at the same time, thus partaking of the qualities of a *poiētēs*. This 'absolute reader' is the reader capable of dealing with the complexity of *letteratura assoluta* and the 'Adamic language'. I will therefore rely on Calasso's reading of Kraus and Adorno to show how Calasso's Nietzschean view of metaphor and 'Adamic language' is enriched by Jewish elements, and how these elements enable Calasso to develop a "messianic" view of the power of language and particularly of writing. I will also show how they help him deal with the issue of originality and maintain his belief in the power of *poiēsis*, in the Marxian/Benjaminian age of mass reproducibility.

## I. The challenge of monotheism

I cabbalisti ritenevano che la lingua potesse essere parlata in virtù del Nome che è presente in essa. Ma quale sarà la dignità di un linguaggio dal quale Dio si è ritirato? Questa è la domanda che si deve porre chi ancora crede di percepire nell'immanenza del mondo l'eco della parola della creazione, ormai scomparsa. È una domanda alla quale, nel nostro tempo, forse potranno rispondere soltanto i poeti, che non condividono la disperazione nutrita da quasi tutti i mistici nei confronti del linguaggio. Una cosa, però, li accomuna ai maestri della *Qabbalah*, anche quando ne rifiutano le formulazioni teologiche perché ancora troppo esplicite: la fede nel linguaggio come un assoluto, sia pure dialetticamente scisso, la fede in quel mistero che nel linguaggio è divenuto udibile.<sup>1</sup>

Il s'agit d'un certain Judaïsme comme naissance et passion de l'écriture.<sup>2</sup>

The third text from Calasso's work-in-progress, *K.* is dedicated to Kafka, the author who, according to Gershom Scholem, 'ha [...] portato a espressione in modo insuperabile il confine tra religione e nichilismo.'<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, a number of Calasso's favorite German and *finis Austriae* authors: Hoffmansthal, Freud, Benjamin, Adorno, Kraus and Kafka are of Jewish origin. This deserves further reflection, as Calasso seems fascinated

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<sup>1</sup> Gershom Scholem, 'Der Name Gottes und die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala' (1970), translated by Adelphi as 'Il nome di Dio e la teoria cabbalistica del linguaggio'. See Gershom Scholem, 'Il nome di Dio e la teoria cabbalistica del linguaggio' in *Il nome di Dio e la teoria cabbalistica del linguaggio*, Adelphi, Milan, 1998, pp. 9-90, pp. 89-90.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Edmond Jabès et la question du livre', *L'écriture et la différence*, Seuil, Paris, 1967, pp. 99-116, p. 99.

<sup>3</sup> Gershom Scholem, 'Zehn unhistorische Sätze über Kabbala', translated by Adelphi as 'Dieci tesi storiche sulla Qabbalah'. See Gershom Scholem, 'Dieci tesi storiche sulla Qabbalah' in *Il nome di Dio e la teoria cabbalistica del linguaggio*, Adelphi, Milan, 1998, pp. 91-102, p. 102. Scholem continues: 'Ecco perché i suoi scritti, versione secolarizzata di un sentimento cosmico che è proprio della Qabbalah (a lui comunque ignota), possiedono, per alcuni lettori odierni, il nitido splendore dei testi canonici: lo splendore della perfezione infranta.'

by typically Jewish elements in their production. I will not linger on *K.*, a rewrite of the Prague author's most famous tales, *Das Schloß* and *Der Proceß*. A more explicit and larger scale confrontation with Jewish culture had already taken place in Calasso's work in the form of *I quarantanove gradini*, the collection of essays whose title was inspired by Benjamin<sup>4</sup>, discussed at pages 52-53. Given Judaism's fascination with exegesis, making of a critical work the ground of his confrontation with this culture, seems a remarkable choice on Calasso's part.

Whether we analyse *K.* or *I quarantanove gradini*, it is obvious that Calasso does not seem interested in confronting Judaism through its founding biblical tales, but rather through its twentieth century intellectuals.

The work of James Hillman, Jewish psychologist and Adelphi author, may help shed some light on one of the reasons, that may have made it difficult for Calasso to deal with the 'Book of Books', in the same way as he deals with Greek and Hindu mythology. Hillman remarks that the biblical tales are 'monotheistic', and that this monotheism is the cultural constraint, which explains why – differently from Greek and other polytheistic societies – Judeo-Christian Western cultures appear marked by an *aut/aut* syndrome, and are incapable of handling contradiction and the simultaneous presence of opposites. This 'monotheism' extends to the characters in the Bible, who lack the depth and complexity of Greek gods and heroes, whose heroism is clearly marked by contradictions.

Considereremmo, per esempio, Artemide, Persefone, Atena, Afrodite sfondi *psicologici* più adatti alla complessità della natura umana che non l'immagine unitaria di Maria, e la diversità espressa con Apollo, Hermes, Dioniso ed Ercole, per esempio, più corrispondente

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<sup>4</sup> 'Io non ho mai potuto pensare e studiare se non in senso teologico, se così posso dire, e cioè in accordo con la dottrina talmudica dei quarantanove gradini di significato di ogni passo della Torah.' See Calasso, 'I quarantanove gradini', p. 126 and 'Pratica dell'illuminazione profana', p. 345 respectively.

ai moti concreti della psiche che non le varie idee di un Sé o le figure, prese singolarmente, di Eros, di Gesù, o di Yavèh. Non che Maria, Eros, Gesù o Yavèh siano falsi: assolutamente no; è solo che tendono, come Zeus d'altronde, a presentarsi in descrizioni che si impongono attraverso l'unificazione, disperdendo così i valori ai quali ciascuno degli altri Dei e Dee dà forma.<sup>5</sup>

Seeing in monotheism a limitedness of meaning, and/or interpretation, Hillman campaigns for a post-Jungian 'polytheistic psychology' that could be applied to literary criticism, for example to the texts of Plato: 'Ho detto altrove che i dialoghi di Platone si prestano a una lettura archetipica, secondo gli dei, il cui stile riflettono, e che le discrepanze all'interno della filosofia platonica possono intendersi come consone al politeismo della sua coscienza.'<sup>6</sup>

'Polytheism' enables us to deal faithfully with such texts, to read their complexity not as loss of meaning, but as truthfulness. Hillman shares this view of a polytheistic complexity of reality with Greek tragedy, pre-Socratic philosophy, particularly his favorite Heraclitus, Nietzsche and of course Calasso. Exemplary is the tale of Ariadne in *Le nozze*: Calasso tells us that, although according to one commonly held view, the Cretan princess killed herself in Naxos, when abandoned by Dionysus, according to another she remained his queen and was transformed into the constellation *Corona Borealis*. There was also a third version of the tale, Calasso reveals. According to that version there were two Ariadnes, one who died and one who survived.<sup>7</sup> He also hints that Dionysus and her first lover Theseus may be one and the same.<sup>8</sup> Calasso strongly stresses that all the different views and truths about Ariadne complement rather than

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<sup>5</sup> James Hillman, 'Molti Dei, molte persone', in Thomas More ed., *Fuochi blu*, Adelphi, Milan, 2005, pp. 60-83, p. 66.

<sup>6</sup> James Hillman, *La vana fuga dagli dei*, Adelphi, Milan, 1991, p. 139.

<sup>7</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 29 and ff.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

contradict each other,<sup>9</sup> and his style and theory thrive on this type of polytheistic thinking. It is understandable therefore, that he may choose not to re-write the monotheistic tales in the Book of Books. Instead, he takes up the cabbalistic unfolding of interpretation favored by modern Jewish authors, which may also have been a reaction to the monotheistic simplicity of the tales.

The second reason for Calasso's choice not to deal with biblical myth directly could relate to his left-wing upbringing which may have made it difficult for him to confront characters with a strong religious dimension. Nietzsche's influence may have added to this unease, as this thinker had made it his mission to free Western man from nihilism, which he saw as the philosophical and cultural burden, imposed by Judeo-Christian culture.

Despite the unease with its monotheistic aspect and the avoidance of the biblical tales, *I quarantanove gradini* reveals Calasso's fascination with Judaism. One reason for this fascination may lie in the fact that Jewish intellectuals played a pivotal role in bringing the gods back into twentieth century culture: figures as diverse as Warburg, Stravinsky and Freud. Even Hillman reflected a number of times on a post-Nietzschean concept of 'return to Greece', which 'offre un modo di far fronte all'indebolimento del nostro centro e alla disgregazione dell cose.'<sup>10</sup> These ideas, illustrated by Hillman in 1975, before Calasso started publishing his work-in-progress, may indicate the two authors' common ascendance in Warburg.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp. 36-37.

<sup>10</sup> 'Un «ritorno alla Grecia » fu vissuto in tempi di rivoluzione nella stessa Roma antica, nell'Italia rinascimentale e nella psyche romantica. In anni recenti, è stato una parte intrinseca delle vite di artisti e pensatori quali Stravinsky, Picasso, Heidegger, Joyce e Freud. Il «ritorno alla Grecia » è una risposta psicologica alla sfida del crollo psicotico; esso offre un modello di disintegrata integrazione.' Hillman, 'Molti Dei, molte persone', p. 73-74.

## II. *I quarantanove gradini*, or the Jewishness of absolute reading

Jewish culture negotiated the strictness of monotheism by developing a sophisticated, non-monotheistic approach to textual interpretation. The outcome of this negotiation is visible in *Qabbalah*, with its privileging of the critical act of reading over the writing of a text. Cabbalistic polytheistic reading is characterised by a diachronic element, evident in the urge to re-interpret the Book, as it evolves with its people [‘A possedere significato, senso e forma non è la parola stessa, ma la *tradizione* della parola, il suo mediarsi e riflettersi nel tempo.’<sup>11</sup>] It is also possible to recognise a synchronic element; the Book may hold ‘infiniti strati di sensi’,<sup>12</sup> available for exegetic decoding. The development of this last concept, of which we can follow the trail from Benjamin and his master Scholem – also in the Adelphi catalogue – to Derrida’s poststructuralism, is one of Judaism’s most valuable gifts to twentieth century literary theory and practice. By simply switching the emphasis from the fragmented persona of a post-Barthesian author to the omnipotent readers addressed by many postmodern writers, it provided fresh justification for the existence of literature, and for the freedom of interpretation. Hillman summarises: ‘L’esegesi diventa allora non già un disvelamento del significato nascosto, bensì piuttosto una *poiēsis*, un’elaborazione poetica del dato, condotta nel piacere di un incessante immaginare.’<sup>13</sup> Thus Calasso, who through *I quarantanove gradini* tackles the highest activity in Jewish culture, the act of reading, effectively becomes *poiētēs* in the only sense deemed legitimate in the Jewish tradition.

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<sup>11</sup> Scholem, ‘Il nome di Dio’, p. 89.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>13</sup> Hillman, *La vana fuga dagli dei*, p. 72.



Calasso's essays on Kraus, 'Dell'opinione' and 'Una muraglia cinese,'<sup>14</sup> are useful illustrations of his fascination with the 'poietic' exegesis of the Jews. Calasso is constantly reminding us of Kraus's Judaism, even when he draws the conclusion that Kraus did achieve 'absolute literature':

Ma ciò che definisce Kraus è la sobria e folle decisione di non separarsi mai, viaggiando per il mondo, dalla sua «arca sacra» – e soprattutto il fatto che essa fosse un teatro di marionette. Più tardi a esso si sarebbe sostituito il linguaggio: e nulla quanto l'operetta avvicinerà i due termini alla fusione.[...] Forse la caricatura degli dei riuscì a dischiuderli il vero Olimpo.<sup>15</sup>

In 'Dell'opinione', Calasso discusses *Die Fackel* and Kraus's view of *opinion*, called throughout the essay with its Parmenidean name of *doxa*, and described as 'una potenza formale, un virtuosismo che cresce senza fine, che attacca ogni materiale. [...] Una volta esaurita la sostanza,' adds Calasso – in a reflection which also involves the concept of parody – 'il metodo fila dalla propria bava sostanze artificiali: gli edifici ormai non hanno fondamenta, ma stanno ancora più saldi, come crescessero dalla terra.'<sup>16</sup> A ring of Borgés' tales of interpretation ad infinitum can be detected in these passages. However, Borgés was fascinated by the *Zohar*, a Spanish cabbalistic text of the Middle Ages, and this sentence could also be apt definition of a cabbalistic reading. This is, for example, how Scholem describes the notion of reading of the Spanish medieval cabbalist Gikatilla: 'La parola di Dio, che raggiunge tutti i mondi, è gravida di

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<sup>14</sup> Kraus is described as an author who 'ha raggiunto una furia della parola che, secondo miopi previsioni, avrebbe dovuto condurlo alla cabbala o alla letteratura assoluta. Lo ha condotto invece, come suo demone, ad applicare l'una e l'altra su un terreno ostico e selvaggio: la stampa, parola cifrata, allora come oggi, per dire qualcosa di sopraffacente e troppo vicino, il mondo trasformato in *universal reportage*, secondo la formula di Mallarmé.' Calasso, 'Dell'opinione', p. 111.

<sup>15</sup> Id., 'Una muraglia cinese', p. 188.

<sup>16</sup> Id., 'Dell'opinione', p.105-106

infiniti sensi, ma non ne possiede uno preciso. Priva in sé di significato, essa è l'assolutamente interpretabile.<sup>17</sup>

If Benjamin proposes to apply cabbalistic reading to profane texts, Kraus, stresses Calasso in 'Dell'opinione', holds a belief that reading any text is a religious act: '[Kraus] certo sarebbe stato confortato dal sapere che, in cinese, «leggere i classici si dice con la stessa espressione usata per recitare una preghiera; i testi cinesi generalmente non hanno punteggiatura, è recitandoli che si impara a mettere il punto: capire vuol dire sentire il ritmo.»<sup>18</sup>

Calasso does not mention that Scholem found this idea of oral reading in Nahmanide, a cabbalist who believed that the Torah had been transmitted to Moses 'in una forma in cui la suddivisione in parole ne comportava la lettura come una serie di comandamenti divini. Ma egli la ricevette anche, nello stesso tempo, sotto forma di trasmissione orale, come lettura di una sequenza di Nomi.'<sup>19</sup> For Calasso, Kraus, and Scholem, the act of reading aloud, in prayer-like fashion, allows the recovery of a deeper level of truth in a text – a recovery linked to the theatrical act of reciting it rather than the understanding of it. Whilst this emphasis on orality has certainly a Nietzschean antecedent for Calasso, his words on Benjamin's forty-nine steps of meaning confirm that a Jewish influence is also at work.<sup>20</sup> Like Scholem, Benjamin, and Kraus, the 'absolute reader' is aware of 'la violenta arbitrarietà del nesso allegorico fra l'immagine e il suo significato, che rivela la incolmabile distanza fra i due ordini, secondo il modello, insinua Benjamin, della scrittura alfabetica, prima imposizione brutale di un senso a una lettera che non vuole accoglierlo.'<sup>21</sup> The gap between written *grammé* and spoken *logos*, and between various

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<sup>17</sup> Scholem, 'Il nome di Dio', p. 66.

<sup>18</sup> Calasso, 'Una muraglia cinese', p. 183.

<sup>19</sup> Scholem, 'Il nome di Dio', p. 38.

<sup>20</sup> Calasso, 'Illuminazione profana', p. 345.

<sup>21</sup> Id., 'I quarantanove gradini' p. 127.

polytheistic versions of the same text generates inexhaustible meanings. However, this inexhaustibility can be seen as both defeat and ultimate glorification of the interpreter and as defeat and glorification of the human or divine author. In Scholem's words, God is the 'scrittore originario,' 'l'unico che parla, infinitamente.'<sup>22</sup> The richness of meaning generated by this inexhaustibility is precisely the source of 'absolute literature'.

Calasso quotes Kraus saying that «artista è soltanto chi sa fare della soluzione un enigma».<sup>23</sup> The concept of *enigma* re-appears in 'Il carattere egizio dell'arte' Calasso's essay on Adorno's theory of art. Having stressed that 'Adorno ha pensato l'arte, da sempre, nello specchio dell'utopia'<sup>24</sup> – 'utopia' being not 'un'orrenda ingenuità illuministica', but 'un polo di accensione fantastica', in whose light 'vive la tradizione ebraica del regno,'<sup>25</sup> Calasso reflects:

Per Adorno [...] la categoria centrale dell'arte è proprio l'enigma – e già questo vale a irritare l'estetica come «scienza»: «tutte le opere d'arte, e l'arte nel suo complesso, sono enigmi; ciò ha irritato la teoria dell'arte fin dai tempi antichi. Il fatto che le opere d'arte dicono qualcosa e nello stesso tempo lo celano designa il loro carattere enigmatico nella prospettiva del linguaggio.»<sup>26</sup>

The cabbalistic struggle with the forty-nine, or infinite, meanings of a text brings with it the recognition that every interpretation may be right or wrong, and that the enigma proposed in a text is proportional to its fascination. But what glorifies the act of reading is not the identification of a hierarchy of meanings, but the never-ending labour of interpretation. 'Per i cabbalisti il fatto che Dio porti a espressione se stesso nel

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<sup>22</sup> Scholem, 'Il nome di Dio', p. 48.

<sup>23</sup> Calasso, 'Una muraglia cinese', p. 191.

<sup>24</sup> Id., 'Il carattere egizio dell'arte', in *I quarantanove gradini*, Milan, Adelphi, 1991, pp. 97-101, p. 99.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

linguaggio – anche se poi tale espressione può risultare lontanissima dalle umane possibilità di conoscenza – è infinitamente più importante di qualsiasi “significato” o “messaggio” specifico che tale espressione potrebbe comunicare.’<sup>27</sup> This heightened view of reading could run the risk of ‘diminishing’ the status of the work of art under scrutiny.

It is once again Adorno who gives to Calasso (together with what the Italian author repeatedly stated to be the best definition of art) the inspiration for looking at the power of reading optimistically from a creative artist’s point of view. The inexhaustibility of meaning releases art from what Hillman would call the trap of monotheism, the responsibility to express a unique truth, and actually liberates the artist, and set him/her on the path of ‘absolute literature’. The absolute reader is the creative *poiētēs* of reading, capable of dealing with an art which is ‘magia liberata dalla menzogna di essere verità.’<sup>28</sup>

### **III. Eden and epigones – *La Vienna del linguaggio***

Calasso often associates language and magic, two words which could be seen as interchangeable in his reading of Adorno’s sentence. This interest in the power of language – manifest in his essays on Kraus – is another element he shares with the culture of *Genesis*,<sup>29</sup> a text in which the language of God brings the world into

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted from Scholem, *Zur Kabbala, und ihrer Symbolik*, in Scholem, ‘Il nome di Dio’, p. 67.

<sup>28</sup> Calasso, ‘Il carattere egizio dell’arte’, pp. 99-100.

<sup>29</sup> Scholem comments: ‘Il legame inscindibile che unisce il concetto di verità della rivelazione e quello di linguaggio - poiché la parola di Dio, se mai l’uomo possa farne esperienza, si rende percepibile proprio nel *medium* del linguaggio umano - è certo una delle eredità più importanti, anzi forse la più importante, che l’ebraismo abbia lasciato alla storia della religione.’ Scholem, ‘Il nome di Dio’, p. 11.

existence, and Adam names reality around him. ‘La traduzione aramaica, per così dire ufficiale, della Torah, usata nel rito della Sinagoga, il *Targum Onqelos*, rende il passo del *Genesi* “L’uomo diventò un’anima vivente” (2,7) con “l’uomo diventò uno spirito parlante.” Il linguaggio è proprio ciò che costituisce l’essenza vivente dell’uomo.’<sup>30</sup> The emphasis on the ‘creating’ power of language goes hand in hand with Judaism’s objection to translation, and transliteration, linked to a deep devotion to the alphabet, source of both reading and writing: ‘le lettere della lingua ebraica, in quanto idioma originario e linguaggio della rivelazione.’<sup>31</sup>

Unsurprisingly, in the debate of the *finis Austriae*, language ‘si pone come questione vitale, iniziale, onnicomprensiva, con un’urgenza a cui il tempo ha saputo contrapporre soltanto lo zelo dei congressi di semiologia.’<sup>32</sup> Calasso, who named Vienna ‘capitale del linguaggio,’<sup>33</sup> and indicated in the Jews Freud, Kraus, Wittgenstein, Schoenberg, Loos ‘gli astri dominanti di questa costellazione,’<sup>34</sup> noted that these authors ‘hanno ricercato il linguaggio, con procedimenti diversi, ugualmente convinti che li attendesse il segreto, finché il linguaggio è tornato a rivelarsi come potenza neutra, totale, incumbente, di cui siamo l’oggetto prima che il soggetto.’<sup>35</sup>

Possibly under the influence of Bazlen (‘Diceva Roberto Bazlen che Kraus, Benjamin e Adorno furono tre successive – e sempre più vulnerabili – uscite dal ghetto’<sup>36</sup>), despite crediting Adorno with the best definition of art, Calasso chooses to discuss language through Kraus, and justifies this choice by means of a comparison with Adorno:

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 28-29.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>32</sup> Calasso, ‘Una muraglia cinese’, pp. 146-147.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 173.

Quando Kraus scrive che «Il progresso fa portamonete di pelle umana», lo vediamo fondare, col massimo risparmio di parole, la «dialettica dell'illuminismo». Ma Kraus non avrebbe mai voluto descrivere quella dialettica. E se siamo grati ad Adorno per averlo fatto, riconosciamo insieme che le implicazioni delle metafore di Kraus continuano a moltiplicarsi ancora oltre il punto in cui la macchinosa esplicitazione di Adorno comincia a girare a vuoto.<sup>37</sup>

The shadow of Nietzsche's idea that metaphors – rather than dialectics – should be the foundation of knowledge can be detected in these remarks. Amongst the reasons for Kraus's appeal to Calasso, is the fact that, differently from Benjamin, 'un cabbalista naufragato nella visione di una natura tutta irretita nella rovina della concatenazione delle colpe, che non offre più lettere illuminanti, scritte nelle cose, quali soltanto Adamo aveva potuto leggere, ma un groviglio babelico di segni, un testo per sempre corrotto',<sup>38</sup> Kraus has a positive relationship with language. Language is his ark of the covenant, his pact with God, and he abandons himself to language as in it 'si suppone una forza propria, un pensiero latente, l'unico capace di spezzare la magia dell'opinione'.<sup>39</sup>

*Die Fackel* would make of Kraus, as discussed at page 113-114, the first modern to highlight the difference between *doxa* in the time of nihilism and the *doxa* of Parmenides, which was 'ancora, simultaneamente e in tutta l'ampiezza del senso, opinione-apparenza' and in which 'l'ordalia fra parola e cosa non è stata ancora spezzata'.<sup>40</sup> Calasso does not say that this Parmenidean *doxa* would find an echo in Jewish culture; Scholem had noted that in the Hebrew language one word, *davar*, 'possiede due significati, quello di "cosa", e quello di "parola", "discorso"'.<sup>41</sup> However,

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<sup>37</sup> Id., 'Dell'opinione', p. 108.

<sup>38</sup> Id., 'I quarantanove gradini', pp. 126-127.

<sup>39</sup> Id., 'Dell'opinione', p. 107.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>41</sup> Scholem, 'Il nome di Dio', p. 45.

in this Parmenidean *doxa*, partaking of the Nietzschean power of metaphor, ‘insieme immagine e discorso dell’apparenza, in essa il tutto si dice negli sprazzi dei nomi e delle forme,’<sup>42</sup> we may sense a memory of the ‘Adamic language’, whose possibility is so dear to Calasso in ‘Les déesses entretenues.’ This is confirmed when, stressing that Kraus managed to attain the non-nihilistic *doxa* of Parmenides, Calasso stresses Jewish antecedents of his view and practice of language:

Nella società dell’informazione la pagina della *Fackel* delimita una enclave [...] non vi troviamo l’ottundente chiarezza della parola come strumento di comunicazione, ma l’illuminante complessità del linguaggio come «mezzo per intendersi con la creazione». Lo sguardo di Kraus è rivolto all’indietro, verso un’origine che rifiuta di specificarsi: «l’origine è la meta», questo è il suo primo assioma. Parole in cui risuona la grande eredità ebraica, la memoria del nominare adamico. E quell’origine ha uno specchio in una fine messianica, dove – secondo una leggenda che tanto potere ha avuto anche su Adorno e Benjamin – il Regno si stabilirebbe lasciando tutto com’è, *salvo alcune lievi modifiche*. La Sacra Scrittura e la sua contraffazione, il giornale, possono trapassare l’una nell’altra.<sup>43</sup>

All three ‘uscite dal ghetto’ believe in the power of language to interact with creation. For them, writing is capable of producing both mere ‘reportage’ and the *doxa* of appearance, on the one hand, and the Holy Scripture, a *doxa* ‘assoluta’, a *logos* in touch with the reality it describes and communicates, on the other. However, this applies even

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<sup>42</sup> Calasso, ‘Dell’opinione’, p. 112.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

more to Kraus, whose observations on the German pronoun *es*, also an inspiration for Spitzer,<sup>44</sup> earn him the title of ‘teologo del linguaggio’:

*Es*: il caos, la sfera, il tutto, ciò che è più grande, più sentito, che è già presente prima di ciò che per primo nasce. Luce, giorno, sera non sono soggetto (come i grammatici erroneamente suppongono) ma predicato, non possono essere soggetto, perché è l’*es* che deve prima portarli alla luce, al giorno, alla sera, sviluppandosi in essi.<sup>45</sup>

The Hebrew creation myth, the idea that language itself is a God who generates reality (‘L’alfabeto è, insieme, l’origine del linguaggio e l’origine dell’essere’<sup>46</sup>) lies behind this reflection, and the belief that we are the object rather than the subject of language.<sup>47</sup>

The last three passages are also all, more or less explicitly, reflections on ‘la parola *origine*’,<sup>48</sup> another typically Jewish theme, which is central to ‘La muraglia cinese’. Having recognised in Kraus ‘la filogenesi ebraica’, ‘non solo estranea ma ostile alla concettualizzazione’, rather than origin as a Rousseauesque ‘rimando alla natura’ or Platonic ‘rimando a un *primum* che sia insieme cronologico e metafisico’,<sup>49</sup> Calasso observes: ‘Questo teologo del linguaggio non offre verbali vie d’uscita, se mai un orientamento dello sguardo: la parola, con tutta la greve armatura delle sue antitesi, non può far più che volgersi verso la fluidità dell’origine, riecheggiare – non affermare – la promiscuità adamica di suono e cosa.’<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See Calasso’s reflections below: ‘*Es*: questa minuscola, trascurata parola presiede all’ossessione del linguaggio, grazie all’ossessione ritrova i suoi possenti tratti arcaici, quali intravide un altro viennese, Leo Spitzer, che al linguaggio dedicò tutta la sua inventività: «Il grande neutro della natura è la più giusta definizione dell’*es*, in altri termini l’*es* discende dalla fantasia mitopoietica degli uomini, *es regnet* [piove] è altrettanto mitico che *Iuppiter tonat*».’ See Calasso, ‘Una muraglia cinese’, p. 147. Calasso also recognizes that this idea is indebted to Groddeck. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 147-148.

<sup>46</sup> Scholem, ‘Il nome di Dio’, p. 33.

<sup>47</sup> Calasso, ‘Una muraglia cinese’, p. 149.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.



The keyword here is ‘riecheggiare’. Calasso praises Kraus for a post-Romantic view of ‘origin’ and ‘originality,’ for an acceptance that literature and language today are better at echoing than at ‘stating,’ founding, creating anew. Yet, possibly thanks to the influence of the ‘filogenesi ebraica,’ Kraus’s view is not a pessimistic one. ‘Riecheggiare’ is not the twentieth century author’s condemnation to silence and creative paralysis, but a declaration of faith in the magic of words, a magic generated by the practitioners of ‘*absolute literature*’: ‘La meraviglia della parola non vi sarebbe senza lo sguardo che essa rimanda lontano, il più lontano da sé e da tutto, quando è contemplata nei suoi incontri clandestini con lo scrittore: «Quanto più da vicino si osserva una parola, quanto più lontano essa rimanda lo sguardo».’<sup>51</sup>

Writers nowadays may be epigones from a temporal perspective, but their importance is still paramount: ‘«uno degli epigoni che abitano nell’antica casa della lingua»[...] a differenza di tanti esaltatori dell’origine, Kraus non vede nell’epigono una forza estenuata; anzi, per lui, solo per chi abita nella fine l’origine si libera dell’equivoco sviante del *primum*.’<sup>52</sup>

This positive view has a clear Jewish antecedent in the Midrash: ‘The Jewish approach is the *story* and the ‘variations’ on the story [...] But the story isn’t literalized into a credo or a dogma that must be believed [...] it has to be retold, that’s the whole business of the Midrash, it has to be retold and it has to be twisted.’<sup>53</sup> Living in what Marx would call the age of substitution, Kraus does recognise that ‘la promiscuità di parola e cosa non è solo un sogno dell’origine, ma tende sempre più a realizzarsi diabolicamente nella realtà quotidiana’, but precisely because of this Calasso sees in him, ‘uno degli ultimi esseri arcaici che stabiliscono con la parola un rapporto precedente a ogni nominalismo;

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., pp. 166-167.

<sup>53</sup> James Hillman with Laura Pozzo, *Inter-views*, Harper & Row, New York and London, 1983, p. 80.

è anche uno dei pochi esseri nuovissimi che hanno percepito come, alla foce del nominalismo, le acque imputridite della parola si mescolano di nuovo, in empia congiunzione, con la cosa.<sup>54</sup> These concepts are very similar to the ones used by Calasso to discuss the possibility of the ‘Adamic language’ in ‘Déesses entretenues’, but in the sentence above the insistence on the concept of origin emphasises their Jewish ascendance. The myth of origin here is not a reminiscence of the romantic dream of the *Ur*-poet or the *Ur*-text, but a reminiscence of the book originating with a story of origin called ‘origin,’ *Genesis*, and its image of Eden, which returns as parody in ‘Déesses entretenues.’

Whilst, like many contemporaries, Calasso perceives a sense of ending in contemporary literature, particularly novel writing<sup>55</sup>, he finds support for a more optimistic view in the messianic element of Judaism. Jewish culture can cope conceptually with the idea that the end and the origin mirror each other, and that the end can be as powerful as the origin. Calasso perceives in Kraus ‘la sobria certezza che la parola fosse già allora parola della fine – e cioè una parola privilegiata da un rapporto di specularità con l’origine.’<sup>56</sup> He continues:

Rivolgere verso l’origine la parola della fine, vivere nell’inganno speculare di un mondo che non si distrugge ma distrugge lo spirito differenziatore per produrre un equilibrio mortale, in parodia della condizione edenica – ciò richiede una strategia paradossale, a cui si possono ricondurre molti dei procedimenti di Kraus.<sup>57</sup>

Interestingly, this ‘paradoxal strategy’ could be seen as a self-reflexive remark on Calasso’s part. Even though Kraus is not the only influence in this sense – Nietzsche is

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<sup>54</sup> Calasso, ‘Una muraglia cinese’, p. 177.

<sup>55</sup> This is particularly visible in *Le nozze* and *Kasch*, as the following chapter will show.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

another – the Viennese author seems to be the inspiration for some of Calasso’s own formal strategies. A typical example is in his use of quotations, a rhetoric device employed constantly and self-consciously by both Calasso and Kraus: ‘L’uso della citazione gli era perciò indispensabile, perchè la citazione è la forma che denota appunto la estrema vicinanza all’origine o alla fine.’<sup>58</sup>

Unlike Benjamin – a weaker ‘uscita dal ghetto’ – Calasso does not wish ‘di scomparire, al culmine della sua opera, dietro una colata invalicabile di citazioni’.<sup>59</sup> Rather, like Kraus, he is a consummate player of the game of breathing new life into a quotation by inserting it into a new context. The attention devoted by Calasso to Kraus’s strategies is very detailed, and indicates, in my opinion, a genuine ascendancy; his adoption of these *paradoxical strategies* indicates that the Jewish influence on Calasso may not limit itself to themes, but also affects the form and style of his writing.

Even if we limit Kraus’ and general Jewish influences to theoretical elements, Calasso’s choice of re-writing the great mythical systems of the Hindu and the Greeks can be recognized as a clear attempt to ‘rivolgere verso l’origine la parola della fine’. This is a result of the influence of a Messianic view of language, and of the release of art from the ‘menzogna di essere verità’, discussed at pages 115-116. The positive twist of Messianism provides *post-storia* writers with a justification for continuing to write meaningful books, and also with a firm belief in another godlike quality of language: its ability to overcome death. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Calasso finds in Kraus ‘il folle rifiuto ebraico della morte, la lotta col Signore geloso per strappare la vita’,<sup>60</sup> and for Calasso Kraus is ‘ebraico’ for ‘il suo ‘scrivere senza fine [...] ultimo esorcismo concessogli dal tempo per spostare la morte [...] perché la parola rivolta all’origine non

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>59</sup> Id., ‘I quarantanove gradini’, p. 125.

<sup>60</sup> Id., ‘Una muraglia cinese’, p. 172.

finisce mai.<sup>61</sup> Again this comment may be self-reflexive in relation to Calasso's choice of re-writing 'le parole dell'origine' of our civilization. The magical belief that words protect from death is evident in Calasso's reflections on Hindu mythology. In *La letteratura e gli dei* Calasso tells of how poetic meters become the magical clothes which make the gods immortal.<sup>62</sup> In *Ka* he took this one step further, and claimed that syllables and therefore language saved the gods from death:

I metri hanno certo a che fare con ciò che sfugge alla morte, ma non sono sufficienti. Sono acqua trasparente, una protezione momentanea, come per noi i vestiti. Così gli dei andarono oltre, per nascondersi. Dai metri passarono alla sillaba. E qui occorrerebbe studiare se la sillaba possa eludere la morte. Ma di questo parleremo un'altra sera.<sup>63</sup>

One of the most powerful Jewish myths haunts twentieth century literature from Joyce to Borgés to Eco. It is that of the Tower of Babel. This is also present in Calasso, even though he remembers it almost accidentally, when quoting Mallarmé, while reflecting on his favorite topic of metaphoric language:

Luoghi comuni, frasi fatte, sono pietre del linguaggio «che ci riportano a quell'epoca poco nota che precedette immediatamente la catastrofe. "A quel tempo," dice il *Genesi*, "la terra aveva una lingua sola"». Suprema meta della scrittura è stata sempre, ricorda Mallarmé ancora una volta, di uscire dalle lingue «*imparfaites en cela que plusieurs*» e, parallelamente, di scoprire nelle cose una lingua scritta e parlante nel silenzio: ne testimoniano secoli di speculazioni sui geroglifici. Ma se tutto, a un certo tornante del tempo, si volge in parodia, anche questa dottrina, che nessuna tradizione come l'ebraica ha

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 'Una muraglia cinese', p.172.

<sup>62</sup> Id., *La letteratura*, pp. 123-124.

<sup>63</sup> Id., *Ka*, pp. 228-229.

sviluppato, dovrà incontrare la presenza attuale della sua contraffazione. Sarà il nazismo a porla in atto. Il suo operare implica «l'annientamento della metafora».<sup>64</sup>

Apart from his powerful reading of Nazism as a monotheistic system, for which meaning cannot be negotiated nor modified, the passage is remarkable for a rather optimistic view of the Tower of Babel myth. The confusion of languages has not cut literary practitioners completely off from the *lingua sola* of Adam. Writers as recent as Mallarmé, an author who allowed the gods back into literature, have aspired to that language, and Calasso does not deny that they may have attained it. His reading of the Tower of Babel as an obstacle rather than a preclusion to the attainment of the 'Adamic language' rings close – rather than to Benjamin's babelic desperation – to Scholem's view that after Babel the holy language took on profane elements, and the profane language some residues of the holy language.<sup>65</sup> This would make any of the imperfect post-Babel idioms capable of becoming *davar*, the creative language of 'absolute literature'.

Even more importantly, the passage brings us back to Adorno's 'carattere egizio dell'arte', and allows us to draw some further conclusions regarding the reasons why Calasso so eagerly appropriates the German philosopher's definition of art. There are at least three reasons why *art* is *magic* for Calasso. First of all the *lingua sola*, the 'Adamic language', is, in line with Jewish culture, a language whose metaphors are so powerful that they speak their inexhaustible meanings even in silence, or as we have

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<sup>64</sup> Id., 'Dell'opinione', pp. 118-119.

<sup>65</sup> 'La generazione che volle erigere la torre di Babele abusò in senso magico di questa autentica lingua santa per imitare entro certi limiti, mediante la conoscenza dei puri nomi di tutte le cose, l'azione creatrice di Dio e per carpire un "nome" che fosse applicabile in ogni occasione. La confusione delle lingue consistette nel progressivo oblio di questa lingua, cosicché si dovettero inventare ed escogitare nuove denominazioni per tutte le cose. Da qui deriva il carattere convenzionale delle lingue profane di contro alla sacralità dell'ebraico. Ma anche la lingua santa risulta da allora mescolata con elementi profani, così come nelle lingue profane sono ancora presenti, qua e là, elementi o residui della lingua santa.' Scholem, 'Il nome di Dio', p. 71.

seen earlier hold the power of temporarily defeating death. The second reason is linked to the fact that, as we can draw from the reflection on the hieroglyphs, the ‘Adamic language’ appears to be, paradoxically, a written language. This idea, as Calasso notes, has a strong Jewish ascendance. The first books of the Bible, including the story of Adam, are put in writing by Moses, the man who received the written word of God on Mount Sinai. Furthermore, the *Zohar* reads the creation of stars in *Genesis* as the inscription of signs in the sky: ‘IN PRINCIPIO, quando la volontà del Re cominciò ad agire, incise segni nell’aura celeste,’<sup>66</sup> and the Bible, as stressed by the cabbalists, particularly Abulafia, presents ‘L’immagine della creazione come atto della scrittura divina,’<sup>67</sup> and indicates that: ‘La scrittura, la segnatura nascosta in Dio, precede il discorso, così che il linguaggio nasce, in ultima analisi, dal farsi suono della scrittura e non viceversa.’<sup>68</sup> This hierarchy between reading and writing, central to cabbalistic culture, for which the Torah is a ‘sistema consonantico’, holding ‘in potenza’ ‘infinitati strati di sensi’, ‘la cui pienezza di significato verrebbe limitata da una scrittura vocalizzata,’<sup>69</sup> reminds us of the importance of the sign, of *enigma*, in Adorno’s definition of art. The magic of language is linked to its being written, which is what turns it into an *enigma*. The reading aloud, prayer-like approach to a holy or literary text, is still a crucial moment of interpretation, as it is only the spoken word which makes the written *logos* intelligible.<sup>70</sup> However, any reading of the hieroglyph of art, or

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<sup>66</sup> Gershom Scholem, ‘Ein Kapitel aus dem kabbalistischen Buche Sohar’ in the Adelphi translation. Gerschom Scholem, ‘Traduzione di un capitolo dei *Segreti della Torah* sulla storia della creazione, in *I segreti della creazione*, Adelphi, Milan, 2003, pp.67-139, p. 69

<sup>67</sup> Scholem, ‘Il nome di Dio’, p. 75.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>70</sup> ‘In questo senso i due gradi corrispondono rispettivamente alla Torah scritta, che contiene in sé infiniti significati e come tale risulterebbe incomprensibile al pari di una voce inarticolata, e alla Torah orale, che attraverso la parola della tradizione autentica rende comprensibile quella scritta, “scioglie le sue difficoltà e spiega i suoi segreti.’ Id., *I segreti della creazione*, p. 54.

of any other ‘holy symbol’, is not only partial and incomplete but also secondary to its writing, or its being written.

This position seems to reverse the Socratic-Platonic hierarchy between oral and written language. Whilst for Socrates truth could only be found in the orality of *dia-logos*, and any writing would correspond to a trapping of the original meaning, bound to be twisted by mis-readings, the cabbalistic view holds the keys for viewing the written word not as something whose meaning is forever lost behind the veil of the sign, but rather as the Pandora’s Box of meanings. We are now ready to discuss the third reason why Calasso holds art as *magia*. Famously, in Plato’s work the ‘magic’ of art points negatively to its illusionistic character. Calasso may have found in the Jewish background of Adorno the intellectual justification for reversing the damnation of the poet and of ‘absolute literature’ sanctioned in the *Republic*. The ‘magic’ of the *enigma* turns writing from being a lie about its status of a *logos* to sanctioning the release of truth in the absolute realm of ‘polytheism’, and becoming the inexhaustible ‘Adamic language’ of all creation: the source of all metaphors. However, in another enigmatic twist, possibly partly inspired by Kraus’ erotic nexus, the magic written language of Adam is revealed as simultaneously that of Eve and the snake, joined together in Warburg’s nymph.

## **Chapter V**

### **Calasso and the postmodern**

#### **[Abstract]**

The objective of this chapter is to demonstrate that Calasso's work is heavily influenced by the postmodern debate. Amongst the postmodern traits of his writing I will highlight his view of history and parody, his approach to myth through a strategy of genre contamination, a Borgesian belief in the power of the *variante*, and his reworking of the theories of Warburg and Santillana.



## I. Writing in *Post-storia*

I never felt in my life the need of using the word 'postmodern'.<sup>1</sup>

Since John Barth's discussion in 1967 of the 'literature of exhaustion' and in 1979 of the 'literature of replenishment,'<sup>2</sup> contemporary writing has tended to be labelled as 'postmodern'. The debate on the validity of the term 'postmodernism,' which spanned at least two decades and involved critics ranging from Barth himself, to Robert Alter, Ihab Hassan and Linda Hutcheon, has resulted in the acceptance of the term, with or without the hyphen. 'Postmodern' generically defines a type of fiction that, either in opposition to or as a continuation of modernism, typically produces texts which display self-reflexive elements. The textuality of such works is foregrounded by recourse to a number of formal devices (such as first person narration, and tale-within-the-tale structures), and thematic choices (including 'a commentary on its own status as fiction and as language, and also on its own processes of production and reception'<sup>3</sup>), none of which belongs exclusively to postmodernism. Postmodern works by, for example, Garcia Marquez, Calvino, Eco, Nabokov, Fowles, and Rushdie are marked by a certain degree of irony. This is often made visible through parody, through the leveling of hierarchies – be it between high and low culture, between author and reader, and through the removal of barriers between genres, or between different types of discourse, for example, between history or science on one hand and fiction on the other.

Calasso rejected the term postmodern, and his rejection of the term is paired with the acknowledgement of his literary roots in the modern, particularly in what he calls 'la

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<sup>1</sup> Roberto Calasso quoted in Grossman, 'Word from Olympus', p. 32. The interview is in English.

<sup>2</sup> See John Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion', *The Atlantic* 220, 2, 1967, pp. 29-34, and John Barth, 'The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction', *The Atlantic* 245, 1, 1980, pp. 65-71.

<sup>3</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative. The metafictional paradox*, Routledge, London and New York, 1984, p. xii.

*décadence*’, and reinforced by his silence on the great contemporary names, be they philosophers or critics. Despite Calasso’s friendship with Chatwin and Sontag, and his devotion to J.L. Borgés, if we exclude the book blurbs of their Adelphi editions, postmodern and postwar authors are never discussed in his texts. The only exception is ‘La sindrome Lolita’, a brief piece on Nabokov.<sup>4</sup> Calasso’s interest in these authors does, however, emerge through their presence in the Adelphi catalogue, as well as through references in interviews. It is also worth noting the near complete lack of explicit reference to structuralist and poststructuralist theoreticians<sup>5</sup> in his texts, particularly remarkable as their works display a deep attraction for the same thinkers, from Nietzsche, to Heidegger, to Plato, to Judaism.

Something in the theorisation of ‘absolute literature’ may be clashing with the idea of belonging to a specific cultural moment: a sense of verticality rather than horizontality, an aspiration to reconnect with its previous incarnation, rather than look for a narcissistic mirror in contemporary productions. Furthermore, the literature of the returning gods does not share with postmodernism the pessimistic sense of late-coming, of being a mere appendix to the great book of tradition, which is so obvious, for example, in Barth’s concept of ‘literature of exhaustion,’ or in the ironic approach of Eco. One could argue that the sense of ending typical of so many post-Joycean texts places these works within the borders of metaphysics, of a linear view of history, whilst the concept of ‘absolute literature’ places Calasso’s books in a region closer to pre-Socratic or Eastern philosophy, or to remain within the Western tradition, to the

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<sup>4</sup> Re-published in *La follia che viene dalle Ninfe*, see Calasso, ‘La sindrome Lolita’, pp. 45-50.

<sup>5</sup> Calasso only makes a reference *en passant* to Derrida and Deleuze, when he recalls, in an interview with Antonio Gnoli, the Cérisy conference on Nietzsche in 1972, at which Calasso, Deleuze and Derrida were all present. Antonio Gnoli, ‘Quel pensiero nella terra di nessuno’, <http://lgxserver.uniba.it/lei/rassegna/000801b.html> (visited: 10/11/2003). Calasso did, however, publish in Italian Derrida’s intervention at that conference, ‘Éperons de Nietzsche’. See, *Sproni, Éperons de Nietzsche*, Adelphi, Milan, 1972. This is one of two texts by Derrida in the Adelphi catalogue, the other one being ‘Le facteur de la vérité’, published as *Il fattore della verità*, Adelphi, Milan, 1978.

philosophical line that goes from Vico to Nietzsche, which foregrounds the cyclical nature of history.

Another explanation for Calasso's rejection of the term postmodern may lie in his formation in a Marxist environment, where postmodern play with the text and subversive views of textuality may have clashed with a belief that literature had to retain an ability to directly influence reality and history. As a matter of fact, the word *storia* comes back in the term Calasso consciously chooses to adopt instead of 'postmodern.' To 'postmodern,' Calasso prefers the term *post-storia*, a term he uses to define 'quella parte di storia che viene messa in scena nel laboratorio sperimentale del nichilismo.'<sup>6</sup> Yet the author's own reflections show that the name *post-storia* is what Nietzsche would call a mask, through which Calasso both reveals and hides himself.

The Adelphi catalogue – like his selection of book blurbs for *Cento lettere a uno sconosciuto* – is a clue, as it bears witness to Calasso's admiration for authors regularly labelled as postmodern, from J.L. Borgés to Chatwin to Nabokov.

Some reviews of *Le nozze*, the book I will focus on from this chapter on, have highlighted elements of it as postmodern. Yet, to my knowledge, no detailed review of these postmodern elements has been attempted. Hence the need for this chapter, to contextualize the investigation of Calasso's affinity with Derrida's poststructuralism.

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<sup>6</sup> Calasso, 'Déesses entretenues', p. 270.

## II. *Post-storia* vs. storia

The first clue to Calasso's adoption of a mask with regard to postmodern culture surfaces in his view of history, and in the definition of *post-storia*. The idea of the world as reportage, existing primarily as a linguistic construct, emerges behind his use of the word *post-storia* instead of *postmodern* in 'Dell'opinione.' Furthermore, history in Calasso appears strangely "horizontal," as can be seized from his words on the past as a 'deposito', which results in experiences, tales, facts, and characters from different historical times all being perceived and presented as simultaneous:

Per chi nasce nella civiltà teologica della post-storia il pensiero è un deposito da cui si può attingere tutto, salvo l'esperienza da cui ogni singolo pensiero è nato, mentre la disponibilità del passato come deposito è essa stessa l'esperienza comune a tutte le forme della nuova età [...] – e perciò alla post-storia non appartiene l'utopia, ma la parodia e l'inversione.<sup>7</sup>

The flattening of the historical perspective, typical of *post-storia*,<sup>8</sup> and of postmodern theory, returns in *Le nozze*:

Il crollo cretese, il crollo miceneo, il crollo di Troia, il sorgere di Atene: gli eroi sigillarono gli eventi significativi e scomparvero. La rapidità era parte della loro essenza. È come se i Greci avessero voluto concentrare in un minimo segmento del tempo tutte le storie delle cui conseguenze sarebbero vissuti.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Id., 'Dell'opinione', p. 105.

<sup>8</sup> Id., 'Déesses entretenues', p. 270.

<sup>9</sup> Id., *Le nozze*, p. 374.

From the distance of *post-storia*, Calasso tends to see the dark and archaic ages of Greece, spanning almost a millennium, all concentrated into the same breath. Supported by a similar habit of the Greek poets, Calasso moves freely between the generation of the Olympian gods, the previous era of Chronos, and even the historical generation of Spartans and Athenians portrayed by Thucydides.

This horizontalisation of the historical perspective, which emerges from the discussion of *post-storia*<sup>10</sup> or the treatment of the past in *Le nozze*, may have a Jewish ascendance, but it has a lot in common with that postmodern culture, in which anything from a Shakespearean sonnet, to an Egyptian pyramid, to Mickey Mouse comics, can be brought to the same level, with no chronological or symbolical hierarchy. Given their importance on the Italian literary scene of the 1980s, a comparison of Calasso's postmodernism with Eco's may be useful. Calasso, with his "aristocratic" preference for gods and heroes, does not seem to push his postmodernism to the same subversive boundaries as Eco, who treats with literary and critical respect the "low" culture of comic books.

However, postmodern irony is easily detectable in *Le nozze*. It emerges through the compression of history, from the perspective of both his "contemporary" present, and the "past" present of the Greek historian Strabo, in the story of Rodopi and Nitocri. History came to confuse these two women, attributing to the prostitute Rodopi, lover of Sappho's brother, a pyramid erected instead for queen Nitocri:

Fra la vita di Nitocri e quella dell'etera per la quale Carasso dissipò la sua fortuna passano circa millecinquecento anni. E circa seicento anni fra la vita di Saffo e quella di Strabone. Tanto occorreva perchè una regina egizia diventasse una bionda etera venuta come schiava dalla Tracia in Egitto, e perchè l'etera greca tornasse a diventare una sovrana egizia.

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<sup>10</sup> For example in id., 'Déesses entretenues', p. 270 and ff.

Rimangono unite in una piramide. E il tempo continua a dare verità ai pochi versi che dedicò

Posidippo a Rodopi: “Dorica, le tue ossa sono ornate da un nastro per le tue morbide trecce/e dallo scialle profumato/in cui un tempo avvolgevi il bel Carasso,/carne contro carne, sino alla coppa del mattino./Ma le bianche, risonanti pagine del canto/ di Saffo rimangono e rimarranno./Beatissimo è il tuo nome, e Naucrati lo custodirà/finché la nave passi sul Nilo immobile, diretta verso il mare”.<sup>11</sup>

Through the ironical flattening of the historical perspective, high and low, the queen and the prostitute, become one. Furthermore, the text inverts the epistemological capabilities of history and literature. Whilst history generates the confusion between the two ladies and eventually proves fictitious, the poetry of Posidippo can reproduce the truth, and has left us a description, which brings back to life, even today, the personality of Nitocri. As *Kasch* had noted, ‘La storia non ha alcuna ragione essenziale per distinguersi dalla letteratura. <<Carmen solutum>> la chiamava già Quintiliano.’<sup>12</sup> Calasso, therefore, does not stop at unveiling history as simply a linguistic construct, he declares it as literary, fictional.

In his treatment of *historia* there may be an ironic attempt to play Thucydides against Herodotus, and to turn Thucydides’ objective, scientific narration of the Pelopponesian war, into what Herodotus would call *thauma*, a piece of wonder. This Herodotean history-telling, which brings together the heroes, the gods, and the Thucydidean characters, as if they belonged to the same fictional plan, also roots Calasso’s work in the culture of postmodernity. Written by a twentieth century author rather than Herodotus, this type of narration becomes an example of ‘historiographic metafiction’: a

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<sup>11</sup> Id., *Le nozze*, p. 306.

<sup>12</sup> Id., *Kasch*, p. 234.

text whose blurring of the border between history and fictional narrative foregrounds the literary, textual character of history itself.<sup>13</sup>

Calasso links the fictional character of history on one hand to its being memory – therefore imperfect reconstruction, in which the author plays a crucial role of gap-filler –, and on the other to its being a sign. The theme of history as ‘sign’ also transpired in *Kasch*, precisely at the point where Calasso dismissed historiography’s ambitions of scientificity [‘quanto più accerchiavano i dati bruti, tanto più lasciavano emergere la natura di nuovo enigma che ha ogni traccia storica’<sup>14</sup>].

Being a sign, history is an *enigma*. Calasso’s discussion of Adorno’s definition of art as enigma enables us to recognise literature at the core of his view of history. Furthermore Calasso seems to hold the view that the enigmatic nature of history, its irrecoverability, can be due to a lack of presence, of material signs, as in the sentence above, and to an excess of presence and memories. If Herodotus, first historian, can be taken as symbolic of the first type of historian/narrator, Plutarch is emblematic of the second:

La sua [of the historian] ambita preda è innanzitutto ciò che alla memoria è sfuggito, che aveva tutte le ragioni per sfuggirle. Dopo un lungo addestramento in questa lotta con l’opaco potrà misurarsi con i personaggi plutarchei, quelli che invece sono resi invisibili dall’eccesso delle testimonianze. [...] Alla fine della sua proterva ascesi lo storico vuole incontrare Napoleone come uno sconosciuto.<sup>15</sup>

In *Le nozze* Plutarch is a constant presence, and becomes Calasso’s main guide – the other being Herodotus – to the mystery of Delphi, the seat of that Apollo/Dionysus

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<sup>13</sup> For a detailed discussion of the term ‘historiographic metafiction’, see Hutcheon, Linda, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Routledge, London and Toronto, 1991.

<sup>14</sup> Calasso, *Kasch*, p. 237.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 236.

duality,<sup>16</sup> which deeply marked the thought of Nietzsche. Calasso finds in the historian almost an alter ego. Between Herodotus and Plutarch, history had shaken off the shadow of its mythological brother, and had undergone the bath of reality of Thucydides' lucidity. Gradually it then started the recovery of its long lost brother, mythology, the only available account of the origins, of the time when gods would show themselves freely to men. Living in the first century AD, almost in the *post-storia della grecità*, at the time when 'The great Pan was dead,'<sup>17</sup> Plutarch, as a 'sacerdote di Apollo delfico,'<sup>18</sup> had possibly more information on myth than Herodotus, but his information was burdened with more contradictions, with all the layers of interpretations on the beginnings of Greece deposited in the texts of the tragic poets, of the philosophers, and the Alexandrine librarians. In relation to archaic and classical Greek culture, Calasso and Plutarch are in the same position of inevitably remote readers. For both, history, the inscription of witnessing, writing on facts and events after they have taken place, can only be 'opaca', incapable of fully reconnecting signified and signifier.

Whether it came from the culture of the *finis Austriae*, or from Plato, or from Nietzsche, this mistrust of the epistemological power of positivistic science and history, corroded from within by the opacity of all writing, is a strong element which Calasso's writing has in common with the culture of postmodernity. Derrida, a thinker who strongly influenced postmodernism, widely discusses the implications of the opacity of writing for the human sciences: 'Que le signifié soit originairement et essentiellement [...] trace, qu'il soit toujours déjà en position de signifiant, telle est la proposition en apparence

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<sup>16</sup> id., *Le nozze*, p. 173

<sup>17</sup> This sentence from Plutarch's 'Sunset of the Oracles', remembered in *Le nozze*, also gives the title and inspires Calasso's essay on Baudelaire, 'La scuola pagana', which opens *La letteratura e gli dei*. Id., *La letteratura*, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> id., *Le nozze*, p. 173.



innocente où la métaphysique du logos, de la présence et de la conscience, doit réfléchir sur l'écriture comme sa mort et sa ressource.<sup>19</sup>

Postmodernism, poststructuralism, and Calasso, all seem to agree that science relies on writing, thus on a trace, a further signifier, as its main epistemological and communicative tool, and that this is its limit and its greatness. Plutarch, first century alter ego, is the emblem of Calasso's postmodernity.

### III. Calasso and 'Pierre Menard'

In our days, said Edward Said, the 'writer thinks less of writing originally, and more of rewriting. The image for writing changes from original *inscription* to parallel script'.<sup>20</sup> *Le nozze's* postmodernism becomes evident when we appreciate that the whole book can be seen as a garland of parallel scripts, ranging from the *Iliad* as a story of Helen and Achilles, the *Odyssey*, the *Argonautics*, Thucydides (Sparta and Athens), Herodotus (Croesus, Lydia), *Oresteia* (Iphigenia, Orestes) and Plutarch (Delphi). Commenting on Nietzsche's aesthetic theory, Colli echoed Plato's *anamnesis*: 'L'artista non imita nulla, non crea nulla: ritrova qualcosa nel passato. [...] il falso distacco dell'esistenza estetica [...] è un ricupero delle rappresentazioni nascenti che agglutinandosi fanno sorgere l'individuo,<sup>21</sup> with which Calasso appears to agree. The portrayal of the gods in *Le nozze* seems aimed at recovering those first divine images, which united concurred to

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<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Linguistique et grammatologie' in *De la Grammatologie*, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1967, pp. 42-108, p. 108.

<sup>20</sup> Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, p. 135.

<sup>21</sup> Colli, *Dopo Nietzsche*, p. 113.

the birth and definition of the human experience and of our sense of selfhood.

Calasso also agrees with Colli's views on originality. We could also argue that his belief in the power of 'absolute literature' releases Calasso from the pessimism regarding creative originality, which marks most contemporary authors. However, be it under the theoretical influence of the Greeks, of Nietzsche, Colli, Warburg, or even Plato, for Calasso originality appears to have its limitations. As he stresses in 'Incipit Parodia', his essay on Lautrèmont in *La letteratura e gli dei*, and in *I quarantanove gradini*, ours is an epoch of re-writings rather than full-fledged original creation, and 'alla post-storia non appartiene l'utopia, ma la parodia e l'inversione'<sup>22</sup>, as discussed at page 58. In 'Dell'opinione' Calasso ascribes to Kraus a number of themes and ideas, and even literary techniques, which recur in his own writing. Amongst these is his use of parody and of quotation. Along with a Jewish influence, they also bear witness to the presence of typically postmodern elements at the core of his view of originality, as authors labeled as 'postmodern' also adopt parody, to provide a theoretical justification for their literary output.

In 'Pierre Menard. autor del Quijote', a seminal text for postmodern practitioners and critics alike, Borges famously recounts how Pierre Menard had rewritten Cervantes's work without changing a single letter, and yet his version was different and even richer in meaning than the original one. Whilst he does not go to this extreme, Calasso's glorification of Talleyrand in *Kasch*, a book dedicated according to its blurb to two topics, 'Talleyrand e tutto il resto' is symptomatic of Calasso's admiration for a kind of Borgesian artist, who only adds a small appendix to the text of tradition. The influence of Borgés on Calasso should not be dismissed. In interviews and articles the author admits to a great fascination with the Argentinean master ['Ho adorato Borgés,

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<sup>22</sup> Calasso, 'Dell'opinione', p. 105.

sempre.<sup>23</sup>]. In 1997 Adelphi secured the publishing rights for Borgés' *opera omnia* in Italy.

Calasso contrasts Talleyrand with the figure that he sees as his only real rival, Napoleon, incarnation of a 'principio della volontà', of the Nietzschean 'volontà di potenza,' in the interpretation of it given by Deleuze and Colli:

La figura di Napoleone ci getta fin dall'inizio in un faticoso imbarazzo: non solo per la légende e per la sua eccessiva notorietà, che ha un carattere tutto nuovo, e già non più plutarchiano, ma perché a un certo punto si è obbligati a riconoscere che [...] quella figura è davvero l'incarnazione storica del principio della volontà; della grandiosa illusione che si possa statuire tutto da zero.<sup>24</sup>

Having identified in Napoleon the creator capable of 'statuire tutto da zero', therefore the romantic, Prometeian artist as *poietēs*, he makes of Talleyrand 'l'altro polo', happy with giving history 'Piccoli «colpi di pollice» nei quali riconosceva l'ultima specie di azione ancora possibile':

Chateaubriand, convinto di essere sferzante, scrisse di Talleyrand: «siglava gli avvenimenti, non li faceva». Questa smania di «fare» gli avvenimenti [...] accomunava Chateaubriand al suo odiato Napoleone. Quanto a Talleyrand, è senz'altro vero che pretendesse al massimo di «siglare» gli avvenimenti, ma non per questo si sentiva diminuito rispetto a qualcun altro che fosse supposto «farli». [...] Ma quella firma, che era davvero un piccolo «colpo di pollice», non aveva un peso minore di altre imprese ben più risonanti, se guardiamo da una certa distanza la nube pulviscolare degli eventi.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Collura, 'Calasso: così ho conquistato la Biblioteca di Borges', p. 31.

<sup>24</sup> Calasso, *Kasch*, p. 67.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

Talleyrand thus becomes symbolic of the postmodern writer, an almost invisible author, whose work is however just as meaningful as the full-fledged creation of a “Napoleonic” artist.

As Calasso and postmodern (post-Nietzschean) culture share a belief in the fictional nature of history, it is, appropriately, in a reflection on history that we find his thoughts on the limits of writing, and on the relation between writing and repetition:

La ripetizione che infuria nella storia presuppone tutta la storia della ripetizione. Quanto più risaliamo indietro, tanto più la ripetizione si avvolge di maestà. Quanto più si diradano le tracce scritte, tanto più imponente è in esse la parte della ripetizione. Sembra che si traccino segni innanzitutto per indicare come qualcosa si deve ripetere. L’etichetta è il primo genere letterario. Perché qualcosa abbia un senso, occorre che lo si ripeta – e per ripetere una cosa occorre ripetere tutto. La consacrazione regale, ma anche una spedizione di caccia, costringono a ricapitolare la storia delle origini, finché da essa si sprigiona la minuscola gemma che è l’atto nuovo, protetto e sostenuto da tutti i precedenti, ultima maglia al centro della rete immane.<sup>26</sup>

In the light of the passages above, we could argue that Calasso re-writes Greek mythology, in the spirit of Menard’s re-writing of the *Quixote*. If Menard’s text is exactly identical to his source, Calasso’s aspires to add a twist, a *colpo di pollice*, to a story recounted and repeated, with ‘variations’, innumerable times. ‘I miti greci erano storie trasmesse con varianti. Lo scrittore – fosse Pindaro o Ovidio – le ricomponeva, ogni volta in modo diverso, omettendo e aggiungendo. Ma le nuove varianti dovevano essere rare, e poco visibili. Così ogni scrittore accresceva e assottigliava il corpo delle storie. Così il mito continua a respirare nella letteratura.’<sup>27</sup> The strategy of re-telling

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 241.

<sup>27</sup> Id., *Le nozze*, pp. 316-317.

with a twist, with what Derrida would call a *différence*, whereby the whole story acquires new life, is common to Greek mythology, to the Jewish Qabbalah, and to postmodern writing and becomes, particularly in authors like Borgés and the Eco of *Il nome della Rosa*, a full-fledged mythologisation of the *variante*. In a world that has lost the hope of originality, abandoning the search for any *Ur-Text*, the writer can settle for a temporary truth. In the world of parody and inversion, ‘La variante è l’origine.’<sup>28</sup> Eliminating all hierarchy, every ‘variation’ justifies its own existence by claiming the right to be its own beginning. But because mythical discourse almost demands repetition, it is precisely through ‘variation’ that ‘absolute literature’ survives. ‘Il mito, se non viene ripetuto, si estenua, muore alla fine come gli dei, di molte morti.’<sup>29</sup> Repetition gives a ‘variation,’ a parallel script, never a perfect copy. This ‘variation,’ through its being the same and different from the previous version, is the real life of myth. Therefore, as will be discussed more in depth in chapter VI, the choice of generating, through re-writing, alternate meanings for the founding myths of Western culture, responds to a need within the tales themselves.

#### **IV. ‘Astrology’ and ‘firmamento’: reading the writing in the sky**

*Le nozze* also declares itself as a postmodern text through the importance given to the theory of an astral origin of myth, used to highlight a connection between high literature and the “low” art of the astrologist. The figures of the Greek gods are reconnected with the constellations and the planets, with which they are traditionally associated. Even

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>29</sup> Id., *Kasch*, p. 249.

though the book makes limited explicit references to this theme,<sup>30</sup> the astral symbols surfacing in the text generate an extremely powerful set of interpretations.

Warburg is a key source for Calasso's belief in a link between myth and the cosmos: his last exhibition, 'Stern Glaube und Sternkunde', reflected on astrology as "the psychology of human orientation in the cosmos,"<sup>31</sup> and *Die Erneuerung der heidnischen Antike* had indicated 'the austere guise of moral allegories [...] prefixed to allegorical interpretations of Ovid', and the 'consistent iconographic tradition' of astrology as the two vehicles of the survival of the ancient gods in the Middle Ages.<sup>32</sup> According to Warburg, before the 'classically rarefied version', 'successfully imposed on us' since Winkelmann,<sup>33</sup> the gods were astral deities, as proven amongst others by the work of Raphael – who, whilst painting his celebrated figures of 'serene and straightforward beauty', had also covered the ceiling of the Cappella Chigi in Rome with 'pagan astral deities [...] in a set of relationships that are not artistically defined but represent the positions of the stars on the day of Chigi's own birth'.<sup>34</sup> Warburg, who saw Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as an attempt to turn chaos into kosmos,<sup>35</sup> may also have inspired

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<sup>30</sup> This scarcity may disguise the intention to follow Homer, who first omitted 'ogni adeguata menzione dell'impalcatura del cosmo', making 'i cieli [...] superflui', in that 'primo disastro operato dalla poesia', through which 'il cosmo dimenticava se stesso.' Id., *Le nozze*, p. 309.

<sup>31</sup> Forster, 'Introduction', p. 25.

<sup>32</sup> Warburg continues: 'All images of the gods in the Italian early Renaissance derive to some extent from these lists of gods compiled in late antique times and after. Even Botticelli, in his *Birth of Venus*, is recasting medieval illustrative conventions in the light of rediscovered antiquity. Thus, the heraldically rigid astral symbols of tradition borrowed new life from antique scripture. This is proved, for instance, by the planetary figures in the chapel of sacrament in Rimini, enlivened by the emotive eloquence of late antique sarcophagi. Similar emotive formulas underlie the Northern Italian engraving on The Death of Orpheus, of which the Kunsthalle in Hamburg possesses the only extant copy. Finally, that period of transition yielded some forms intermediate between medieval literalism and the antique idealism of the Renaissance. One of these is a deck of Northern Italian tarot cards. The Kunsthalle possesses a particularly good copy in which, for example, Venus is still shown in the medieval way, while Mercury (fig. 116) has already taken on the lineaments of antique sculpture.' Warburg, *Pagan Antiquity*, p. 559.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 598.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 618-619.

<sup>35</sup> 'The extraction of specific groups from the unfathomable host of stars, and their naming after spirits and animals, is not a game', he wrote to Karl Umlauf, 'but man's attempt to gain his bearings with chaos, to acquire a coherent mental image of it.' Warburg to Karl Umlauf, 13 October 1928, Hamburg, Staatsarchiv, fol. 1, referenced in Forsters 'Introduction', p. 27.

Calasso's interest in this text, where gods and nymphs turn into plants, animals, and stars.

Giorgio de Santillana – another author from the Adelphi catalogue, who was attracted to Ovid, and acknowledged his remarkable astronomical knowledge, emerging almost casually from his narration,<sup>36</sup> may also be seen as a key influence behind Calasso's belief in a relationship between mythical figures and stars. This thinker held the view that mythical stories from all civilizations embody astral events, which dramatically affected life on Earth, such as the equinoctial precession, which gave a 'significato nuovo e decisivo' to the Milky Way as 'un punto di riferimento dal quale si poteva immaginare avesse avuto inizio la precessione.'<sup>37</sup>

*Ka* clearly echoes de Santillana when it underlines the presence of the memory of three cosmic events in pagan religions: 'Scandite nel tempo, si manifestano tre forme del male, della colpa, dell'irriducibile disordine che ci accompagna. Riassunto, le colpe sono: l'obliquità dell'eclittica ('l'originario dissesto del mondo'), la precessione degli equinozi ('movimento retrogrado, abbandonato a se stesso, che approfitta della stanchezza divina'), l'incommensurabilità di  $\sqrt{2}$ .'<sup>38</sup> *Kasch* openly ascribes to Santillana the view that the religious stories of primitive people carry the memory of the 'obliquità dell'eclittica',<sup>39</sup> and, even though it mentions him only as an estimator of Nonnus,<sup>40</sup> *Le nozze* is indebted to Santillana's idea of myth as 'essentially cosmological.'<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, all references to gods and mythical figures as connected to astral phenomena (Ariadne, Erigone, Eracle, Ananke) have an antecedent in Santillana.

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<sup>36</sup> Giorgio de Santillana, *Il mulino di Amleto*, Milan, Adelphi, 2003, p. 297.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 289.

<sup>38</sup> Calasso, *Kasch*, p. 271-272.

<sup>39</sup> Raccontava Giorgio de Santillana: «Quando Marcel Griaule, che ci ha rivelato civiltà ignote nel Sudan occidentale, chiedeva ai suoi esperti del luogo di parlargli un po' della terra abitata, di dirgli quel che sapevano dei paesi lontani, si meravigliava di vederli sempre indicare il cielo. E finalmente capì che per loro la "terra abitata" significava la zona dell'Eclittica». *Ibid.*, *Kasch*, p. 269.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.*, *Le nozze*, p. 372.

<sup>41</sup> De Santillana, *Il mulino di Amleto*, p. 75.

A postmodern challenge to the “positivistic” spirit of canonic high literature is also detectable in Calasso’s choice to adopt as his inspiration two authors, whose work explicitly crosses the borderlines between traditional academic disciplines, and who privilege a subject like astrology, traditionally dismissed as unscientific and of low intellectual status. Even though the word is not used explicitly by him in this context, we could argue that Calasso works on almost a new reading of the word *astrology*, and reconnects it to its etimological meaning of “discourse on the stars.” As such, astrology becomes almost a synonym of *firmamento*, the “writing in the sky,” and interchangeable with mythology, as both would ultimately refer to the same events and images.

*Le nozze, Ka*,<sup>42</sup> and, more explicitly, *Kasch*,<sup>43</sup> whose core is a legend on this topic,<sup>44</sup> all insist on linking human narration ‘Il «dono di raccontare» [...] ondosso, trascicante solo all’ebbrezza’, and the ‘firmament’, ‘la «scrittura del cielo»,’<sup>45</sup> a theme, which also haunts Plato and Derrida. Calasso’s fascination with the relation between astral rotation and meaning is a clue to the importance of this idea in his theory of writing. Each mythology would represent a cycle ‘scritto nel cielo, nel ritorno delle costellazioni.’<sup>46</sup> The ‘lenta rotazione’ of this astral cycle, in itself a repetitive movement, opens up ‘il cielo dei significati,’ as each rotation generates a different version of the same myth: ‘Il repertorio dei gesti è limitato, i significati sono inesauribili. Così le stesse storie si ripetono e variano perchè ogni volta si scopra, in una lenta rotazione, una nuova terra e un nuovo cielo dei significati. E appunto nel cielo era stata osservata per la prima volta quella rotazione.’<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See for example his presentation of the seven Saptarşi, the rsi, ‘più antichi degli dei’, and more ancient than the Earth itself, ‘che oggi tremano dagli astri dell’Orsa Maggiore’, Calasso., *Ka*, pp. 190-191.

<sup>43</sup> The text states that : ‘Kasch è l’origine della letteratura. Il soma è l’origine della dolcezza.’ Id., *Kasch*, p. 176.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 170 and following.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 173.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 275.

<sup>47</sup> Id., *Ka*, p. 73.



Whilst Hindu mythology, with its stories ritually re-enacting astral cycles,<sup>48</sup> appeared like the first significant step, Greek mythology marks the birth of an ‘ordine nuovo’, in which for the first time ‘il mito sfugge al rito come il demone alla bottiglia’, and echoing more freely the astral events that inspired them, ‘le storie cominciano a rendersi indipendenti, e sviluppano nomi e relazioni’, and ‘continuano a vivere da sole’<sup>49</sup>:

Unici nel Mediterraneo, i Greci non si trasmettevano le loro storie attraverso un’ autorità sacerdotale. Erano storie erratiche, e anche per questo si imbrogliavano così facilmente. I Greci si abituarono, come a un fatto normale, a udire le stesse storie raccontate con intrecci diversi. E non c’era un’ autorità ultima, a cui riferirsi, per sapere qual’era la versione giusta. Omero era l’ultimo nome evocabile: ma Omero non aveva raccontato tutte le storie.<sup>50</sup>

Rather than a form communicating an original meaning, Greek literature becomes an order of ‘storie erratiche,’<sup>51</sup> a proliferation of versions, with no way to give hierarchical precedence, to acknowledge one of them as more truthful or original than the others.

This rejection of hierarchy and metaphysical truth can be seen once again as kabbalistic and postmodern. The quotations above confirm that, for Calasso, acknowledging a relationship between writing and the sky does not grant writing, or myth, any stability of meaning, as by linking the content of the stories to the ever-changing rotation of the stars the author doubles the potential meanings of ‘il cielo dei significati.’ The movement of the stars and the letters is echoed by the movement of the

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<sup>48</sup> ‘Erano storie degli antichi re, storie esemplari che il nuovo re-sacrificante avrebbe rinnovato. Erano storie cicliche, che continuamente ricominciavano, per un anno intero. Trentasei volte, in cicli di dieci giorni. E da questo traevano il loro nome: *pāriplava*, la storia che sempre ricomincia (*pāriplavate*).’ Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>49</sup> Id., *Le nozze*, pp. 313-314.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 313.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.314.

stories. In a Borgesian vertigo, he underlines that all is writing, or leads back to writing, and that, being representations of a writing in the sky, the forms of the gods are simply empty shells of signifiers, and therefore, in poststructuralist fashion, simultaneously ‘presence’ and ‘absence.’ Yet that vertigo is the only way for post-storia readers and writers, to let the gods back into their lives.

As astrology is interested specifically in the movements of astral bodies, making the link between gods, stars, and writing one of the foci of his narration accentuates the postmodern and poststructuralist character of Calasso’s work, adds another layer of meaning to his representation of the power of ‘variation,’ and releases the power of ‘absolute literature’.

The idea that the ancients saw in the disposition of planets and stars a form of writing, may also lie behind Calasso’s claim that ‘l’arte è il collegamento più rapido fra un rigagnolo e la Via Lattea.’<sup>52</sup> Whilst this may suggest that Calasso found a way back to a messianic origin, by grounding his tales in the galaxy, one of the most beautiful pages of *Le nozze* – which explicitly links writing and firmament – seems to state the opposite:

Nei miti greci molto era implicato che per noi è perduto. Quando guardiamo il cielo notturno, la prima impressione è di stupore dinanzi a un ammasso stocastico, disperso su un fondo oscuro. Platone ancora riconosceva «i fregi nel cielo». E riteneva che quei fregi fossero le immagini «più belle e più precise» nell’ordine del visibile. A noi sembra invece precluso percepire un ordine, e tanto più un movimento dentro quell’ordine, là dove ci viene incontro una fuscaccia bianca sfrangiata, la Via Lattea, cinto di una gigantessa.<sup>53</sup>

The text of the firmament, or rather our difficulty in mapping the gods back to it, becomes emblematic of the situation of readers/writers in *post-storia*, and thus

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<sup>52</sup> Id., ‘Una muraglia cinese’, p. 168.

<sup>53</sup> Id., *Le nozze*, p. 314.

symptomatic of our poverty of interpretation, which yet does not cut us away from the possibility of enjoying/writing those stories whose (astral) origin is lost.

Postmodern is also the deliberate ambiguity between the acts of reading and writing, which can be seized in the passage below<sup>54</sup>. Is the ‘noi’ a reference to the readers of mythology or to ‘mytho-graphers’ like Calasso? In my view, the text deliberately avoids clarifying this. The postmodern irony, which works to corrode the boundaries between reading and writing, is certainly at play. Writing a text like *Le nozze* cannot be attempted without reading.

Noi non dobbiamo rimpiangere troppo di aver perduto molti segreti del mito, anche se dobbiamo educarci a percepirne la mancanza, il vasto indecifrato [...] Non solo non vediamo più le Sirene, ma non distinguiamo più i cieli. Eppure. Eppure in quella stoffa tagliuzzata, in quelle storie monche degli dei possiamo ancora avvolgerci. E dentro il mondo, come dentro la nostra mente, quella stoffa continua a tessersi.<sup>55</sup>

In a strategy common to many postmodern authors, and most likely to have been inspired by Nietzsche, he uses his work as a commentary on Western culture, by going back to its Ur-tales, now ‘monche,’<sup>56</sup> and making the reader self-aware of our status of remote and therefore always already different – in the etimological sense – interpreters of them. The gap between his reading and the preceding one becomes the locus of our modernity, the elusive difference that makes the reader aware of the cultural standpoint he is reading from. In a typical postmodern Eco-style move, Calasso allows the reader to enter the *fabula*: ‘Questa, si direbbe, è diventata la condizione naturale degli dei: apparire nei libri. E spesso in libri che pochi aprono. È forse un preludio all’estinzione?’

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<sup>54</sup> The discussion of these interesting lines will be resumed, from a different perspective, at p. 201.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 315.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 315.

Solo in apparenza. Perché nel frattempo tutte le potenze del culto sono migrate in un solo atto, immobile e solitario: quello del leggere.<sup>57</sup>

If ‘absolute literature’ can be perceived as closer to ‘literature of replenishment’ than to ‘literature of exhaustion,’ it is for the idea that, despite our ‘mancanza’ of the gods and their stories, the cloth of myth ‘continua a tessersi,’ ‘dentro la nostra mente.’ Yet the ‘stoffa’ is ‘tagliuzzata,’ and all we can aim for is ‘storie monche.’ This celebration of the fragmentarity of knowledge, whilst displaying an expected Nietzschean ascendance, is also a strong element of commonality between Calasso and those post-Joycean practitioners he does not acknowledge as an influence.

## V. The discourse of *mythos*

Reviewing *Le nozze*, Simon Schama wrote: ‘it will be read and re-read not as a treatise, but as a *story*: one of the most extraordinary that has ever been written on the origin of Western self-consciousness.’<sup>58</sup> *Le nozze* does not belong to one of the canonical literary genres: half treatise – at once literary, philosophical, anthropological and historical – and half tale – a fictional account, possibly a novel. The book opens, like is typical of an epic tale, but also of novels, *in medias res*, with Europa kidnapped by a bull, who will turn out to be Zeus. The focus is on the woman, who will pass her name to the continent, whose culture has come to be called ‘Western’, therefore opening the narration with her tale may be seen as a declaration that the book will treat Greek

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<sup>57</sup> Id., *La letteratura*, p. 29.

<sup>58</sup> Simon Schama, quoted in ‘Roberto Calasso’, *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, volume 81: Yearbook 1993, pp. 39-52, p. 39.

culture as the inaugural Western culture. Yet soon the tale of the rape of Europa is abandoned, in favour of a literary critic's meditation on the Chinese boxes of mythology: 'Le storie non vivono mai solitarie: sono rami di una famiglia, che occorre risalire all'indietro e in avanti.'<sup>59</sup>

Whilst I do not disagree with Cecchetti's view that in Calasso's 'pagina composita, fatta di suggerimenti, allusioni, annotazioni, cifre, frammenti', in the 'tratti fondamentali insomma della scrittura (saggistica? letteraria?) di Calasso,'<sup>60</sup> Bazlen's inheritance can be recognized, this formal lingering on the borderline between two genres is typical of postmodern narration. The latter often chooses to remind the reader of its fictional nature through a choice of genre contamination. The discussion up this point enables us establish a comparison between Calasso and Eco. If we read the two authors through the lense of Aristotelian theory of literary genres, which are one of the themes of *Il nome della rosa*, and whose formal dissolution "becomes" the text of *Le nozze*, the two authors appear to share the same concerns.

The choices made, around the balance between novel and treatise, are worth commenting on. The treatment of the theme, the privileging of certain scenes and elements of the narration, displays a will to re-narrate the Greek mythical tales, most of which we know from poetry – epic, tragic, lyric – as a novel. As Calasso believes – he demonstrated it, by means of Baudelaire's 'Spleen de Paris', in an essay on Mallarmé – that 'la differenza tra poesia e prosa è inconsistente,'<sup>61</sup> this is not as remarkable as the fact that, whilst the content of the text is developed according to narrative criteria, formally the text is much closer to a treatise.

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<sup>59</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 23.

<sup>60</sup> Cecchetti, *Calasso*, p. 29.

<sup>61</sup> Calasso, *La letteratura*, p. 116.

To use Nietzsche's terminology again, it is almost as if Calasso tried to represent his theme as torn between metaphysics, which could be identified with the rationalistic structure of the traditional novel, and its overcoming in the form of the treatise. This formal *monologo fatale* dramatises and clarifies the problem of a writing dealing with illusion on a double level; as the elusiveness of the sign, and the irrecoverableness of the past. 'Le figure del mito vivono molte vite e molte morti, a differenza dei personaggi del romanzo, vincolati ogni volta a un solo gesto.'<sup>62</sup> Comments like this foreground, in a typically postmodern move, the linguistic and fictional status of a text. Together with underlying the flexibility and creativity inherent to mythical discourse, this comment presents myth as a literary genre, just like the novel, with the difference that the novel, writing from the golden age of *logos*, freezes the characters in one inescapable ending, whilst mythical characters are freed by writing. Calasso's parallel scripts, his simultaneous contradictory re-writings of the same stories, aim at freeing all the potential interpretations suggested by a text, thus achieving, as Hillman would say, a 'polytheistic' truth. The same piece of writing, which depicts his mythical characters' action, brings with it all the other potential courses of action, not as impossible – because discarded by the author, but as available for future versions, or possibly already used in past ones.

Calasso indicates that myth grants all versions, simultaneously, the acknowledgement of truthfulness, and to its characters innumerable futures. Towards the end of *Le nozze*, Calasso resumes his meditation on the difference between myth and novel:

I miti sono composti di azioni che includono in sé il proprio opposto. L'eroe uccide il mostro, ma in quel gesto si percepisce che è anche vero l'opposto: il mostro uccide l'eroe.

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<sup>62</sup> Id., *Le nozze*, p. 36.

[...] Ce lo dicono le varianti, che sono la circolazione del sangue mitico. Ma ammettiamo pure che di un certo mito scompaiano tutte le varianti.[...] Rimarrà uguale il mito? Qui si giunge al discrimine sottilissimo fra il mito e ogni altra narrazione. Anche senza varianti, il mito manterrà l'inclusione dell'opposto. Che cosa lo prova? La sapienza romanzesca. Il romanzo, questa narrazione dimidiata dalle varianti, tenta di recuperarle accrescendolo lo spessore di quel testo singolo a cui deve affidarsi. Così l'azione romanzesca tende, come verso il suo paradiso, all'inclusione dell'opposto, che il mito possiede per diritto di nascita.<sup>63</sup>

If the novel aspires to a binary system, to the inclusion of its opposite, the various 'variations' of a myth celebrate its belonging to a polysemic order, concur to make it polytheistic, in Hillman's terms. It is worth stressing that these comments in the text of *Le nozze* are self-referential, and in this sense symptomatic of an apparent contradiction in the text. Whilst writing a "novel of mythology," Calasso attacks the novel as 'narrazione dimidiata', incapable of reflecting the whole spectrum of reality, always aspiring to the 'inclusione dell'opposto,' but never attaining it. While celebrating the power of myth, Calasso, in a typical postmodern gesture, almost undermines his own narration of it. However, as his narration is actually a mixture of novel and treatise, of Aristotelian *mimesis* and *diegesis*, it may not be tainted by the weaknesses of the novel. Also the choice of writing on mythology may be a way of releasing the novel from its inherent limits. Both the questioning of the referential power of its own work in progress and the endeavour to stretch genres beyond their traditional boundaries occur in postmodern authors.

The text is scattered with reflections on (and reminders of) the same metaphor, one possibly borrowed by Calasso, via Colli, from the pre-Socratic philosopher Epimenides. In the opening tale, the flowers she has collected are the means through which Europa

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., pp. 315-316.

breaks the ice with the bull.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, at the wedding of Europa's brother Cadmus with Harmony, the latter is given a necklace by her mother, the goddess Venus. Calasso's reflections make this necklace one with the belt of Venus herself, Ariadne's crown, the garland given by Europa to the bull, and the garlands, which accompany all Graeco-Roman banquets.<sup>65</sup> The whole of *Le nozze* can be read through this image of the garland, a macro-metaphor, decoding whose meanings is a never-ending exercise in the practice of 'undecidability'.<sup>66</sup> The semantic field of this metaphor stretches to include a range of symbols including 'bende'<sup>67</sup> and a 'velo.'<sup>68</sup> I will devote a thorough reading to the occurrences of this metaphor in chapter X, particularly from page 312. For now, however, I would like to emphasise that this metaphor is also reflected on a formal level in the structure of the text, in which the novel is made to collapse in a garland of gods' and heroes' epiphanies, all bound together by the essayistic structure. The contamination of genres formally overflows in the metaphor, which supports it. By writing *Le nozze*, Calasso has, in my view, attempted to perform a Nietzschean metaphor, a bridge, a correspondence between the form and the content of his book. He has, however, ironically 'played' this garland, in a post-Borgesian fashion. The Italian word *antologia*, with its clear Greek origin, may have also played a part in coming up with this macro-metaphor.

La collana, la corona, la ghirlanda: con gli anni si staccavano le foglie e i petali della bellezza, rimaneva la stretta fredda di un cerchio, la nuda necessità; e ciò che una volta aveva sprigionato interi cicli di storie, il ciclo tebano, il ciclo troiano, si contraeva in fatti di

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pp. 130-136.

<sup>66</sup> For a review of 'undecidability' see chapter VI.e

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., pp. 318-320

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p. 310.



cronaca [...] Ma tutto questo, e nulla meno di questo, apparteneva alla natura della corona, della collana, della ghirlanda.<sup>69</sup>

*Anthologia*, “collection of flowers”, is the name given to a selection of excerpts from great texts of the past. One only has to look at the interest around the topic of the literary canon in contemporary literary criticism, to appreciate that Calasso’s choice to select the flowers from the garland of ancient Greek textuality is not innocent, but echoes that literary criticism devoted to questioning the legitimacy of the literary canon and re-drafting to include the voices of ‘otherness’, be it in feminism or in post-colonialism or through the recovery of Western authors on the margins, a task in which *Adelphi* played a key role in Italian culture.

Calasso’s proud rediscovery of an outsider of the classical canon such as Nonnus of Panopolis – in pages marked, even lexically, by the vocabulary of the garland – clearly inscribes him in this path of recovery of ‘otherness.’ So does his choice to balance female and male voices in the book, for example by opening it in the name of Europa and sealing it in the name of her brother Cadmus – with the garland of Europa becoming the necklace of Cadmus’s wife Harmony.

The garland is the cipher of *Le nozze* in other ways. All *varianti* of the same myth can be imagined as belonging to the same garland, the ‘latent order’ of myth: ‘Non esiste evento mitico isolato, così come non esiste una parola isolata. Il mito, come il linguaggio, si dà intero in ciascuno dei suoi frammenti. Quando un mito lascia agire la ripetizione a la variante, affiora per un tratto l’ossatura del sistema, l’ordine latente, coperto di alghe.’<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

Calasso develops this principle to point simultaneously to the idea of a garland of all mythical stories known to us, and to that of a garland of all ‘variations’ of the same story. If each illustration of a mythical tale in *Le nozze* is an instance of the latter the narration as a whole makes of *Le nozze* an instance of the former, a garland, an anthology, of Greek myth.

The deconstructive urge is, in my view, the most remarkable postmodern element of Calasso’s mythological script, unless, on the basis of Derrida’s ‘Some statements and truisms about neologisms, newisms, postisms, parasitisms, and other small seismisms’,<sup>71</sup> we want to dissociate Derrida as well from postmodernism. It is, in my view, impossible to appreciate the richness of Calasso’s game without accepting the striking analogy and the influence on Calasso’s work-in-progress of this Jewish philosopher, and lover of Nietzsche, whose thought may be seen as the embodiment of postmodernism, but who, like Calasso, appears uneasy with the term.

## **VI. Con-textualising the gods. *Le nozze* as poststructuralist script**

Before moving on to review in detail the influence of the thought of Derrida on *Le nozze*, I will contextualize Calasso’s covert reception of Derrida, by acknowledging common elements that Calasso and Derrida inherit from Nietzsche and Heidegger.

Calasso’s view of reading, which has its roots in Nietzsche’s theory of interpretation on one hand and in Jewish culture on the other, is also indebted to

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<sup>71</sup> The original was published in English under as ‘Some statements and truisms about neologisms, newisms, postisms, parasitisms, and other small seismisms’, in David Carroll ed., *The “states” of theory. History, art and critical discourse*, New York and Oxford, Columbia University Press, 1990, pp. 63-94. For an Italian translation see: Jacques Derrida, *Come non essere postmoderni*, Medusa, Milan 2002.

Heidegger. In ‘Monologo fatale’, whilst defending, in very poetic words, Nietzsche from Heidegger’s attack,<sup>72</sup> Calasso notes that the latter’s reflection operates ‘soprattutto per *catene etimologiche*.’<sup>73</sup> Heidegger has learnt from ‘Jakob Böhme e altri teosofi seicenteschi’ an ‘implicita cabbala fonetica’, but tries to apply it in impossible conditions, having done away with ‘un Dio che fonda divinamente il linguaggio, *phýsei* e non *thései*’. Only a Nietzschean *funambolo*, someone belonging to ‘la sfera della *Artistik*, parola insostituibile, vicina appunto alla vita dell’acrobata più che a quella del professore di filosofia’ can be successful at this ‘cabbala’. However, the incessant digging into the spectrum of meanings of a word, exemplified by Heidegger’s interpretation of truth, *aletheia*, as ‘that which comes out of hiding’, is employed consistently both by Calasso and poststructuralist thinkers like Derrida, and it turns a rhetorical device into a serious search for meaning. Even though Nietzsche – a philologist by formation – would probably have disagreed with most of their findings, his influence can be detected in this search. In it, philosophical *logos*, traditional tool of metaphysics, gives way to philological *logos*, closer to the literariness of language, and paves the way for appreciating its metaphoricity. Nietzsche is arguably the most striking philosophical influence on contemporary literary criticism. Lyotard, Deleuze, Derrida and the main theoreticians of postmodern and poststructuralist culture (I include under this label, because of the theorisation of *phallogocentrism*<sup>74</sup> in Derrida, also feminist and postcolonial theory, as a privileging of margin and ‘difference’) all place their work

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<sup>72</sup> ‘Heidegger ha risposto con una più subdola ingiustizia, negando a Nietzsche il privilegio da lui rivendicato per il suo pensiero, quello di non essere, a rigore di termini occidentali, un filosofo, ma un nomade che saccheggia i templi crollanti della filosofia per tornare poi nel *suo* deserto’. Id., ‘Monologo fatale’, pp. 27-28.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>74</sup> This word appears in his writing from 1972. It is used to foreground in traditional Western philosophy and culture the predominance of a phallogocentric dialectic, and to identify a connection between ‘male’ (‘patriarchal’, *phallus*) and ‘oral’ discourse (*phonē* or *logos*), marked in this tradition as ‘privileged’ terms in opposition respectively to ‘female’ (‘matriarchal,’ *hymen*) and written discourse (*grammé*). See Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, pp. XVII-XXI and Jacques Derrida,

in the trail of Nietzsche, whose attack on what Lyotard's 'La condition postmoderne'<sup>75</sup> would call 'the great metanarratives' is possibly the main theoretical foundation of postmodernism. Going back to Calasso, we can recognise that Nietzsche's critique of interpretation and rejection of *aut/aut* may have influenced Calasso's formulation of the *variante*. The similarity of Calasso's formulation with some of Derrida's readings is also however impossible to ignore. Similarly, it is difficult not to place in a poststructuralist context his expressed belief that the meaning of myth can be found in 'difference, as discussed in depth in chapter VI.

Calasso's reading of metaphorical language also shares common ground with Derrida, this time directly via Nietzsche. Calasso presents an interpretation of Plato's condemnation of the poet, based on the power of metaphor and metamorphosis, two words which, if we play a game of *etimological chains*, appear related; one a generic passing through – possibly of content, the other a passing through of form:

La città platonica non espelle soltanto un certo tipo di uomini, ma anche un certo tipo di dei: gli dei omerici, appunto. Quanto all'uomo da espellere, Platone non lo definisce innanzitutto un poeta, ma <<uomo capace di trasformarsi sapientemente in tutto>>. Da ciò s'intende che l'opposizione platonica, prima ancora che a un certo uso della parola, si rivolge a una certa pratica della metamorfosi. [...] Platone allude qui al trauma, alla spaccatura nella storia della conoscenza, che avviene quando, invece di dire: a si trasforma in b, si dice a è b.<sup>76</sup>

It should be recognised that this may sound like a weak justification. Plato does not

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*Sproni*, Adelphi, Milan 1991. *Éperons* was initially published in French 1978 but was first given as a paper in 1972.

<sup>75</sup> This text from 1979 was rapidly published in Italian (1981) by Feltrinelli – its English publication was in 1984 –.

<sup>76</sup> Id., Conferenza 'Il terrore delle parole', in *Roberto Calasso, Fondation Charles Veillon*, Bossigny, Fondation Charles Veillon 1992, pp.17-18.

condemn the poet explicitly, however, the condemnation of the ‘metaphorical man,’ capable of metamorphosis, is still the condemnation of the artist, master of the rules of ‘analogy.’ Calasso also stresses that, whilst it is true that ‘Tutta la *Repubblica*, di fatto, può essere letta come la messa in scena della disputa tra Platone e Omero,’ to the Greeks Homer was more a theologian than a poet. It is in this sense, he explains, that one has to read the third book of the *Republic*, as the accusation from a philosopher to a theologian, of having composed ‘miti falsi.’<sup>77</sup> He also underlines the contradiction between *Republic*<sup>78</sup> and *Phaedo*<sup>79</sup>, where Socrates says: ‘Bello infatti è questo rischio, e occorre con queste cose [cioè con le parole stesse] in certo modo incantare se stessi.’ In *Phaedo*, continues Calasso, ‘La conoscenza per simulacri appare [...] come [...] un incanto pericoloso e bello, un rischio che dobbiamo accettare perchè ‘la conoscenza che ci viene incontro da questa via non sarebbe raggiungibile in altro modo.’<sup>80</sup> Despite Nietzsche’s professed dislike for Socrates, whom he viewed as the initiator of nihilism, Calasso ascribes to Socrates Nietzsche’s conclusion on the epistemological power of metaphors and poetic language. Whilst Nietzsche may have been Calasso’s sole inspiration for this reading of Plato, once again the coincidences between his thought and Derrida’s are worth commenting upon, and place Calasso, solidly, in the postmodern arena. Plato’s view of Homer as theologian would probably be agreed to by Derrida, who as Peggy Kamuf well summarises in her review of *De la Grammatologie* believes ‘the concept of the sign, whose history is coextensive with the history of logocentrism’ to be ‘essentially theological.’<sup>81</sup> Interestingly, Derrida also displays interest in the concept of metaphor: ‘Il ne s'agirait donc pas d'inverser le sens propre et

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p.16. See Plato, *The Republic*, III, 394d

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., II, 377d.

<sup>79</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, translated by David Gallop, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 114d.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>81</sup> Peggy Kamuf, ‘From “Of Grammatology”’, *A Derrida Reader*, pp. 31-33, p. 32.

le sens figuré mais de déterminer le sens « propre » de l'écriture comme la métaphoricité elle-même.<sup>82</sup>

The retelling of various versions of the same mythical tale appears in itself ambiguous: it celebrates myth's power to include its opposite, but also plays all versions against each other, deconstructing the truth of all of them, leaving it 'undecidable'.<sup>83</sup> Also, from a formal point of view, the decision to render it in the form of a treatise, a typical tool of metaphysics, rather than through poetry, may signify the defeat of the culture of metaphor, of the epistemological power of literature, which he so often celebrates. His re-writing thus also becomes on a formal level a deconstruction of Greek mythical tales. In my view it is impossible to explain these elements of Calasso's writing without making recourse specifically to the vocabulary of poststructuralism, the form of philosophical and literary criticism which coexists with postmodernism, and to the term *deconstruction*.<sup>84</sup> Even though his reading of them may be original and not filtered by any contemporary, we can say that even the most fruitful Nietzschean elements in Calasso's work have also haunted the imagination and the theory of postmodern and poststructuralist authors.

Calasso inherits from Nietzsche a gnoseological and literary approach, also favoured by Derrida. Like Nietzsche does from the *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, and Derrida at least since 'La pharmacie de Platon',<sup>85</sup> Calasso exploits all the metaphorical possibilities

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<sup>82</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'La fin du livre et le commencement de l'écriture', *De la grammatologie*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1967, pp. 15-41, p. 32.

<sup>83</sup> This Derridean concept will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

<sup>84</sup> To appreciate the intended meaning of this term see Jacques Derrida, 'La structure, le signe, et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines', in *L'écriture et la différence*, Seuil, Paris, 1967, pp. 409-428. 'Deconstruction' emphasizes the fact that in our de-centered world it is impossible to determine an ultimate meaning for any text, as we are trapped within the language and with the tools of metaphysics although recent philosophical thought has decreed its end. Consequently, the essay celebrates the need for a post-Nietzschean incessant and playful interpretation, which would enable us to undo the contradictions which a text consciously or, more often, unconsciously, displays. Spivak well summarises 'deconstruction' as 'A reading that *produces* rather than *protects*. See Gayatri Spivak, 'Translator's Preface to Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins, 1974 (1967), pp. ix-lxxxvii.,' lxxv.

<sup>85</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'La pharmacie de Platon', in *Dissémination*, Éditions de Seuil, Paris, 1993, pp. 77-213.

offered by the figure of a god, to make of that god almost a guide, through the understanding of the theme he is treating. In post-Nietzschean fashion, his writing on the god is experiential. It is through this experience/performance that the meaning of the god itself in relation to his theme is clarified. And writing brings about all possible ‘variations’ and makes the figure of the god a rich canvas of coexisting and contradictory symbols. The god does not stand as a metaphor for a simple idea of concept, but fully presents his polytheistic face and his power as a garland of meaning. Unsurprisingly, all the gods discussed in *Le nozze* concur to shape Calasso’s fluid, metamorphic and all-inclusive view of the power of language and literature. It is through these figures, and through the figures of a few human beings, which enjoyed a privileged relation with the gods, that Calasso manages the simultaneous re-reading and re-writing of Greek mythology. This re-writing reveals the gods in all their contradictory complexity. However, Calasso’s reflections on the gods, and his way of bringing them back, reveal an almost Mephistophelian attempt to bring back free (‘absolute’) literature, or at least to know it, through the regenerating power of re-writing it. If for Nietzsche writing became the only way to experience truth through the power of the mask of metaphor, for Calasso mythologizing, the re-presentation of the gods, becomes the way to reconnect with the power of literature.

The choice to illustrate the relationship between gods and *mythos*, rather than between god and *logos*, is also extremely meaningful, and finds a resonance in Derrida’s dismantling of *logocentrism*.<sup>86</sup> If Derrida as a philosopher is happy to propose deconstruction as a way out of the iconoclastic power of *logocentrism* which ultimately

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<sup>86</sup> This term, regularly employed by Derrida throughout *La grammatologie*, emphasizes the history of philosophy as marked by the predominance of ‘logos’ (oral discourse) over writing, and by a belief that this ‘full word’ (‘parole pleine’) was capable of expressing and ordering reality. The second part of the term, ‘centrism,’ should also be reviewed in the light of the questioning of the notion of ‘centre’ in ‘Le structure, le signe, le jeu’, especially pp. 409-410. See also the discussion of phallogocentrism at note 74 of this chapter (page 155)

annihilates the power of metaphors, Calasso as an author will not stop at deconstructing mythology, but will also attempt to reconnect himself to what we could call “mythocentrism”: an exaltation of the undying power of mythical images. Privileging *mythocentrism* over *logocentrism* is not, however, releasing Calasso from the company of Derrida. In their attempt to break free from the limits of *logos*, and of traditional metaphysical thoughts, they both end up exalting the margin and the periphery over the centre, and foregrounding femininity. Even in his re-focusing mythology on the figure of woman/nymph, therefore, Calasso can be seen as deconstructing mythology.

Deconstruction also links *logos* and patriarchy. So, whilst we can see it as his most original contribution, Calasso’s suggestion that a feminine, nymphic, metaphoric language lies at the core of ‘absolute literature’, and allows knowledge, is preceded by a number of conclusions that he shares with the poststructuralist climate.

One of Derrida’s most useful tools, the putting of a concept ‘under erasure (‘sous rature’<sup>87</sup>), is also in my view subtly employed by Calasso. Derrida developed this approach out Heidegger, who had put ‘sous rature’ the concept of being. Heidegger, as well explained by Gayatri Spivak in the preface to the English translation of *De la grammatologie*, ‘crosses out the word “Being” and lets both the word and the deletion stand.’<sup>88</sup> Whether applied literally or metaphorically, this approach of writing a word, crossing it out, and then printing both word and deletion provides the tool for articulating and problematising concepts at the same time, for the simultaneous articulation of a concept and its ‘other’. This draws attention to the irrecoverability of the meaning of any word, and at the same time to the fact that it is precisely this ultimate irrecoverability that opens up signification. If, as Spivak notes, Nietzsche puts knowledge ‘under erasure’, Heidegger puts Being ‘under erasure’, and Derrida does the

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<sup>87</sup> The translation is Spivak’s, see Spivak, ‘Translator’s Preface to Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*,’ p. xiv.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xv



same with writing,<sup>89</sup> *Le nozze* can be seen as Calasso's attempt to put the images of the gods, that have haunted Western imagination, 'under erasure.'

What I will attempt in the next few chapters is to adopt Calasso's own approach, and read his re-reading/re-writing of the gods, in order to determine the ways in which his view of literature and language is affected by the figures of the gods, and the way in which his re-presentation of these figures reveals a dialogue with poststructuralism.

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<sup>89</sup> Spivak, 'Translator's Preface to Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. xli.

## **PART II**

### **CALASSO – A TEXT**

*Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia* – The influence of poststructuralism on Calasso's representation of the Greek gods

## Chapter VI

### Zeus or the discourse of *mythos*

#### [Abstract]

Through a discussion of Calasso's re-writings of the tales of Io and Europa, of his reflections on Zeus' statue in Olympia and his oracle at Dodona, and his relation with the metaphor of the *corona*, this chapter will investigate, from page 179, Calasso's representation of the 'frieze in the sky' named Zeus.

The investigation will demonstrate that the representative choices around the figure of Zeus place *Le nozze* and 'absolute literature' firmly in the poststructuralist *Weltanschauung*, through the attention given to the ideas of 'difference' and 'undecidability', the corrosion of Zeus as a symbol of hierarchy, the questioning of Zeus as philosophical presence, and the foregrounding of mythology as discourse.

## I. Io and Europa - 'difference', and 'undecidability'

The tale of Io is a useful starting point for demonstrating that Calasso's representation of Zeus, both as a mythical character and a patriarchal symbol, reveals analogies with poststructuralist deconstruction. The importance of this tale in the economy of the book is emphasized by the fact that – even though *Le nozze* opens with the tale of her great-granddaughter Europa – Io's tale is introduced as the 'primary' one, which sets all other tales in motion. I use the term "primary," rather than "original," because, even though through this tale Calasso foregrounds the Platonic theme of the copy, he gives it a strangely Derridean twist; in Calasso's re-writing, the Greek origin is 'difference'. Derrida's discussion of *indécidables* is a useful starting point for appreciating the poststructuralist elements of the tales of Io and Europa. In 'La double séance,' through his discussion of the word 'hymen,' Derrida gives a thorough definition of 'indécidabilité' – a term which he credits Gödel for<sup>1</sup> – as an operation, a process, a 'pratique':

Ce qui compte ici, ce n'est pas la richesse lexicale, l'infinité sémantique d'un mot ou d'un concept, sa profondeur ou son épaisseur, la sédimentation en lui de deux significations contradictoires (continuité et discontinuité, dedans et dehors, identité et différence, etc.). Ce qui compte ici, c'est la pratique formelle ou syntaxique qui le compose et le décompose.<sup>2</sup>

Like Hillman's *polytheistic* narration, Derrida's *indécidable* can be traced back to

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'La double séance', in *La dissémination*, pp. 214-346, p. 271.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 271.

Nietzsche's 'pervasive strategy of intersubstituting opposites, [...] in the process undoing opposite perspectives, showing that the two terms of an opposition are merely accomplices of each other.'<sup>3</sup> Calasso's handling of the relationship between Io and Europa, and their respective tales, reveals that he sees them as such an *indécidable*. Despite acknowledging that Io's tale sets all subsequent tales into motion,<sup>4</sup> thus making it a 'first' from a chronological perspective, the narration suggests that from the god's and reader's perspective, between Europa and Io's tales there is no temporal or representational hierarchy. Calasso notes repeatedly that they are but re-enactments of the same plot with a difference. This clearly emerges in the lines on the *ekphrasis* on the fate of Io, which Europa had seen on the golden basket, wrought by Aephestus, which she was carrying when Zeus abducted her:

Scendendo verso le praterie fiorite, vicino al mare, Europa teneva in mano, sbalzato in nobili metalli, il suo destino. Come in musica, la sua melodia era l'inverso di quella della sua antenata. Un toro l'avrebbe rapita dall'Asia verso quella terra che si sarebbe chiamata Europa, come anni prima il disperato errare marino di una giovenca che aveva pascolato in terra greca si era concluso in Egitto, al lieve tocco della mano di Zeus. E un giorno sarebbe giunto in dono alla fanciulla Europa un canestro d'oro. Lo teneva in mano, distratta.<sup>5</sup>

Even the flow of the narration declares that a poststructuralist undoing of opposites is taking place. The tales of the two princesses are not narrated orderly, according to chronological succession, but by alternating a scene of the tale of one of them with a scene of the tale of the other, as if the author were choosing to weave two types of flowers in a garland. Rather than on Io and Europa as such, the reader is drawn to linger

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<sup>3</sup> Spivak, 'Translator's Preface to Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. xxviii.

<sup>4</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

on the space between the signs ‘Io’ and ‘Europa.’ Present and past, and the border between the two characters, appear clearly marked by the play of ‘undecidability’. Calasso employs these stories of metamorphosis to reveal that literature is born in the differential space between copy and original.

This play does not stop at Io and Europa: Calasso appears bent on undoing binary oppositions between all the women in the Cretan royal family: ‘Io, Telefassa, Europa, Argiope, Pasifae, Arianna, Fedra. Questi nomi ci parlano di un volto largo, purissimo, splendente, che rischiera da lontano, che rischiera tutti, come la luna.’<sup>6</sup>

Mythology and its birth as narration – and its astral connection – are played out in front of the reader through the praxis of ‘undecidability’. Whilst Calasso does not employ the term *indécidable*, he makes use of another term, employed by Derrida in the same context. In his discussion of the term *hymen*, Derrida explains that what applies to *indécidable* and *hymen*, also holds for him for other words, which all seem to have a relation to writing, ‘pour toutes les signes qui, comme *pharmakon*, *supplément*, *différance*, et quelques autres, ont une valeur double, contradictoire, indécidable qui tiens toujours a leur syntaxe’,<sup>7</sup> all words that ‘admettent dans leur jeu la contradiction and non-contradiction (et la contradiction et la non-contradiction entre la contradiction et la non-contradiction).’<sup>8</sup>

Calasso employs the term *differenza*, and his discussion of this term echoes Derrida’s, particularly in Calasso’s treatment of the Platonic theme of the copy. In *Le nozze* we read that, for cheating on his wife Hera,<sup>9</sup> Zeus chose *tauroparthenos* Io, the goddess’s priestess, so he preferred the copy to the original:

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., *Le nozze*, p. 21. In this sentence there may also be an echo of Robert Graves’s matriarchal goddess, Eurynome, or ‘wide-wandering’, identified with the ‘visible moon’. See Robert Graves, *The Greek myths*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1955, p. 28

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘La double séance’, p. 272.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 273.

<sup>9</sup> Interestingly another bovine divinity, see Homer’s epithet for her of ‘boopis’.

Nel suo aspetto, nelle sue vesti, Io era tenuta a ripetere l'immagine della dea che serviva. Era una copia che tentava di imitare una statua. Ma Zeus scelse la copia. Desiderò la differenza minima, che basta a disarticolare l'ordine, a produrre il nuovo, il significato. E la desiderò perchè era una differenza, perchè era una copia.<sup>10</sup>

Calasso suggests that meaning, if such term can be used, is generated through a play of differences between multiple significations of the same signifier, rather than being inscribed as a unique, 'monotheistic', truth in any sign. This is what Derrida says in his seminal 'La structure, le signe et le jeu,' where he discusses a 'système dans lequel le signifié central, originaire ou transcendantal, n'est jamais absolument présent hors d'un système de différences. L'absence de signifié transcendantal étend à l'infini le champ et le jeu de la signification.'<sup>11</sup> If we look again at the earlier quotation which claims the 'undecidability' between all the women in the Cretan royal family, the 'purissimo volto splendente', which could be posited as the "origin-al" of their tales, is irrelevant. What matters is what we learn about this mysterious 'volto' through each repetition of the tale. If Calasso's Zeus, choosing Io, the copy, over Hera, the original, to allow the generation of *significato*, appears to side more with poststructuralism than with the condemnation of art and the artist in Plato's *Republic*, so does the authorial emphasis on the link between Europa and Io. When Zeus seduces Europa, Io's great-granddaughter, he generates a new tale and further meaning by copulating with a copy of Io, already a copy of Hera.

The references to the theme of *differenza* do not stop here. Through the tales of Europa and Io, remarkably, our author discusses, without explicitly mentioning either,

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<sup>10</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> Derrida, 'La structure, le signe, et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines', p. 411.

both meanings of the verb *différer* discussed by *L'écriture et la différence* and *Marges de la philosophie*. These meanings are well summarized by Gayatri Spivak in her preface to the English translation of *De la grammatologie*: ‘The two together—“difference” and “deferment”—both senses present in the French verb “différer”, and both “properties” of the sign under erasure—Derrida calls “difference”.’<sup>12</sup>

The first meaning of *différer* clearly emerges in the comments on the triangle of different female images of Europa, Io, Hera. The second—diachronic—meaning of the Derridean *différer*, is embedded in Europa’s tale. It surfaces through two narrative elements, both highlighting our simultaneous proximity and distance from our sources: the fact that Europa had seen the *ekphrasis* of the fate of Io in the basket she was carrying when she was abducted, and the fact that Europa goes from being the name of a girl, to being the name of a continent.<sup>13</sup>

In conclusion, Calasso actually inscribes Derridean *différance* at the core of *Le nozze*, by turning the founding story of Western mythology into a tale of *differenza* that, by playing against each other Hera—original, Io—copy, and Europa—copy of a copy, encapsulates the pre-emptying of the ‘metaphysics of presence.’<sup>14</sup> Calasso’s comments on Io as copy in the production of signification (and literature), and on Europa as fleeting presence-absence, interchangeable different copy of Io, contribute to make of this ‘déesse’, simultaneously, a Warburgian nymph, the embodiment of Derridean

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<sup>12</sup> Spivak, ‘Translator’s Preface to *Of Grammatology*’, p. xxxvi.

<sup>13</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 17-19.

<sup>14</sup> This term, used regularly in Derrida, can be treated a synonymous with ‘traditional’ philosophy, which was based on the idea of ‘being,’ and could therefore formulate a belief in ‘presence.’ Heidegger’s dismantling of the concept of ‘being’ (see page 160) can be seen as the conclusion of this long theoretical path. See in particular the essay ‘La fin du livre et le commencement de l’écriture’ for an appreciation of the Derridean views on the ‘history of metaphysics.’ Jacques Derrida, ‘La fin du livre et le commencement de l’écriture’, *La grammatologie*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1967, pp. 15-41



‘difference’, and the goddess of ‘absolute literature’.

## II. *Metamorfosi* – The astrological Zeus and the end of patriarchy

Sulla spiaggia di Sidone un toro tentava di imitare un gorgheggio amoroso. Era Zeus.<sup>15</sup>

This is the opening sentence of *Le nozze*, with Zeus metamorphosed into a bull in order to seduce Europa. Furthermore, the first action ascribed to the father of the gods is precisely *mimesis*, the action for which Plato condemned the artist in the *Republic*. Since Calasso frequently uses metaphor, metamorphoses, and imitation as almost interchangeable terms, I will explore this metamorphosis of Zeus as a metaphor for the *poietic*, for literature, and demonstrate that the metaphor/metamorphosis of Zeus as bull does not produce an exaltation of the father of the gods as a patriarchal author or authorial and metaphysical origin, but rather as a postmodern, Talleyrandean, deconstructed author. Behind Calasso’s fascination with tales of metamorphosis – a *leitmotif* and interpretative key not just the figure of Zeus, but of the text overall – is the shadow of the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, who apart from being quoted in the ‘Fonti’ at the back of *Le nozze* is made, in the opening chapter, the recipient of the highest literary homage, that imitation reserved by Borgès’ Menard to Cervantes. *Le nozze*’s re-writing of the rape of Europa – even though its textuality is thickened by elements mutated, for example, from Apollodorus<sup>16</sup> – faithfully follows the imperial poet’s description of the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> The divine bull smelling of roses, for example, is in Apollodorus. Apollodoro, *Biblioteca*, Adelphi, Milan, 2004, III,1,1.

first meeting between Europa and the bull Zeus,<sup>17</sup> where the princess meets a bull ‘di un bianco abbagliante, dalle piccole corna, che sembravano gemme lucenti,’<sup>18</sup> whose horns she crowns with garlands. The only ‘variation’ is in the comment on the contrast between the behaviour expected of an Olympian ruler and Zeus’s metamorphic action, diegetically explicit in the source,<sup>19</sup> but conveyed mimetically by Calasso, through the blushing of Athena<sup>20</sup> - her blushing is discussed at page 173.

In the writing of a sophisticated author like Calasso, the representation of Zeus during metamorphosis cannot be seen as an innocent homage to Ovidian *classicità*, but may actually reveal Calasso’s (conscious or sub-conscious) poststructuralist agenda. For example, the introduction of the god as *toro* may be seen as an attempt to deconstruct, through astrology, his traditional image of father of the gods. *Toro* in Italian, translates not just as “bull” but as the astrological sign “Taurus”, thus Zeus’s appearance as bull can be read as his appearance as the ‘frieze in the sky’ that he is connected with.

Both the ‘mythical’ and ‘political’ versions of the tale of Europa recounted in *Le nozze* are cast under the sign of Taurus. In the mythical version of this tale which opens *Le nozze* Europa is seduced on Crete by Zeus-bull, whilst in the political version we are told that she was kidnapped by the bull-worshipping Cretan, and eventually married their king Asterius – the grandfather of another Asterius, also called ‘Minotaur.’<sup>21</sup> The difference between the mythical and political version denounces a linguistic correlation between Zeus and an astral god, Asterius. This name is the first sign that in the ‘storie cretesi’ narrated by Calasso the link between a divine bull and a ‘frieze in the sky’ will be a defining motif.

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<sup>17</sup> Ovidio, *Metamorfosi*, II, 846 and ff.

<sup>18</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 16.

<sup>19</sup> Ovidio, *Metamorfosi*, II, 848-853.

<sup>20</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, pp. 19-20.

The tale of Io, the ‘primary’ *storia cretese*, is also framed within a Taurean symbology: the kidnapping of Io ‘*tauroparthenos*,’<sup>22</sup> by Phoenician sailors, who leave on a ship ‘in forma di toro,’<sup>23</sup> culminates in the allusion to Io generating to Zeus Epafo – known in Aegypt as the bull Apis, a bovine astral god.<sup>24</sup>

Behind this astral symbology lie a number of influences, from Ovid, to De Santillana, who relied heavily on Ovid for his research. Warburg – who also relied on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* for identifying the figures of nymphs in a number of works of art, and devoted his ‘*Stern Glaube und Sternkunde*’ to a cultural study of the zodiac, may also have influenced the re-working of the sign of Zeus.

The influences above can all be argued to be signals taking the reader on the road to deconstruction of the father of gods. As in the zodiac there is no ruling sign, loading the representation of Zeus with reminiscences of the astrological Taurus, may conceal an attempt to subvert his patriarchal image. This can be better appreciated through an analysis of the representation of Europa.

## **II.a Europa and the politics of mythology– The sky bull and the sky nymph**

Possiamo dire di avere varcato la soglia del mito soltanto quando avvertiamo un’improvvisa coerenza tra incompatibili.<sup>25</sup>

As Derrida well summarises in his re-reading of Plato’s *Phaedrus* in *Dissemination*, the Greek ‘father’ (*pāter*) simultaneously meant ‘un *chef*, un *capital*, et un *bien*’, as well as

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 19. The arrival of the astrological age of Taurus has been linked, for example in Bernal’s controversial *Black Athena*, with the appearance of bovine deities across the Mediterranean, from the Taurean gods of Minoan civilization to the Egyptian cult of Apis. Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1991, particularly vol II, p. 163 and following.

<sup>25</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 36.

having a link with the sun-god and the idea of appearance.<sup>26</sup> Calasso's Zeus-Taurus, being written as a re-reading of its Greek versions, appears, if not fully reversing it, at least to be at play with the Platonic *pāter*. *Le nozze*'s rendition of the tale of Europa supports this. The text opens, hierarchically, with the *pāter* of Greek mythology; however, Calasso chooses to first show us Zeus, king of the anthropomorphic Olympians, in a zoomorphic form, and without the traditional power emblems of his patriarchal image. Besides the attention is immediately switched from him to Europa, and the *ekphrasis* of her golden basket, which retraces her female genealogy, culminating in her *trisavola*, Hera's priestess Io.<sup>27</sup>

In the opening scene, with its pictorial attention to detail,<sup>28</sup> we can recognise the attempt to invest Europa with the characters of the Warburgian nymph. Like the female images in Botticelli's *Primavera* and *Venere*, with their fleeting clothes moved by the wind, which would embody the resurfacing of ancient paganism in Renaissance art, Europa appears on the scene with the wind Boreas blowing her clothes,<sup>29</sup> whilst her peplum, behind her shoulders, 'si era gonfiato in una vela purpurea,'<sup>30</sup> and addresses a prayer to the waters and the winds.<sup>31</sup>

The Warburgian intimations<sup>32</sup> concur in making of Europa-nymph the symbolic centre of her tale, and conjure up a subversive view of Zeus and Europa in relation to

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<sup>26</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'La pharmacie de Platon,' in *Dissémination*, Éditions de Seuil, Paris, 1993, pp. 77-213, p. 100.

<sup>27</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 18.

<sup>28</sup> This could be a way to initiate, with the book, a dialogue with Plato, who laid on painters as well as writers the blame for creating images three times removed from reality. This element of Platonic philosophy is also discussed by Derrida. See for example Derrida, 'La pharmacie de Platon', pp. 169-177.

<sup>29</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>32</sup> Remarkably Warburg had traced precisely in the tale of Europa - as recounted by Poliziano - one of the sources for the *Venere*, and had noted that Poliziano lingers on the idea of the dress and hair of Europa, which are in movement. The opening therefore contains a double homage to Warburg, in the choice of theme, and also in the allusion to that other return of the gods in 1520's Italy. The double homage may also allude self-referentially to Calasso's own attempt to make the gods return through the writing *Le nozze*. Warburg, *Pagan Antiquity*, p. 98.

the production and control of meaning. This invites a poststructuralist reading of the god and its tales. As we are dealing with an author who attempts to ‘bring back’ the gods, the fact that a nymph, rather than the Olympian ruler, is instrumental to the appearance on the scene of the father of the gods, is remarkable. So is the fact that in the presence of this nymph Zeus turns into an imitator. Europa, source/cause of his transformation into a bull, and of his act of mimesis, appears to work to deconstruct the male/authoritarian *Zeus pāter*. Whilst, through the depiction of Zeus as a bull, Calasso may be drawing attention to his sexual prowess, through the insistence on the nymph riding Zeus-bull, Calasso seems to suggest a subtle inversion of their stereotypical sexual roles, and thus of patriarchal hierarchies. The text confirms this through an almost casual annotation, already mentioned at page 170, that ‘Atena arrossi spiando dall’alto il padre cavalcato da una donna.’<sup>33</sup>

The fate of Europa helps to clarify the extent of the subversion of Zeus’s patriarchal image. Europa will give her name to a continent, but not displace Zeus; she will end up purely as one of the innumerable names in the catalogue of Zeus’s human lovers, one of the names in the garland of stories, which make up mythology. However, this is precisely the locus of maximum hierarchical ambiguity between Zeus and Europa. Even though Zeus will remain the father of the gods, and Europa will just be a name in the garland of stories, between the lines of the text, through the emphasis on femininity in Europa’s and the other tales of metamorphosis, we can read a different view. Zeus – who may be no more than his own name and tales – needs the nymph, ‘merce di scambio’ in the game of ‘equivalenza,’<sup>34</sup> in order to attempt literature (*mimesis*); without the nymph, he cannot assert himself as creator.

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<sup>33</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 15.

<sup>34</sup> For the discussion of this concept see id., ‘Déesses entretenues’, p. 259.

In the deconstruction of the ‘frieze’ of Zeus through Europa, Zeus’s role in relation to authority, and authorship is at stake. Thus, the fleetingness of Europa-literature is echoed by the fleetingness of the authorial Zeus, a Pierre Menard, whose persona is subject, through further astral representations, to the corrosive game of ‘difference’. Another astral image of Zeus will help the demonstration.

### **III. Zeus and the question of presence – From Olympia to Dodona**

#### **III. a ‘Gigante incrostato di creature’**

The sky bull is not the only astral image of Zeus in *Le nozze*. An ‘absolute’<sup>35</sup> reading of this text reveals that Calasso plays the Zeus of mythical and literary tradition off against different astral images, sometimes simultaneously. This play with the different astral sediments of the figure of Zeus is evident in the pages on Phidias’s chrysolephantine statue of Zeus in the temple of Olympia. This description’s importance to the symbolic order of the book is stressed by Calasso’s statement that, according to Quintilianus, this statue had added something new to human religion.<sup>36</sup> The representation of the Olympian Zeus contains reminders of two further astral incarnations of this god, both crucial to the interpretation of the book, and both lending themselves to a poststructuralist reading.

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<sup>35</sup> In the sense discussed in Chapter III.ii, from p. 118.

<sup>36</sup> Id., *Le nozze*, p. 196.

Made of gold and ivory, shining against the dark floor of the temple of Olympia,<sup>37</sup> the statue suggests the colours of a star against the night sky. Explaining the reason why modern commentators are perplexed by the surviving descriptions of this work, Calasso supports this interpretation of Zeus as an astral object. He remarks that it is an error on the part of the moderns to analyse Phidias' *Zeus* with the same terms of reference applied to Praxiteles's *Hermes*:

L'errore dei moderni sta nel considerare lo Zeus di Fidia una statua, nel senso in cui è una statua lo Hermes di Prassitele. E invece era altro. Chiuso e corrusco nella cella del tempio, lo Zeus di Fidia era forse più vicino a un dolmen, a un betilo, a una pietra caduta dal cielo, su cui si fossero aggrappati, per vivere, gli altri dei e gli eroi.<sup>38</sup>

This new astral 'analogy,' in which we may see an astrological/astronomical reminder of Zeus as the planet Jupiter, results in a questioning of the patriarchal Zeus as Heideggerian 'presence'. As a planet, as a rock from the sky, Zeus does not seem to have a life of his own, other than as a 'supporto', which the other gods and heroes will live upon. While the body of the god, pullulating with heroes, is described, all we know about the god's head is that it was wearing 'una corona d'ulivo.'<sup>39</sup> Making Zeus a faceless 'immobile guardiano seduto su un trono' is in my view a further deconstructive strategy towards *Zeus pāter*. One of the traditional meanings of the Greek and Latin *pāter* was that of 'head' of the family, and, as Onians notes,<sup>40</sup> the distinctive gesture of

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 196-197.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>40</sup> In *The Origins of European Thought*, a text published by Adelphi. See Richard Broxton Onians, *Le origini del pensiero europeo*, Adelphi, Milan, 1998, p. 125. For the original English see Richard Broxton Onians, *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time and Fate*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1951.

the Homeric Zeus was a nod ('cenno') of the head. The still and faceless Zeus of Calasso appears deliberately different from this traditional image.

The representative choices around the Olympia Zeus are also remarkable if we consider that Calasso repeats that Zeus is the god of *apparire*. Yet he may purely be picking a very accurate term from his philosophical vocabulary. The father of the gods in the twentieth century can no longer be the god of 'being,' of full presence, but purely of appearance; an illusion of being. We could argue that this faceless 'gigante seduto e incrostato di creature'<sup>41</sup> is a Nietzschean figure, marked by the undoing of the 'I'. Being Zeus the totality of the Olympian system, this appears in him as simultaneously fragmented, into all the heroes and gods sculpted on his body, and yet held together by the support of the god's body:

Ma Zeus non era soltanto quell'immobile guardiano seduto sul trono: Zeus era tutte quelle scene, quei gesti, confusi e rimescolati, che increspavano il suo corpo ed il suo seggio in minuscoli brividi. Fidia aveva dimostrato, senza volerlo, che Zeus non può vivere da solo: aveva mostrato, senza volerlo, l'essenza del politeismo.<sup>42</sup>

Here Calasso makes explicit what he may have been hinting at in the tales of Europa and Io, through the references to the god's metamorphic power; his 'planetary' Zeus is not a unique or unifying presence in the traditional philosophical sense, unless we are willing to see his presence as mere 'support'. Through the keyword *apparire*, as through his choice to represent him as Phidias' statue, Calasso drives the reader to question whether Zeus is rather an 'absence' than a 'presence'. 'Appearance,' or 'origin of appearance' are also two of the meanings of *pāter* discussed by Derrida whilst

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<sup>41</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, pp. 197-198..

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 197-198.



analyzing the Egyptian counterpart of Zeus, Ammon, in *Dissémination*. But of all the meanings of the Greek *pāter*, discussed by Derrida, Calasso's Zeus only appears to incarnate this one, the one allowing the deconstruction of *pāter* as 'presence.'

If we are willing to see in the Olympian Zeus a display of Phidias, Zeus and Calasso's artistic language, the 'giant encrusted with creatures' appears less and less like the patriarchal founder of Western metaphysics, and more like its hidden enemy, corroding it from within, in line with what Foucault sees as 'a fundamental structure of contemporary thought': 'L'effondrement de la subjectivité philosophique, sa dispersion à l'intérieur d'un langage qui la dépossède, mais la multiplie dans l'espace de sa lacune, est probablement une des structures fondamentales de la pensée contemporaine.'<sup>43</sup>

### III.b 'Otherness' in Olympus

Gli dei dell'Olimpo sono i primi che accettano di apparire totalmente, 'dopo aver attraversato tutto il cerchio della metamorfosi'. E quest'ultimo camuffamento esaltava più di ogni altro. Era anche il più pericoloso. Poteva infatti accadere che la differenza divina non fosse più colta nella sua pienezza.<sup>44</sup>

A poststructuralist – post-Nietzschean – ring can be detected in this passage, where Calasso unveils the *apparire* of the gods as their most effective masking, thus, effectively making of his own re-writing, rather than a return of the gods, the return of their masked images. This especially affects Zeus, *metamorphosis* being his distinctive cipher in the book. *Metamorphosis* makes of Zeus the god of a *morphē*, which as the "meta" prefix suggests is in constant flux. Once again, whilst celebrating him as

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<sup>43</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Préface à la transgression', *Dits et écrits, I, 1954-1975*, pp. 261-278, p. 270

<sup>44</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 70.

*phanaios*, as *phenomenon*, *apparire*, *Le nozze* makes *Zeus pāter* untenable as metaphysical ‘being.’<sup>45</sup>

It is also worth noting that Calasso’s reflection on man’s experience of the gods is marked by the Derridean term *différence*, and that the manifestation of all the gods, being linked explicitly to *metamorphosis*, challenges the absolute reader both with the Nietzschean idea of mask and the poststructuralist belief in a play of ‘difference’ within signs. Another inspiration for these thoughts may be Plato’s cave myth,<sup>46</sup> which haunted Nietzsche through his madness, and possibly Plato’s reading by Derrida, who, reflecting on *pāter*, as the embodiment of philosophical presence, notes: ‘Or, de ce père, de ce capital, de ce bien, de cette origine de la valeur et des étants appairaisants, on ne peut parler simplement ou directement.’<sup>47</sup>

Calasso devotes a remarkable chapter to Zeus’ oracle of Dodona in Epirus, which supports and expands on this theme of Zeus’s facelessness and absence in presence. Predictions in Dodona, notes Calasso, were given by the the murmur of the breeze blowing between the branches of a sacred oak.

Whilst it is hard to prove a direct influence, Derrida’s reading of the theme of the face in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas reveals some remarkable analogies with the vocabulary of the faceless god of metamorphosis in Calasso’s pages on Olympia and Dodona. Using words that would not sound unfamiliar to a beholder of the Phidian Zeus, as described by Calasso, Derrida noted that in Levinas ‘La face de Dieu se dérobe à jamais en se montrant.’<sup>48</sup> ‘La face de Dieu qui commande en se cachant, est

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<sup>45</sup> Heidegger may be an influence here, as much as Nietzsche and Derrida. Heidegger’s critique of the traditional concepts of metaphysics, influenced by Nietzsche and Husserl, had focused on the vocabulary associated with Western metaphysics. The concept of *being* as elaborated by the Greek philosophical tradition and subsequently by Western thinkers up to Hegel, is subjected by Heidegger to an exercise of ‘unveiling’, which reveals its limitations and relativity.

<sup>46</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, VII, 514 and ff.

<sup>47</sup> Derrida, ‘La pharmacie de Platon’, p. 101.

<sup>48</sup> Derrida, ‘Violence et métaphysique’, in *L’écriture et la différence*, Seuil, Paris, 1967, pp.117- 228, p. 160.

à la fois plus et moins visage que les visages,<sup>49</sup> he added, a few lines later, conjuring up an image of god at the end of patriarchy very similar to that of the Olympian Zeus, before wondering whether Levinas would subscribe to Jabès's comment: « Tous les visages sont le Sien; c'est pourquoi IL n'a pas de visage ».»<sup>50</sup>

Whilst it could be argued that Derrida and Calasso are simply both attracted to a certain type of Judaism, Derrida's words may work as a clue to the reason for Calasso's fascination with the faceless *pāter* of the gods. Summarizing Levinas's philosophy, he continues: 'Le visage n'est ni la face de Dieu ni la figure de l'homme : il en est la ressemblance. Une ressemblance qu'il nous faudrait pourtant penser ayant ou sans le secours du Même.'<sup>51</sup>

Thus Calasso's Zeus, distant from the patriarchal image of the king of the gods, faceless, and wordless, may be simultaneously revealing and concealing the reason for Calasso's unacknowledged fascination with poststructuralism. 'Otherness', as foregrounded by deconstruction, may be the medium for allowing the return of the gods and their father in *post-storia*. For the proof we need to look no further than to Dodona itself.

### **III. c Dodona's naming and the fleetingness of *apparire***

Omitting Santillana's interesting presentation of this oak as a type of 'cosmic tree', Calasso recounts, referencing Herodotus, that the sanctuary of Dodona was the place

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

where the gods had been given their names, whilst the earliest inhabitants of the Greek mainland, the Pelasgian, had revered them in silence:

Ora, un qualche navigante aveva portato con sé dall'Egitto i nomi degli dei. Ma era giusto usarli? Ed erano, quei nomi ignoti, i nomi appropriati? La quercia rispose che quei nomi erano giusti e che era giusto usarli. Zeus è il dio che lascia nominare gli altri dei. Zeus è il dio che lascia apparire.[...] I Pelasgi passarono da un omaggio muto agli dei ad un omaggio dove li evocavano con nomi stranieri, di cui nulla sapevano.<sup>52</sup>

The text shows that the adoption of the gods' foreign names is endorsed by Zeus, god of *apparire*, who lets the other gods appear by being turned into words. The name warrants the appearance of the gods, yet the emphasis on foreignness underlines that the naming, allowed by Zeus, in typical poststructuralist fashion,<sup>53</sup> reveals and conceals at the same time. Naming and language are nothing but 'otherness,' the 'otherness' that lets the gods be.

The text also suggests that the experience of these gods may well be one of *différence*, with a previous name or with a previous nameless phase. When discussing the transmission of the 'storie cretesi' – a term which Calasso may owe to Colli's translation of the pre-Socratic philosopher Epimenides<sup>54</sup> – Calasso recounts that in the Cretan linear B tablets we can find names of deities, unknown to classical Greece. The author suggests that their attributes and sphere of influence were potentially assimilated by one or more of the surviving gods, during the 'dislocazione del sacrificio' – another instance of Derridean *différence*, the transmission of the gods from Crete to Athens. Names on Cretan clay tablets are all that survives of these gods, notes the author, 'come

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<sup>52</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 354.

<sup>53</sup> As shown for example in Derrida's discussion of proper names, in Jacques Derrida, 'Des Tours de Babel', *Psyché : inventions de l'autre*, Paris, Galilée, pp. 203-235.

<sup>54</sup> Colli, *La sapienza greca*, Vol.II, p. 63

se gli Olimpi fossero stati un tempo molto più numerosi e portassero con sé l'ombra di quei divini fratelli scomparsi.<sup>55</sup> If the Zeus presiding over Dodona allows the other gods to be named with foreign different names, the clay tablets of Zeus's Cretan birthplace reveal that 'difference' is always already inscribed in all of the Olympians, and that, having absorbed qualities of other gods without carrying on their names, the signifier of the Olympians names can never coincide perfectly with their signified.

To add to this Saussurean intimation, if Phidias's statue showed that Zeus cannot be looked at like a statue of a single being, but as a totality, and if metamorphosis shows that totality, being about becoming, about constant transformation, is as much about form as it is about its opposite, I would suggest that Dodona – the oracle where Zeus is not precisely an oak, but the movement of an oak's branches in the wind – is the other side of the coin of Olympia. The use of a vocabulary echoing that of his description of Phidias's statue, particularly the obsessive repetition of the word 'supporto', confirm that for Calasso as well, these two representations of Zeus have to be tackled simultaneously:

Sino al quinto secolo, Zeus non ebbe un tempio a Dodona, il più antico degli oracoli. Il centro del santuario era una quercia [...] Zeus non ha carattere, è il supporto di ogni carattere. Come la sua statua in Olimpia era il supporto di tutte le forme, sue parassite, così il suo luogo accoglie ogni possibile luogo. E la sua voce, lo stormire della quercia, è la più vicina all'indifferenziato, quella che sulla terra più ricorda il mare.[...] Zeus è il qualsiasi, supporto dell'unico. L'unico non sussiste senza il suo supporto. Ma il supporto può sussistere da solo. [...] Il supporto tende ad essere indifferente, perché tutto su di lui riposa.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 23.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 354-355.

The Dodona god, as presented in *Le nozze*, is the ultimate *indécidable*, pure fleetingness of leaves in the wind, or, like the sea, a constant *metamorphosis*. From Olympia to Dodona to the Cretan hill where as a bull he seduces Europa, Calasso's Zeus appears to mark the gap between 'being' and 'appearance,' thus the 'difference' between presence and re-presentation, philosophy and literature, and to celebrate, with Foucault, the appearance of 'l'être meme du langage,'<sup>57</sup> that 'n'apparaît pour lui-même que dans la disparition du sujet.'<sup>58</sup>

#### **IV. Zeus and the mythology of the Milky Way**

##### **IV.a 'Ninfa immortale' – The *corona* of myth**

Through the portrayal of the Dodona oak, Calasso may have taken Warburg's influence to extreme consequences, by foregrounding the 'otherness' of Zeus through subversive reminders of the *pāter's* nymphidic, and therefore feminine, nature. Being nymphs traditionally associated with woods and vegetation, emphasis on Zeus as a plant, and on the leaves of the Dodona oak shaken by the wind, may be argued to betray a desire on Calasso's part to bring to light a feminine, Warburgian, Zeus. The same could be argued for the choice to liken Zeus to a sea, as water is the other traditional nymphidic element, as noted in 'La follia'. It is remarkable that in his re-writing of the Dodona oracle Calasso has chosen to omit the reference to Zeus's feminine alter ego Dione, who

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<sup>57</sup> Michel Foucault, 'La pensée du dehors', *Dits et écrits, I, 1954-1975*, pp. 546-567, p. 567.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 549

according to Kerényi – an author Calasso knows well and published for Adelphi<sup>59</sup> – ruled over Dodona with him.<sup>60</sup> Whilst we may read this as an attempt to repress the feminine markers at Dodona, in my view Calasso did not find it necessary to foreground them through separate images, as in his representation of Dodona the feminine markers were assimilated by Zeus. Further representations of the *pāter* support this.

Femininity could be argued to mark the Olympian Zeus, ‘pietra caduta dal cielo’, which being ‘tutto’, could also be ‘ninfa’, through the macro-metaphor of the garland. Instead of a sceptre, symbol of patriarchal power, or of the thunderbolt of Olympian iconography, Zeus wears ‘una corona d’olivo’ and also carries in his right hand ‘una Nike con un nastro e una corona.’<sup>61</sup> Whilst the olive crown is the sign of the Olympic winners, and Nike may be seen as their deity, the feminine, nymphidic imagery of the garland appears to strongly mark this Phidian Zeus. Thus, even the statue that added something new to human religion suggests the ‘undecidability’ between the *pāter* of Greek mythology and his traditional *autrui*, the seduced nymph, carrying her garland.

The garland is a corrosive symbol in the hand of a Platonic metaphysical *pāter*, as ‘Nel cinto di Afrodite, nella corona, nel corpo di Elena, il bello si sovrappone alla necessità, avvolgendola nell’inganno.’<sup>62</sup> The Olympian Zeus, whose description is marked by the triple insertion of the symbol of the garland, and explicitly defined as ‘essenza del politeismo,’ can be argued, not only carry a crown, but to be the crown par excellence, the garland of all other gods and their ‘cycles of stories,’ thus ultimately of myth itself. The Taurean Zeus of metamorphosis and mimesis, the Zeus of Dodona, the Zeus of Olympia, all seem to agree in making of Zeus, rather than the *pāter*, the embodiment of

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<sup>59</sup> Kerényi’s *Dioniso* was published in 1992. Karl Kerényi, *Dioniso*, Adelphi, Milan, 1992 (1976)

<sup>60</sup> Karl Kerényi, *The gods of the Greeks*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1958, p. 60.

<sup>61</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 196.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

the discourse on myth: ‘Il regno di Zeus sono le storie greche, di cui ancora facciamo parte.’<sup>63</sup>

A critical reading of Calasso’s Zeus as embodiment of mythological discourse needs to take into account other sections of the text that also foreground the god’s femininity, and deconstruct him through a further, subversive, astral incarnation. This astral incarnation has to be reviewed in the context of the *Heracleotic knot*, the image – which also haunts *Ka*<sup>64</sup> – of the mysterious embrace between two ‘serpenti annodati’<sup>65</sup> Chronos Ageraos (‘Tempo-senza-vecchiaia’) and Ananke, two deities of the time before Zeus. In Calasso’s reading, of all the Olympians, only Zeus, *pāter*, and supplanter of Chronos,<sup>66</sup> witnessed this embrace, when he swallowed Phanes, the *protogonos*, offspring of the *Heracleotic knot*, whose image [‘il volto di un dio, il primo volto che rivelò che cosa è il volto di un dio’<sup>67</sup>] has haunted Zeus ever since.<sup>68</sup>

Calasso’s statement that ‘Zeus è *phanaios*, colui che appare’<sup>69</sup> – thus the god who makes ‘present’, in a philosophical sense – acquires new sense in the light of his relationship with his precursor Phanaios. During the description of the swallowing of

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>64</sup> In *Ka* the embrace is between two trees, the tree of life and the tree of knowledge: ‘La prima delle storie è vegetale e non ha sviluppo. È l’intrecciarsi di due alberi, il loro coito perenne; immobile.[...] Ogni immagine del dio allacciato alla sua paredra [...] ripete la firma dei due alberi intrecciati, come se due figure dalle membra umane fossero state espulse dall’intrico di quelle fronde e, mescolandosi, tendessero a formarle di nuovo.’ Id., *Ka*, p. 389. Calasso continues, revealing the Warburgian ascendancy of his fascination with this image: ‘In tutte le storie, risalendo indietro, molto indietro, fino a quel punto in cui scompare ogni orizzonte, si trova un serpente, l’albero e l’acqua. O è un serpente che copre con le sue spire una sorgente. O è un grumo, un nodo vagante sulle acque, un cuscino circolare che accoglie un corpo divino e scivola tra le onde. O è un serpente attorcigliato attorno a un tronco che esce dall’acqua.’ Id., *Ka*, p. 389.

<sup>65</sup> *Le nozze*, p. 228.

<sup>66</sup> Interestingly, even though ‘Tempo’ in Greek is ‘Chronos’, Calasso avoids making of Tempo-senza-vecchiaia the father of Zeus.

<sup>67</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 228.

<sup>68</sup> ‘Per Zeus la nostalgia di Phanes si fissò nella figura del serpente.’ Ibid., p. 228.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 277.



Phanes – who, according to Colli’s studies on Orphism, was ‘dio maschio e femmina’<sup>70</sup> – *Le nozze* explicitly declares the *pāter*’s femininity: ‘Era maschio, ma era anche una Ninfa immortale.’<sup>71</sup> *Le nozze* dedicates ample space to playing with different faces of the myth of the faceless goddess of the ‘heracleotic knot,’ Ananke, who is not only a nymphidic figure, but also a goddess of necessity, whose ‘vincolo inflessibile’, ‘che stringe circolarmente il mondo’, ‘è coperto da una fascia screziata, che possiamo vedere nel cielo come Via Lattea,’<sup>72</sup> a conclusion that echoes de Santillana’s *Hamlet’s mill*.

By virtue of his Phidian incarnation, the ‘absolute reader’ can conclude the ‘undecidability’ between Zeus encrusted with garlands and Ananke – thus between the god and the *crown* par excellence, the Milky Way, defined, as we have already seen at page 146, ‘fosciacca bianca sfrangiata [...], cinto di una gigantessa.’<sup>73</sup> This calling into question of the sexuality of Zeus, and of the Milky Way itself, finds an echo in Derrida’s ‘La double séance,’ a reading of one of Calasso’s favourite authors, Mallarmé, where the philosopher notes that the Milky Way – ‘voie lactée’ – can be seen as both feminine and masculine.<sup>74</sup>

#### **IV.b Mythography – The *variante* and the Milky Way**

Rather than temptingly employ the idea of firmament to anchor the gods and the meaning of their tales in the immobility of an Aristotelean-Ptolemaic sky, Calasso uses the imagery of the Milky Way to emphasise the state of flux of Zeus/garland/discourse and his tales. Yet Calasso does not appear to stop at emphasizing the fluidity of oral

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<sup>70</sup> Colli, *La sapienza greca*, Vol.I, p. 40.

<sup>71</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 227.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 314.

<sup>74</sup> Derrida, ‘La double séance’, pp. 335-336, note 61.

*logos*, but appears specifically bent on highlighting the fluidity of even written tales, of *mitografia* as well as *mitologia*.

*Le nozze* makes only veiled references to the link between writing and the astral origin of myth. However, both *Ka*, and *Kasch* emphasise, like Plato and Derrida, that the etymology of firmament reveals that the ancients saw in the disposition of planets and stars a form of writing, and foreground a link between the firmament, as “writing in the sky”, and the writing of man: ‘In Oriente, da giochi complessi fondati sull’astronomia si sviluppò una specie di stenografia che divenne poi l’alfabeto.’<sup>75</sup> ‘Absolute literature’ marks then the moment when ‘Il «dono di raccontare» [...] si sostituisce alla «scrittura del cielo».’<sup>76</sup> Behind every mythology, the author explains, is the perception of an astral cycle, a cycle ‘scritto nel cielo, nel ritorno delle costellazioni.’<sup>77</sup> This astral cycle, ‘lenta’ rotazione,’ is a repetitive movement, and this repetition opens up ‘il cielo dei significati,’ as each rotation generates a different version of the same myth: ‘Il repertorio dei gesti è limitato, i significati sono inesauribili. Così le stesse storie si ripetono e variano perchè ogni volta si scopra, in una lenta rotazione, una nuova terra e un nuovo cielo dei significati. E appunto nel cielo era stata osservata per la prima volta quella rotazione.’<sup>78</sup>

Read together with the quote below, these statements take the absolute reader to a Borgesian universe, where not only meaning is to be negotiated amongst different *varianti* of the same story, but even the stars connected to the story are in constant movement, and thus, despite following a cycle, they cannot be seen as giving any stability of meaning to the tales. If even the stars are in flux, and thus fleeting appearance, rather than full presence, Zeus is, aptly, their god.

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<sup>75</sup> De Santillana, *Il mulino di Amleto*, p. 27.

<sup>76</sup> Calasso, *Kasch*, p. 173.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275.

<sup>78</sup> *Id.*, *Ka*, p. 73.

Appena lo si afferra, il mito si espande in un ventaglio dai molti spicchi. Qui la variante è l'origine. Ogni atto avvenne in questo modo, oppure in quest'altro, oppure in quest'altro. E in ciascuna di tali storie divergenti si riflettono le altre, tutte ci sfiorano come lembi della stessa stoffa.<sup>79</sup>

These remarks, made, almost incidentally, after a discussion of the myth of Daphne, suggests that, as *crown* and Milky Way, Zeus – if he is origin – is origin not because he is father but because, like the nymph, he is 'difference'. The passage below, already discussed at page 145, can now be read under a new light.

Unici nel Mediterraneo, i Greci non si trasmettevano le loro storie attraverso un'autorità sacerdotale. Erano storie erratiche, e anche per questo si imbrogliavano così facilmente. I Greci si abituarono, come a un fatto normale, a udire le stesse storie raccontate con intrecci diversi. E non c'era un'autorità ultima, a cui riferirsi, per sapere qual'era la versione giusta. Omero era l'ultimo nome evocabile: ma Omero non aveva raccontato tutte le storie.<sup>80</sup>

Interestingly, the fleetingness of the 'storie erratiche', 'che vivono da sole' of myth is connected explicitly to the figure of Zeus:

La fuga dei miti dal rito ricordava le continue imprese adulterine di Zeus. Con quelle incursioni, colui che era il padre di Dike, e la faceva sedere sul trono...svela di essere "contrario alla giustizia" e di covare pensieri "contrari all'ordine"...Le incursioni divine erano un improvviso sovrabbondare della realtà. Così, rispetto alla scabra coazione rituale, la storia era un continuo traboccare di cui poi rimanevano visibili i relitti: i personaggi.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Id., *Le nozze*, p. 172.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., pp. 313-314.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 314.

Rather than a patriarchal guarantor of hierarchy and order, Zeus appears as *absolutus*, free of any duty to justice, hierarchy, or ritual, so as the embodiment of mythology as ‘absolute literature’. The arrival, or in Warburg’s terminology, the ‘return’ of Zeus, generates the ‘personaggi’, whose names make up the the constellation of mythology.

## **V. From Phanes to Cadmus – Authorship and secondariness – Zeus in writing**

Derrida in ‘La double séance’ reflects on the etymology of *hymn/hymen* from a verb *uphaino*, which means to ‘weave’, and links weaving and oral poetry (*hymn*), as well as weaving and writing. In the same section he also reflects on the textility/textuality of the veil.<sup>82</sup> Once again, as this text is a commentary on Mallarmé, we may argue satisfactorily that Calasso takes the same influences to similar conclusions, but I find remarkable, nevertheless, that their theoretical vocabulary is stretched in similar semantic and metaphorical directions.

If the ‘undecidability’ between Zeus and the Milky Way/*crown* suggests that Calasso may lean for a reading of Zeus as ‘absolute literature’ and *firmamento*, thus as mythography, the text is scattered with further elements to support a reading of Zeus as at least instrumental to the writing of myth.

### **V.a Phanes – On authorship**

Through the garlands marking his bovine metamorphosis, the garland of his various metamorphoses throughout *Le nozze*, the triple insertion of the metaphor of the garland

in the description of Phidias's statue and through the insistence on the idea of *support* throughout the discussion of the faceless Dodona Zeus, Calasso suggests a reading of Zeus as a unifying force, a 'tutto'. This 'tutto' could be seen as authorial force, even though fragmented, – the Olympian image of the 'supporto' pullulating with beings conveys this powerfully – authorial *persona*.

Calasso may, either consciously or sub-consciously, intend the absolute reader to interpret the great 'appearances' of Zeus (the metamorphic bull, the Olympian statue, and the Dodona oak) jointly with the tale of Phanes, whose name in Greek is etimologically linked to *apparire*, and reveals an obvious similarity with the epithet of Zeus *phanaios*. Phanes, 'il Protogonos, il primo nato tra i sovrani del mondo', 'la chiave della mente' – born, like Prajāpati, the Hindu father god, in 'un guscio d'oro', and who, like Jahweh, generates through his voice,<sup>83</sup> is presented as a creator, a choice which draws attention to an authorial side of Zeus, who re-creates the world after Phanes.

It is worth noting that Calasso's interest in this obscure divinity from the pre-Olympian age – while he only incidentally alludes to the traditional story of the dethronisation of Zeus' biological father Chronos – may have been inspired by Colli,<sup>84</sup> who had highlighted Phanes' role in Orphism,<sup>85</sup> and who saw Orphism not as a religion, but as poetical practice/performance, included in the mysteric ritual at Eleusi.

Zeus's authorial role is almost incidentally highlighted through a reflection on Plato's damnation of the artist in the *Republic*. Calasso states that the Republic expelled both men and the Homeric gods, and that the man to be expelled was not precisely a poet, but a man capable of metamorphosis, 'uomo capace di trasformarsi sapientemente

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<sup>82</sup> Derrida, 'La double séance', pp. 261-263.

<sup>83</sup> Calasso, *Ka*, p. 36.

<sup>84</sup> Colli, *La sapienza greca*, Vol. I, p. 41.

<sup>85</sup> Sembra ormai pacifico che ciò cui le fonti vogliono alludere con varie indicazioni, "Orfeo", "il teologo", "I seguaci di Orfeo", "cose orfiche", eccetera, non è altro – in primo luogo – se non poesia. Id., *La sapienza greca*, vol. I, p. 35.

in tutto', a statement making Zeus, 'lord of metamorphosis', the author par excellence. However, both the metamorphic, Olympian, and Dodona representations, and that of the swallower of Phanes, allow the reader to simultaneously identify and undo Zeus as an authorial figure, in poststructuralist fashion. For example, we could argue that Phidias' statue, whilst conveying an idea of Zeus as author of mythology, points to him as its subject matter, and as the discourse about it at the same time. A reflection is needed on Calasso's choice of making his absolute reader experience Zeus through the description of Zeus's statue, rather than through Zeus directly. There may be a reminiscence of the blinding sun-god of the Platonic cave myth, which can only be contemplated indirectly,<sup>86</sup> however the casting of Zeus as a statue also suggests 'undecidability' between Zeus the author of mythology, Zeus as expression/discourse on mythology, as the statue itself, and Zeus as artistic subject matter, for Phidias.

Similarly in the tale of Phanes, Zeus is both the creator of a new world and the creature of Phanes, and we can argue that the swallowing of Phanes is also the moment of deconstruction of the 'anthological' Zeus. It simultaneously places him inside and outside mythology, playing his role as master and author of the Greek tales off against his role of character in it, and as role of the discourse around this mythology, which *Zeus phanaios* makes appear.

Alongside this deconstruction of the authorship of Zeus in the light of the debate on the 'death of the author,' the contemporariness of Calasso's presentation of Zeus as artist can be seized in his creative use of Colli's studies on the Orphic Phanes. This is particularly evident in his choice of foregrounding as Zeus' first action, after doing away with his artistic precursor, the re-generation of Night and the generation of Uranus and Gaia.<sup>87</sup> The emphasis on Zeus as the new Phanes, the fagocitator of creatures of the

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<sup>86</sup> A myth haunting both Nietzsche and Derrida

<sup>87</sup> *Le nozze*, pp. 228-229.

past, which he will have to re-generate identical, makes of Zeus, in *Le nozze*, a re-creator, or, if we prefer, a creator in the sense epitomized in Borges's seminal 'Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote', rather than a Romantic, original *pater-auctor*. Calasso's authorial Zeus, marked by repetition and secondariness, becoming, is very similar to the Talleyrand in *Kash*, the master of *stile* and the *colpo di pollice*.

### **V.b Cadmus and the *mythography* of Zeus**

Both the fagocitation of Phanes, the reflection on Phidias' statue, and Calasso's fascinating pages on the Dodona oracle sanction the secondariness of Zeus in another extremely interesting direction, by implicitly playing them against the Jewish creation myth, which from the Renaissance onward formed the basis for the theory of the godlike author.

If Jahweh, never mentioned in *Le nozze*, creates the world through speech (*logos*), Calasso's Dodona Zeus creates the other gods not by naming them but, indirectly by allowing them to be named. The Olympia pages (discussed from page 174), with the emphasis on Zeus faceless/silent *supporto* of the gods and heroes, mark Zeus with the same character of indirectedness. One is tempted to read Zeus not simply as the god that lets other gods be named in Dodona, but also sculpted in Olympia. From both readings, rather than metaphysical origin or originator, the Zeus of *Le nozze* emerges as always secondary, mediated, re-presented in agreement with the interpretation given at page 191.

This secondariness is in my view the key indicator that Calasso does not only aim to make Zeus the garland of oral mythological discourse, but of its inscription as well, even though this operation subjects Zeus *pāter* to further subversion. It is very

tempting to read Calasso's pages on the faceless god of Dodona and Olympia in the light of Derrida's reading of Plato's *Phaedrus*, where he reflects on the disappearance of the face of the *pāter*, and states: 'La disparition de la face est le mouvement de la différance qui ouvre violemment l'écriture ou, si l'on veut, qui s'ouvre à l'écriture et que s'ouvre l'écriture.'<sup>88</sup>

Once again whether for a direct influence or because of frequentation of the same sources, there appears to be an analogy in the way the two authors treat their patriarchal symbols. Derrida may be making diegetically explicit what Calasso consigns to mimesis and re-presentation, to knowledge through 'absolute literature'. The disappearance of the face opens up for the astral Zeus of *Le nozze* the 'crown' and the 'firmament', allows Zeus to come back as the support of the other gods and other heroes, to let them be nominated – and inscribed.

At the twilight of metaphysics, at the end of the era of philosophical *logos*, the space of 'absolute literature' is in the disappearance of the face and its replacement with the constellation, with the alphabet inspired by the writing in the sky. To show how Calasso confers on Zeus the ultimate 'undecidability', that of being touched by writing, a good starting point is the tale, specular to Europa's, of her brother Cadmus, with which *Le nozze* ends.

It could be argued that through the 'undecidable' relationship with Europa-nymph, Zeus can be seen as *mythology*, as discourse on myth. Through his relationship with Cadmus, her monster-slayer brother, he instead becomes *mythography*, thus inscription of myth. After all, Europa seals her abduction by trusting an oral message to the winds and the seas, whilst Cadmus sanctions his ruin in Zeus, which is also his glory, by scattering on the Greek soil the letters of that alphabet, in which all tales, including that of Europa, will be transferred and, in Derrida's terms, differed/deferred.

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<sup>88</sup> Derrida, 'La pharmacie de Platon', pp. 208-209



Cadmus's story is intertwined with that of Zeus, in a series of events that lend themselves to different readings, and that are all easily read under the sign of *grammē*. The narration of the clash between Zeus and Tifeo can be decoded in authorial-patriarchal terms. This is the only tale in the book in which Zeus is clearly represented with one of his traditional power symbols, the thunderbolt, yet the story catches the *pāter* when he has just lost the emblem of Olympian power to Typhon. However, Zeus' main fear when overthrown by the Titan is of an artistic nature: he 'temeva anche l'«Ellade, madre di miti», che avrebbe potuto rimescolare le sue favole e trasferire a Tifeo quei dolci epiteti della sovranità di cui Zeus godeva.'<sup>89</sup> Zeus, the god who in Dodona allowed the *apparire* through nomination of the other gods, is afraid of losing his own names, and only secures his own epithet, thus his own nomination, his grip on mythology, by recovering the thunderbolt with the help of the mortal Cadmus. Cadmus, the hero who planned Thebae like an astral map, is also the man who brought the alphabet to Greece, thus allowing for mythology to be put in writing, and for mythography- 'absolute literature' to be born.

Yet Calasso's re-writing of the tale of Cadmus opens Zeus up to further 'undecidability'. Zeus's fear of losing his own names confirms a suspicion that already arose during my reading of all the images of Zeus as 'frieze' in the sky. Because of his nature of 'support' and 'crown,' as the god allowing nomination, and appearance through nomination, and because of the importance attached by Zeus himself to the loss of his epithet, we could argue that Calasso's is a Zeus of the age of the twilight of the

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<sup>89</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 425.

gods. This god would be nothing else than name(s), purely his own linguistic ‘supporto’, even though this ‘supporto’, allowing the magic of literature, our only communion with the gods.

But even in his names, Zeus appears to be ‘difference’, and repetition. The traditionally accepted etymology of Zeus as god of the daylight sky<sup>90</sup> makes of *Zeus phanaios* a repetition, but also creates a space for a play of ‘difference’ between the name of Zeus as a sky god, the name of Zeus as *morphē* and appearance, and the name of Zeus *pāter* as origin. Like Derrida’s Babel, Calasso’s Zeus, ‘divisé, bifide, ambivalent, polysémique [...] déconstruits.’<sup>91</sup> Yet, Calasso may argue that ‘difference’ is the appropriate space for the leap of faith in a god only to be experienced in books, as emerges from these lines, already referenced at page 147:

Noi non dobbiamo rimpiangere troppo di aver perduto molti segreti del mito, anche se dobbiamo educarci a percepirne la mancanza, il vasto indecifrato [...] Non solo non vediamo più le Sirene, ma non distinguiamo più i cieli. Eppure. Eppure in quella stoffa tagliuzzata, in quelle storie monche degli dei, possiamo ancora avvolgerci. E dentro il mondo, come dentro la nostra mente, quella stoffa continua a tessersi.<sup>92</sup>

If we want to push the interpretation of this *Zeus phanaios*, creature and creator,

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<sup>90</sup> See for example the entry ‘Zeus’ in wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zeus> (visited) on 10/11/2006: ‘Zeus, poetically referred to by the vocative *Zeus pāter* ("O, father Zeus"), is a continuation of \**Djēus*, the Proto-Indo-European god of the daytime sky, also called \**Dyeus ph<sub>2</sub>tēr* ("Sky Father").<sup>[1]</sup> The god is known under this name in Sanskrit (cf. *Dyaus/Dyaus Pita*), Latin (cf. *Jupiter*, from *Iuppiter*, deriving from the PIE vocative \**dyeu-ph<sub>2</sub>tēr*<sup>[2]</sup>), deriving from the basic form \**dyeu-* ("to shine", and in its many derivatives, "sky, heaven, god").<sup>[1]</sup> And in Germanic and Norse mythology (cf. \**Tīwaz* > OHG *Ziu*, ON *Týr*), together with Latin *deus* ("deity, god") and *dīvus* ("godly") and *Dis* (a variation of *dīves*, meaning "wealthy, blessed"<sup>[3]</sup>), from the related noun \**deiwos*.<sup>[3]</sup> To the Greeks and Romans, the god of the sky was also the supreme god, whereas this function was filled out by Odin among the Germanic tribes. Accordingly, they did not identify Zeus/Jupiter with either Tyr or Odin, but with Thor(Þórr). Zeus is the only deity in the Olympic pantheon whose name has such a transparent Indo-European etymology.’ This etymology is known to both Colli and Calasso. See *La sapienza greca*, Vol. III, p.161, and Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 123.

<sup>91</sup> Derrida, ‘Des Tours de Babel’, p. 207.

<sup>92</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 315.

garland/snake of mythography, under the sign of postmodern irony, we can however come to another equally interesting conclusion. The ‘undecidability’ which marks the representations of Zeus can be extended and in a way resolved, if we agree to see his ‘colpo di pollice’ as that of a publisher (simultaneously reader and re-writer/re-printer of mythology. As Calasso notes in ‘L’editoria come genere letterario’, ‘tutti i libri pubblicati da un certo editore potevano essere visti come anelli di un’unica catena, o segmenti di un serpente di libri, o frammenti di un singolo libro formato da tutti i libri pubblicati da quell’editore.’<sup>93</sup>

Is it as *autore* or as *editore* that Calasso’s self-reflexive Zeus performs the Babelian feat of deconstructing (itself)? The answer, as in Calasso’s life, is likely to be *indécidable*.

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<sup>93</sup> Id., ‘L’editoria come genere letterario’, pp. 118-119.

## Chapter VII

### Apollo and *enigma*

#### [Abstract]

In this chapter, I will demonstrate how Calasso deconstructs Apollo as son of Zeus, and as brother of Dionysus, and that this deconstruction allows the author the *mise en scène* of different facets of an authorial figure, thus foregrounding different aspects of ‘absolute literature’.

I will attempt a re-reading of Calasso’s portrayal of the ‘frieze in the sky’ named Apollo as his re-writing of a *mito innominato* of this deity – whose content can at least partially be identified in ‘La follia che viene dalle Ninfe’. Through the lens of some of Derrida’s texts I will demonstrate that this re-writing conjures up Apollo as a macro-metaphor, capable of similar, as well as different, effects from Zeus-garland.

I will reflect on Calasso’s representation of the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi and his oracle, in which I will identify the embodiment of the power of ‘writing,’ a bridge between the ‘metaphysics of presence’ and ‘absolute literature’. My objective will be to highlight that Calasso’s re-writing of the figure of Apollo appears preoccupied with a number of poststructuralist issues, such as ‘difference’, dissemination of meaning, the relationship between patriarchy and ‘otherness’ and their potential ‘undecidability’.

## I. The secret of Zeus

### La Apollo as frieze in the sky

If Zeus is linked in *Le nozze* with discordant astral images, the book's treatment of the astral symbology surrounding Apollo is less ambiguous. Calasso pays homage to the solar, hyperborean Apollo, by re-writing Apollonius' famous lines on the appearance of the *Apollo of the Dawn* to the Argonauts.<sup>1</sup> Being familiar with Apollonius, the author is aware that, at least from the age of Euripides,<sup>2</sup> Apollo and Helios-Sun were confused, and that, in Hellenistic times, Apollo became one with the sun god.

He tends however to associate Apollo more frequently with light and fire. Whilst there may be an influence of Kerényi,<sup>3</sup> who treats Apollo as different from the sun-god Elio, the choice of not emphasising Apollo's solar connection may betray the attempt to reflect on an "anomaly" of Greek mythology, which deeply affects Calasso's portrayal of this god. As discussed in Derrida's *Dissémination*, centered on the god of writing of Platonic mythology, in a number of mythological systems, including the Egyptian, the sun god is also the *pāter*. Instead, in Greek mythology, the sun god is a son, subordinated to the *pāter*. *Le nozze*, whilst not openly discussing the patriarchal implications of Apollo's solar connection, employs the sign of Apollo to hint to the subversion of the order of Zeus: 'Nel segreto, in un segreto a cui è rarissimo persino che

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<sup>1</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 363.

<sup>2</sup> The earliest certain reference to Apollo identified with the sun titan Helios appears in a surviving fragment of Euripides' play *Phaethon* in a speech near the end (fr 781 N<sup>2</sup>). See the entry on 'Helios' in wikipedia, at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helios#External\\_links](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helios#External_links), visited on 14/03/2008. It is also worth considering the pages Robert Graves dedicates to Helios and Apollo. Graves stresses the subordination of the early Helios – prior to the identification with Apollo – to the goddess of the moon. Apollo would have defeated Helios and taken over his role, thus also marking the defeat of matriarchal religion. See Graves, *The Greek myths*, pp. 156 and ff. Whilst Calasso does not refer to these pages, they may be useful background to his treatment of Apollo.

<sup>3</sup> Kerényi's works *The gods of the Greeks* (1958) and *The heroes of the Greeks* (1959) have influenced the author of *Le nozze*. Calasso explicitly acknowledges a debt to him. See Calasso, *La letteratura*, p.17.

si alluda, Apollo è per Zeus ciò che Zeus era stato per Crono,<sup>4</sup> states Calasso, who then clarifies:

Sino a quel punto si spingono le storie: ma, per ogni mito narrato, c'è un mito non narrato e innominato che gli accenna dall'ombra, affiorando per allusioni, schegge, coincidenze, senza che mai un autore osi raccontarlo di seguito come una singola storia. E qui il «figlio più forte del padre» non deve nascere perché è già presente: è Apollo. Nel perpetuo convito olimpico si guardavano un padre e un figlio fra i quali scintillava, invisibile a tutti ma non a loro, il falchetto dentato con cui Crono aveva reciso i testicoli a Urano.<sup>5</sup>

This is a remarkable statement: the opposition between Apollo and Zeus emerges in the inscription of *mitologia*. Furthermore, it emerges through fragments ['schegge e allusioni'], and this emergence makes the 'mito innominato' of Apollo an opportunity for inscription to exercise the power of poststructuralist dissemination, through the play of 'variation. 'Calasso, who appears to firmly anchor the appearance and power of Apollo within language, at the same time, in a game of *mise en abîme*, questions mythology as the discourse of Zeus. Linguistic 'schegge' reveal that the 'crown' of Zeus cannot be read, without simultaneously dealing with a parallel and secret story, which appears to put Zeus' mythology 'under erasure'.

Even though *Le nozze* never shows Apollo displacing Zeus, the power struggle between Zeus and Apollo appears forever under way, as shown in the quote above, and as 'always already' – in Derrida's terms – resolved in favour of 'il figlio più forte del padre', as can be inferred from the passage below:

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<sup>4</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 94.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

Da Zeus si dipartono due linee di discendenza sovrana: Dioniso e Apollo. Quella di Dioniso è la più oscura, e solo a tratti affiora. In Dioniso, serpente e toro, si ricapitola tutta la storia sino a Zeus, e si riapre. La linea di Apollo è più appariscente, ma ancor più coperta dal segreto là dove si tocca la trasgressione di Apollo contro il padre. Apollo non è serpente e toro, ma colui che uccide serpente e toro.<sup>6</sup>

As Zeus is both *snake* and *bull*, the reader – driven to question the patriarchal status of Zeus through the tales centering on the *pāter* himself – is led to wonder whether the order of Zeus may already have been subverted.

### **I.b Mythology *under erasure*?**

*Pur* è il nome umano di Apollo (il senza nome). Zeus è il suo nome divino.<sup>7</sup>

Apollo and Zeus are connected through the symbology of fire, which textures the book. Calasso, under the influence of Colli's re-reading of Plutarch,<sup>8</sup> turns this symbology into a trail for the decoding of Apollo's relationship with Zeus *pāter*. Calasso's claim that Apollo and Dionysus are the children more dangerously close to supplanting Zeus should be reviewed through the filter of this symbology, and particularly through *Le nozze*'s two symmetric tales of incineration, both drawing attention to mastery/patriarchy issues. Coronis was incinerated for betraying Apollo with a mortal stranger, possibly Theseus, while pregnant with the god's son Esculapius, who is miraculously saved. Incineration, directed against a feminine element, affects a relation

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 237.

<sup>7</sup> Colli, *La sapienza greca*, Vol. III, p. 154.

<sup>8</sup> Plutarch, *De Ap.Delph*, 389c, quoted in Colli, *La sapienza greca*, Vol.III, p. 154.

of filiation, a structure which is repeated later in the tale of Semele, Zeus' lover and mother of Dionysus, also incinerated, and whose son was also miraculously saved.<sup>9</sup>

If fire in *Le nozze* affects filial/sexual relationships, it is explicitly linked to disobedience and subversion: 'Il fuoco del cielo divampa su chi sta uscendo dal recinto dell'umano', and 'Fuori dal tracciato di ciò che è ammesso, c'è il fuoco.'<sup>10</sup> Whilst these words are explicitly connected to humans such as Prometheus and Odysseus, they may also be read as a commentary on the disobedience of the *discendenza sovrana* of Apollo – and Dionysus. Thus, through the symbology of fire, Calasso reveals that he plays off Zeus and Apollo. Similarly, Derrida plays off a son and a father-king in 'La pharmacie de Platon', where the Egyptian god Thoth-Theuth, the son, 's'oppose à son autre (père, soleil, vie, parole, origine ou orient) mais en le suppléant.'<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, fire in *Le nozze* is also specifically symbolic of creative power, as emerges in the tale of Cadmus, Europa's brother, who saves Zeus by enchanting Typhon<sup>12</sup> through 'la musica giusta' of Apollo. Zeus' salvation through Apollo's music confirms the power struggle between Apollo and Zeus as a creative struggle. Moreover, the fact that Apollo, who knew the 'musica giusta' needed to defeat Typhon, lets Cadmus rescue his father, could be read as filial devotion, but also as a reference to the fact that Apollo, in an oblique way, was already ruling.

Discussing Heidegger's idea of *Sein*, Derrida comments that the philosopher had put 'Being' 'under erasure' – not formally doing away with it, yet showing its 'undecidability' – and maintains that Nietzsche had done the same with *knowing*. Calasso appears to have made a similar gesture, only not towards a philosophical concept, but towards the Greek *pāter*, whose sign, by means of Apollo, can be read as

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<sup>9</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, pp. 76 and 433.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>11</sup> Derrida, 'La pharmacie de Platon', p. 115.

<sup>12</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 423.



simultaneously ruling and deposed. Mythology, far from being only the plural and all-inclusive *discourse* of Zeus, becomes an *indécidable*; it reveals the silent arrival of the age of Apollo, whilst that of Zeus remains formally there, ‘under erasure.’

## II. The herald of metaphysics?

### II.a The god of ‘being’

The deconstruction of Zeus/mythology in the name of Apollo calls into question Western beliefs on philosophy as well as literature. *Le nozze* allows a reading of Apollo as philosopher, as is obvious in the lines below:

Il gesto mitico è un’onda che, nell’infrangersi, disegna un profilo, come i dadi gettati formano un numero. Ma ritirandosi accresce nella risacca la complicazione indominata, e alla fine la commistione, il disordine, da cui nasce un ulteriore gesto mitico. Perciò il mito non ammette sistema. E il sistema stesso è innanzitutto un lembo del manto di un dio, un lascito minore di Apollo.<sup>13</sup>

The claim that ‘il mito non ammette sistema,’ and that *sistema* is ‘un lascito minore di Apollo’, makes of Apollo the opponent of mythology, its metaphysical ‘other.’ The Apollo of *Le nozze* would thus embody, in the trail of Winkelmann, and the Nietzsche of *Die Geburt der Tragödie* and *Dionysische Weltanschauung*,<sup>14</sup> the rational, logical

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 316.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of this theme see Colli, *Scritti di Nietzsche*, p. 25.

side of creativity, as opposed to the irrational Dionysus. Apollo's constant association with light – a theme whose re-reading appears influenced by Colli,<sup>15</sup> as well as by Greek tragedy – in *Le nozze* supports this reading of Apollo as a philosopher god. However, the association of Apollo with light is also an analogy with Derrida, who recognises a 'métaphore de l'ombre et de la lumière (du se-montrer et du se-cacher)' as 'métaphore fondatrice de la philosophie occidentale comme métaphysique,'<sup>16</sup> and in an oracular passage, associates Apollo with light and eyesight: 'Le sens du sens est apollinien par tout ce qui en lui se montre.'<sup>17</sup> The role of Calasso's Apollo as embodiment of Western metaphysics becomes clear in some lines on the oracle of Delphi:

Dall'Oriente erano venute storie più occulte di altre storie. Ma qui di storie non si trattava più. Erano enunciati scarni, in paragone, che imprimevano sulle cose il «sigillo del “ciò che è”». E quel sigillo permaneva chiuso in se stesso, fiero, immobile, come l'epsilon incisa nel tempio di Delfi. Lì per la prima volta i sacerdoti scoprirono come quella conoscenza che è potere non derivi soltanto dalle storie segrete degli dei, ma dal sillogismo ipotetico.<sup>18</sup>

Following Plutarch, Calasso makes Delphi the birthplace of philosophy in Western Europe, and through the reference to the *epsilon*, the birthplace of that 'being,' whose twilight he will passionately follow in Nietzsche and Heidegger. As the god of Delphi, *Le nozze*'s Apollo appears to stand for 'being,' but his representation suggests a 'being' already 'under erasure.' Thus, calling attention to the 'undecidability' between Zeus and Apollo would be an apt commentary, on Calasso's part, on that post-Nietzschean and post-Heideggerian universe, in which postmodern authors and poststructuralist

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<sup>15</sup> Kerényi instead for example in *The gods of the Greeks* took care to dissociate Apollo from the Greek sun god Helios. See Kerényi, *The gods of the Greeks*, p. 168.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Force et signification' in *L'Écriture et la différence* Paris, Seuil, 1967, pp. 9-50, p. 45.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>18</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 178.

philosophers attempt to create a new role for writing, on the eve of the metaphysics of presence.

## II.b Letteratura isolata e sovrana

As soon as he introduced Apollo on the scene, with a faithful re-writing of the ‘Homeric hymn’ pages on the god’s birth at Delos, Calasso explains that Greek gods can be split into gods of ‘*mixis*’, like Dionysus, and gods ‘isolati e sovrani,’<sup>19</sup> such as Apollo, Artemis, Athena:

L’Olimpo si distacca da ogni altra dimora celeste per la presenza di tre divinità innaturali: Apollo, Artemis, Atena. Irriducibili a una funzione, imperiose custodi dell’unico, hanno stracciato quella lieve cortina opaca che la natura tesse intorno alle sue potenze. Lo smalto e il vuoto, il profilo, la freccia. Questi i loro elementi, non acqua o terra. C’è qualcosa di autistico negli dei innaturali dell’Olimpo. Apollo, Artemis, Atena procedono avvolti nel loro nimbo. Guardano il mondo quando devono colpirlo, ma altrimenti il loro sguardo è lontano, come rivolto a un invisibile specchio dove ritrovano la propria figura separate dal resto. Quando Apollo ed Artemis tendono l’arco per uccidere sono sereni, assorti, l’occhio è fisso sulla freccia.<sup>20</sup>

Whilst one may expect the re-presentation of ‘l’Obliquo’ (‘Loxias’) as ‘isolato and sovrano’ to be employed to foreground his belonging to the metaphysics of presence, Calasso drives the reader down the opposite route. Apollo, as *logos*, is orderly, structured, intellectual search, as well as artistic form. Like Athena – the statue-maker,<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 67-68.

<sup>21</sup> The discussion of Athena is explicitly centered on the theme of the statue, through the re-writing of the tale of the Palladio, the statue of her friend Pallade, forged by the goddess herself, which had become the guardian of the power of Troy. Ibid., pp. 257-258.

thus another potential artistic supplanter of the *pāter* – he works for ‘appearance.’ The reference to Apollo’s weapon, the arrow, may hint at the god as holder of the power of writing, which, as a long tradition attests, is often metaphorised as an arrow – a metaphor also discussed by Colli.<sup>22</sup>

The vocabulary and the symbology Calasso employs around these deities, his attribution of power to them over ‘lo smalto e il vuoto’, and the insistence on ‘il profilo’ as well as ‘la freccia’ as one of their distinctive marks, reinforces the impression that this discussion may have form, and specifically literature, as a theme.

The isolation of these gods thus becomes another name for the ‘absoluteness’ of literature. The references to autism, considering the ‘autistic’ element that Calasso recognizes in ‘absolute literature’, which he sees as capable of affecting reality precisely because self-reflexive, as discussed in chapter II, reinforces this impression. The gods ‘isolati e sovrani’ are to be read as practitioners of ‘absolute literature’.

These philosopher gods ‘portatori di un’opposta perfezione, nuova ed inaudita’, are monster-slayers, but are put ‘under erasure’ through their artistic attributes and behaviour. Athena kills Gorgon, crowned with snakes, and Apollo kills the snake Python. But, in both cases, the deity chooses to assimilate the monster, in order to obtain its creative power: ‘I serpenti della Gorgone si muovevano al vento sul petto di Atena. Erano diventati le frange dell’egida. I denti e le ossa di Pitone riposavano nel bronzeo bacino del tripode da cui la Pizia pronunciava gli oracoli di Apollo.’<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Colli, *La sapienza greca*, vol.I, p. 378.

<sup>23</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 237.

## II.c Enigma – Re-presenting obliquity

Apollo's epithet 'l'Obliquo'<sup>24</sup> ('Loxias'), recurring in Homer and the tragic poets,<sup>25</sup> has been turned by Calasso into a subtle metanarrative strategy, which causes the emergence in the text of an Apollo different from the Winkelmannian figure of clarity still recognizable in Nietzsche. He foregrounds the obliqueness of the god's responses at Delphi, the oracle, where the god utters his prophecies indirectly, through the words of the Pythia – also enigmatic. Obliqueness, thus, draws attention to Apollo's linguistic texture: as Plato's wise man cannot look at the sun directly, so the adept of the Delphic god of *sein* can only know the god obliquously, linguistically, through the words of his priestess. As Heraclitus stressed, 'Il signore, cui appartiene l'oracolo che sta a Delfi, non dice né nasconde, ma accenna.'<sup>26</sup>

Colli's work helps put into context Calasso's view that the words of the Pythia are a type of enigma. Disagreeing with Nietzsche's condemnation of dialectics as the start of the Greek decadence<sup>27</sup>, and recognizing in Greek philosophy a strand of 'dialettica costruttiva',<sup>28</sup> Colli, in his later work entitled *Dopo Nietzsche*, traced the evolution from enigma to dialectics: 'evoluzione rintracciabile nella parola "problema", che da "ostacolo", quindi "enigma", passa a significare "formulazione di una ricerca, termine tecnico della dialettica.' As 'l'enigma uccide, la dialettica no, provoca solo una punizione 'cerebrale',<sup>29</sup> dialectics would simply become a ritualized, harmless, version of enigma - 'viene meno soltanto il rischio mortale.'<sup>30</sup> -

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>25</sup> One only has to think of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, where the lexical references to the obliquity of Apollo are a crucial key for decoding the text

<sup>26</sup> Colli, *La sapienza greca*, Vol.III, p. 21.

<sup>27</sup> Colli, *Dopo Nietzsche*, p. 45.

<sup>28</sup> Represented by Plato and Aristotle, as well as one of 'dialettica distruttiva' (Parmenides, Zeno, and Gorgias). Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 49.

Thus one could argue that, despite its obliqueness, Calasso's Apollo is a representation of the origin of philosophy in enigma, rather than a literary figure. However, behind the fascination with enigma in *Le nozze* and *Ka*<sup>31</sup> the absolute reader recognizes Adorno's definition of art, discussed in *I quarantanove gradini*. Calasso, as already mentioned at page 115, is fascinated by Kraus' belief that «artista è soltanto chi sa fare della soluzione un enigma».<sup>32</sup> In this sense, *Le nozze*'s Apollo is clearly an artist figure. Enigma, thus, simultaneously marks Apollo as the god of the metaphysics of presence, and connects him to literature, making of 'l'Obliquo' a representation of 'being' put 'under erasure' by the power of form.

#### **II.d Oedipus – On logos**

In order to appreciate the complexity of Calasso's Apollo as philosophical and literary god, and their coexistence 'under erasure,' I will review his pages on Oedipus, whose tragedy, centered on the deciphering of enigma, takes place under the sign of Loxias. They allow the recognition of Apollo's obliqueness at play in the text, and spell out to the reader the tragic consequences of failing to recognize the literary side of the Apollinean.

Having made of Apollo the original philosopher, 'il capostipite degli uccisori di mostri,' Calasso presents Oedipus as a monster-slayer, but one who has perfected this ability in a very Apollinean direction:

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<sup>31</sup> Calasso, *Ka*, p. 159.

<sup>32</sup> Id., 'Una muraglia cinese', p. 191.

Il più infelice fra gli eroi, e il più inerme, ma anche colui che fa un passo di là dagli eroi, è Edipo. Il rapporto con il mostro è un contatto, pelle contro pelle. Edipo, per primo, non tocca il mostro, ma lo guarda, e gli parla. Edipo uccide con la parola, getta nell'aria parole mortali come le formule magiche scagliate da Medea contro Talos.<sup>33</sup>

Like Medea – a grand-daughter of the sun, according to Kerényi<sup>34</sup> – Oedipus murders with words. But, unlike Apollo and Athena, Oedipus has not assimilated the monster, and this makes his victory, achieved exclusively through the power of metaphysical *logos*, a hollow one: ‘La parola permette una vittoria troppo pulita, che non lascia spoglie. Ma proprio nelle spoglie si cela la potenza. La parola può vincere là dove fallisce ogni altra arma. Ma rimane nuda, e solitaria, dopo la sua vittoria.’<sup>35</sup>

Calasso often notes that words leave a residue, and these ‘spoglie’, akin to Derridean *supplément*, allow the game of signification and the blossoming of the *varianti*. The text foregrounds the residue as connected to the ability to assimilate the monster, the ‘other,’ an ability which appears precluded to metaphysical *logos*.

If we offer Calasso’s Oedipus to a post-Nietzschean reading, the tale of Oedipus is one of the key moments where the text reveals that if ‘il sistema’, *logos* as philosophy, is ‘un lascito minore’ of the god, this is because a ‘lascito maggiore’ lies somewhere else. Calasso shows us that Oedipus’s *hybris* lies in his inability to deal with this other *lascito*: with the experiential power of art and writing, and the magic of an *episteme* under erasure.

Calasso’s discussion of *enigma* and *geroglifici* in *I quarantanove gradini*, helps us recognize the emblem of this magic in the image of the Sphinx, itself a hieroglyph, hence writing. Oedipus reads the enigma of the hieroglyph-Sphinx, but by refusing

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<sup>33</sup> Id., *Le nozze*, pp. 384-385.

<sup>34</sup> Kerényi, *The gods of the Greeks*, p. 171.

<sup>35</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 385.

assimilation with this monster and the residue it generates, he abdicates the experiential power of writing. He becomes a Western metaphysician, and thus he sins against aesthetics. Intent on deciphering the meaning of the Sphinx, he neglects its signifier, his appearance, he forgets that ‘Primo nemico dell’estetico fu il significato. Il simbolo appare come un’immagine che è anche qualcos’altro.’<sup>36</sup> Calasso notes that in Greek art ‘non si pensa subito al significato, ma all’apparizione’ and that whilst ‘il più piccolo sigillo mesopotamico ci invita a decifrare’, ‘la statua ignora la decifrazione’ and ‘prima di significarci qualcosa, vuole soltanto essere accolta dall’occhio, ed insidiarvisi.’<sup>37</sup> Oedipus, who has gone beyond the heroes and pushed the Apollinean powers to their next level, fails because he limits his reading to the Apollo ‘isolato e sovrano’, hostile to *mixis* and *metamorphosis*, avoids dealing with the god as mythographer, and with *logos*’ relation to knowledge and being through the artistic experience of *grammé*.

Calasso’s Oedipus uses words to destroy, rather than to deconstruct and gives up on turning writing into the opportunity for dissemination, for the never-ending play of *varianti*.

In the 1970s, Adelphi published Derrida’s *Le facteur de la vérité*, a brief text, which challenges Lacan’s reading of Poe, as failing to deal with the dissemination at play in Poe’s ‘The Purloined Letter’. Derrida notes that the difficulty with dissemination may lie in the fact that ‘la disseminazione attacca la legge del significante [...] *intacca* l’unità del significante,’<sup>38</sup> which appears to be precisely Oedipus’s issue in *Le nozze*, when dealing with the spoils of the Sphinx-*grammé*.

The Theban king, whose blindness punishes the *hybris* of blind faith in metaphysics, and his misreading of Apollo, fails to see that even light isn’t simple, it

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 273.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 273.

<sup>38</sup> Derrida, *Il fattore della verità*, p. 59.



actually encloses its opposite:

La perfezione [...] esige sempre un qualche nascondimento. Senza qualcosa che si occulta, o che rimane occulto, il perfetto non è. Ma lo scrittore come può nascondere l'evidenza della parola e delle sue figure? Con la luce. [...] Nascondere con la luce: peculiarità greca. [...] Per questo la luce ulteriore a quella greca è di altra specie, e assai meno intensa. Quella luce vuole stanare il nascosto. Mentre la luce greca protegge il nascosto.<sup>39</sup>

This Greek light, used by the writer, and whose god is Apollo, does not work to unveil, but to conceal. It attacks the unity of the signifier: it is the light that has assimilated the monster and that is worked by 'difference'.

Even though he presents him as 'isolato,' Calasso avoids discussing the possible etymology of the name of Apollo as the 'not many', as 'unique'. In my view this cannot be accidental, particularly if we consider that Apollo is the god Calasso chooses to discuss when presenting his postmodern view of the power of 'variation', already discussed at page 187: 'Appena lo si afferra, il mito si espande in un ventaglio dai molti spicchi. Qui la variante è l'origine. Ogni atto avvenne in questo modo, oppure in quest'altro, oppure in quest'altro. E in ciascuna di tali storie divergenti si riflettono le altre, tutte ci sfiorano come lembi della stessa stoffa.'<sup>40</sup>

The etymology of Apollo is not mentioned as it could have gone against his reading of this god 'isolato e sovrano' as actually a champion of dissemination, as the god of grammatology.

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<sup>39</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 317.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

### III. Apollinean *différences*

Even though he can transform like Zeus, Calasso prefers to show Apollo's plurality by opposition rather than metamorphosis: his opposition is to Zeus, but also simultaneously to his brother Dionysus, as well as to his own priestess. In all of these relationships, the game of 'difference' and dissemination can be identified, and used to recognise the contemporariness of this representation.

#### III.a Vs. Nietzsche: Apollo and Dionysus as *indécidable*

The relationship between Apollo and Dionysus is clearly marked as important to the economy of the text by Calasso's statement that they both are 'di discendenza sovrana', however Dionysus *is* snake and bull, whilst Apollo kills both. Similarly, Calasso's statement that Greek gods can be split into gods of '*mixis*', and gods 'isolati e sovrani' appears to emphasise the opposition between Apollo and Dionysus. However, a different picture emerges through the pages dedicated to the love of Ariadne for Theseus and Dionysus, which immediately follows that of Europa and Zeus in the first chapter.

*Le nozze* introduced Theseus on the scene under the sign of Apollo, to whom the young hero had dedicated his curls in the temple of Apollo at Delphi.<sup>41</sup> Yet, for being a creature of Apollo, and therefore a bull-slayer, as exemplified in the killing of the Minotaur, Calasso stresses that Theseus displays an obsession with the symbology of his enemy: "Così stretti erano i loro rapporti che mise una testa di toro sulle monete che

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

per la prima volta fece coniare nella sua città, la sacra Atene, come egli stesso aveva voluto chiamarla.’<sup>42</sup>

The tale of Ariadne reveals the reason of this connection. Whilst she had been drawn to Theseus by the fact that she saw him as ‘opposto al dio’ Dionysus and therefore as her hope to break free from the ‘cerchio del toro,’<sup>43</sup> when, re-enacting Theseus’s behaviour, Dionysus leaves her in Naxos, she realizes that Dionysus and Apollo’s alter ego Theseus are not enemies, but may actually be one and the same, or bound by ‘gemellarità’.<sup>44</sup> In the Cretan stories, ‘sulla scena, si mostra il contrasto tra Dioniso e Teseo, nell’oscurità si salda il patto tra Apollo e Dioniso.’<sup>45</sup> Through the figure of Theseus, and in the reading of Ariadne, the relationship between Apollo and Dionysus is declared as *indécidable*.

I am not discounting the other influences clearly present in Calasso, from Greek pre-Socratic philosophy and tragedy, to Plutarch, all the way to Nietzsche and Colli, which may have sufficed to send Calasso in that direction. However, the choice of giving a reading of Apollo focused on this ‘undecidability’ with Dionysus, rather than for example attempting to delimit and define him, makes Calasso’s text very much a contemporary, poststructuralist statement. The contemporariness of his reading of Apollo and Dionysus is confirmed by the primary role given to the Nietzschean character, Ariadne, as decoder of the game of ‘difference’ between these gods. Dead in one of the many versions of her myth adumbrated in *Le nozze*, turned into *Corona Borealis* in another, this female character also becomes Calasso’s desired absolute reader, who re-casts the Delphic twins as *indécidable*, and thus disempowers them as

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

patriarchal figures, even though by doing so she may actually ascribe them a higher power as artists.

Elaborating on the theme of the *discendenza sovrana*, *Le nozze* suggests that the duality Apollo/Dionysus incarnates the dual ‘secret’ of Zeus, the god who, in theory, ‘non può avere segreti, as he ‘semplicemente, è:’ Typhon’s murder, and having been killed in a cave in Crete. Splitting his own myth into two parts, ‘Scindendosi nei due figli, Zeus riprodusse in ciascuno la totalità. All’interno della loro forma, Apollo e Dioniso ospitano gli opposti e oscillano fra i loro estremi.’<sup>46</sup>

Apart from noting that each of the two gods would be the product of a division and yet remain a totality, thus becoming, like Zeus, a self-sufficient interpretation, of the world, I would like to draw attention to the use of the word ‘oscillano’, and the textual suggestion that the oscillation of meaning within the form would be what makes the god a totality. This echoes remarkably the idea of meaning held by Foucault or Derrida, for whom a simple opposition never exhausts the meaning of a word or a text, as meaning(s) constantly arise and simultaneously co-exist.

The complexity of the relationship between Apollo and Dionysus is clearly highlighted by Colli in *La sapienza greca*: ‘Dioniso, che raccoglie in sé tutte le contraddizioni, è una cosa sola con Apollo, che è la sua contraddizione.’<sup>47</sup> Calasso’s ‘oscillazione tra estremi’ could be argued to simply be an echo of Colli’s ‘contraddizione’. Yet the metaphorical language of ‘oscillation’ could also be conveying the type of movement suggested by Derrida’s vocabulary of ‘presence’ and ‘absence’<sup>48</sup> and implying that both Dionysus and Apollo are poststructuralist symbols,

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 340.

<sup>47</sup> Colli, *La sapienza greca*, Vol.I, p. 25

<sup>48</sup> Discussed in Derrida, ‘Linguistique et grammatologie’, pp. 42-108

so each term/symbol is presence of the absence of the other.

### III.b 'Istinti artistici'

Derrida defines '*différance* (avec un a)' as 'passage détourné et équivoque d'un différent à l'autre, d'un terme de l'opposition à l'autre.'<sup>49</sup> He concludes that 'On pourrait ainsi reprendre tous les couples d'oppositions sur lesquels est construite la philosophie et dont vit notre discours pour y voir non pas s'effacer l'opposition mais s'annoncer une nécessité telle que l'un des termes y apparaisse comme la différence de l'autre, comme l'autre différé dans l'économie du même.'<sup>50</sup>

Rather than follow Nietzsche's *Die Geburt der Tragödie* and depict the two deities as opposite, Calasso plays with this *différance*, by eroding the borderline between them. 'Quando Apollo riappare e stringe il braccio di Dioniso, si odono le ultime note dei ditirambi. Ed ecco subentra il peana. La sola continuità è data dal suono,'<sup>51</sup> he comments, making of music the element marking the continuity, and thus the 'undecidability', between the two deities.

Derrida's *L'écriture et la différence* contains an explicit reflection on the '*différance*' between Apollo and Dionysus, which he discusses as a fundamental 'difference', a 'structure originaire.' Derrida, who reads the Nietzschean pair through the 'métaphore fondatrice'<sup>52</sup> of Western philosophy as metaphysics, and links Apollo with metaphysics and light, reflects on Dionysus: 'S'il faut dire, avec Schelling, que « tout n'est que Dionysos », il faut savoir – et c'est écrire – que comme la force pure, Dionysos est

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<sup>49</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'La différence', in *Marges de la philosophie*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1972, pp. 1-29, p. 18.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.18.

<sup>51</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 173.

<sup>52</sup> Derrida, 'Force et signification', p. 19.

travaillé par la différence. Il voit et se laisse voir. Et (se) crève les yeux. Depuis toujours, il a rapport à son dehors, à la forme visible, à la structure, comme à sa mort.<sup>53</sup>

In what may sound like a misreading of Nietzsche, who highlighted the rationality of Apollo in opposition to the irrationality of Dionysus, Giorgio Colli, in his pages on the oracle of Delphi and on the Nietzschean texts dedicated to Delphi and its gods, stated that in *Die Geburt der Tragödie* the concepts of *apollineo* and *dionisiaco* are ‘parificati’ like ‘istinti artistici’<sup>54</sup> and that both gods were ‘strumenti per liberare la natura umana, tramite il sogno e l’ebbrezza.’<sup>55</sup> Exactly as for Colli and Derrida, for Calasso Apollo and Dionysus are both artist images, specifically connected to the power of writing. But the similarities with Derrida do not end here.

#### **IV. Mirroring the garland – The sign of Delphi**

##### **IV.a *Omphalos* – Apollo and ‘otherness’**

Colli’s and Warburg’s influence drive Calasso to a closer identification between Apollo and Dionysus under the sign of *possessione*, and the symbol of the snake, which appears like a complete reversal of the Winkelmanian image of Apollo as the rational sun-god of artistic polish and perfection, and of the traditional view of the sun-god as the god of knowledge (*philosophos*).

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p.47-48.

<sup>54</sup> Colli, *Scritti di Nietzsche*, p. 41.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

*La sapienza greca* discusses the idea – from *Phaedrus* – that ‘la possessione è la più alta forma della conoscenza ed il più alto potere,’<sup>56</sup> and differentiates between Dionysus, who ‘induce gli uomini alla follia,’ and is himself ‘folle,’ and Apollo, who ‘suscita la follia’, but remains ‘lontano.’<sup>57</sup>

With Plutarch as a source, Calasso dedicates a number of pages to the Apollinean oracle of Delphi, where he emphasizes, through a discussion marked by the whole Warburgian triad of nymph, snake and source, the theme of ‘possession,’ and the fact that the oracle’s responses were uttered in verses, precisely in hexameters:

Il dio sapeva che la potenza veniva dalla possessione, dal serpente arrotolato intorno alla fonte. Ma questo non gli bastava: le sue donne, le sue figlie vaticinanti dovevano rivelare il verso, non solo gli enigmi del futuro. La poesia si presentò come la forma di quelle parole ambigue che i consultanti chiedevano per decidere della loro vita e di cui spesso capivano il significato solo quando i fatti erano già avvenuti. [...] non sussisteva un’incompatibilità che è ovvia per i moderni: quella fra possessione ed eccellenza formale.<sup>58</sup>

The oracle of Delphi is thus serving a meta-narrative purpose: not simply uttering the prophecies, but calling attention to their being in verse, thus to their literariness.

Calasso’s pages on the Delphic oracle appear to echo Derrida’s reflection (in *L’écriture et la différence*) on a thought that ‘nous appelle à la dislocation du logos grec; à la dislocation de notre identité, et peut-être de l’identité en général; elle nous appelle à quitter le lieu grec, et peut-être le lieu en général, vers ce qui n’est même plus une source ni un lieu (trop accueillants aux dieux), vers une respiration, vers une parole prophétique ayant déjà soufflé non seulement en amont de Platon, non seulement en

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<sup>56</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p.169.

<sup>57</sup> Colli, *La sapienza greca*, Vol. I, p. 20.

<sup>58</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 168.

amont des présocratiques, mais en-deçà de toute origine grecque, vers l'autre du Grec (mais l'autre du Grec, sera-ce le non-Grec ? Pourra-t-il, surtout, se nommer le non-Grec ? Et notre question s'approche).<sup>59</sup>

When discussing Delphi, Calasso displays remarkable attention for the tripod, the 'pentola di bronzo' in which he recognizes the 'ricettacolo del potere delfico,'<sup>60</sup> an artefact that 'segna un altissimo grado della civiltà,'<sup>61</sup> and will later be supplanted in Greece by another offering, the statue. The tripod was covering the 'spaccatura nella terra,'<sup>62</sup> from which were exhaling the mysterious vapours inhaled by the priestess when uttering prophecies. Calasso's interest in prophetic speech can also be an attempt to reach out to a Greek origin, beyond the pre-Socratics, which can also be seen as the 'autre' of the Greeks. His Virgil, his guide to the 'otherness' of the Greeks, appears to be the god Apollo. The secret of Apollo is paradoxically revealed as the coincidence between the "isolated" god of being and metaphysics, and its *autrui*.

Another Plutarchean reminiscence seals this point: the tripod is the resting place of the teeth and bones of Python, the snake whose killing makes Apollo the first monster-slayer<sup>63</sup>, as already mentioned at page 204.

Thus, Calasso's representation of the god in which Winkelmann, and partially even Nietzsche, saw the light of rationality, as pre-announced in the discussion of Oedipus, makes of the assimilation of the monster, instead of the purification from it, the centre of Apollo's cult. A god whose symbol is a snake and also an actual snake are mentioned as part of the 'embarassing' past of Delphi:

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<sup>59</sup> Derrida, 'Violence et métaphysique', p. 122.

<sup>60</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 183.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>63</sup> 'I serpenti della Gorgone si muovevano al vento sul petto di Atena. Erano diventati le frange dell'egida. I denti e le ossa di Pitone riposavano nel bronzeo bacino del tripode da cui la Pizia pronunciava gli oracoli di Apollo.' Ibid., p. 237.



Nell'adyton della Pizia, Apollo ha una statua d'oro, Dioniso lo zoccolo della sua tomba. Ma tutto sembra succedersi senza urti. Ora potenze congiunte e alternanti, Apollo e Dioniso lasciano malvolentieri trapelare il loro passato in quel luogo. Non molti ricordano che sotto il coperchio di bronzo del tripode dove ora siede la Pizia bollirono un giorno gli arti smembrati di Dioniso Zagreus. E neppure che Dioniso, secondo alcuni, fu il primo a vaticinare dal tripode. E neppure che un serpente si attorcigliò intorno alle zampe del tripode.<sup>64</sup>

The Delphic story, and its ritual, confirm that Apollo's rule depends on assimilation, on his ability to obtain access to the power of the monster, thus on his hold on 'otherness.' Delphi would be the seat from which the *perfetto, isolato e sovrano* Apollo, the god who stays alone, through his *alter ego* Dionysus is granted access to an *autre*, and to its power. This *autre* is a snake, therefore a monster, but also, potentially, a representation of Zeus-serpente-toro, as Zagreus is alternatively identified with both Dionysus and Zeus.

When discussing Athena and Apollo's characteristic of assimilating the monster, for Apollo, Calasso adds that: 'Le squame di Pitone erano arrotolate attorno alla pietra dell'omphalos. L'ombelico è il punto, l'unico punto, l'indispensabile, dove il perfetto si lega alla perfezione dell'indifferenziato. È il piede di Europa nel mare.'<sup>65</sup>

The *omphalos*, 'l'ombelico del mondo', the crack in the earth upon which stood the tripod, is covered with the monster's skin. But if the 'punto', the 'ombelico' of Delphi allows Apollo, and Calasso's absolute readers, to reconnect with a Greek origin, the reminder of the foot of Europa is a second hint in the same direction: the god who embodies the crown/snake of mythology, the divine name of 'absolute literature', and

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., pp. 173-174.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 237.

who, in the oak of Dodona is the epitome of the *indifferenziato* could be the monster, always already slain by Apollo.

The Greek origin, if such a word can be used today, can be read through the sign of Apollo as the rise of literary form, of ‘absolute literature’, in the different, ever-changing space between *indifferenziato* and *perfetto*. This rise of ‘absolute literature’ does not prevent Delphi from also acting as the origin of philosophy, and thus from simultaneously preserving an image of Apollo as philosopher god: ‘Quando Apollo ebbe conquistato Delfi, ne fece il luogo della possessione, spartita fra mantica e sillogismo.’<sup>66</sup> As the birthplace of verse – pre-Socratic philosophy was also written in verse – Delphi can act as a common origin, as well as ‘difference’, between metaphysics and art. It can accommodate within its precinct both the engraving of the *epsilon*, which marks the home of the metaphysics of presence, and its being put ‘under erasure,’ through the representational power of art and language, of which ‘possession’ is a synonym.

#### **IV.b Sun, logos, and patriarchy**

[Le langage] se lève avec le soleil.<sup>67</sup>

We have seen in the previous section that it is possible to establish in Calasso’s text a series of equivalences between Apollo’s ‘other,’ the monster, and his *pāter* ‘under erasure’ Zeus. These equivalences point to the *pāter*’s hold over *mythology* and *logos*, as one of the layers of ‘variation’ that it is possible to decode in the sign of Delphi. Yet there is another player in the Delphic scene that can be classified as ‘other,’ and that

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<sup>66</sup> Id., *Ka*, p. 288.

<sup>67</sup> Derrida, ‘Violence et métaphysique’, p. 167.

also contributes to Calasso's representation of Delphi as a 'sign' for 'absolute literature'.

In many ways, while Calasso's Zeus appears rather weak as a patriarchal image, Apollo displays stronger patriarchal features. Whilst Zeus's crown of mythology appears to depend on the seduction of the nymph, Apollo's relationship with the feminine at first sight is much more "traditional". As a sun deity, Apollo is traditionally opposed to his twin sister Artemis, often confused with the moon goddess Hecate, and Calasso retains this opposition and, with the help of his definition of the god as 'isolato e sovrano,' makes of them the epitome of the pure masculine and the pure feminine. Artemis would rather kill or die than lose her virginity, and in a clear scheme of complementarity, Apollo's relationship with women tends to be based on violence. The love stories with Coronis and Daphne end in death, and, when Calasso discusses the two 'regimi' that can subsist between mortals and gods as 'la convivialità e lo stupro,' he makes Apollo the champion of the second. Creature of this solar, patriarchal Apollo appears to be his singer Orpheus. Calasso remembers that Orpheus had been the first to recognize the 'Apollo dell'Aurora' as he passed by their ship at dawn,<sup>68</sup> and erected an altar to him. As Derrida suggests in his readings of Plato's *Phaedrus*, the sun is the ultimate patriarchal symbol, this would help us understand why the mythical singer, who appears so familiar with the solar Apollo in Apollonius, in a different section of *Le nozze* displays unease in dealing with the Delphic Apollo, despite his being the god presiding over verse and poetry. The text justifies Orpheus's refusal to compete in the Apollinean sanctuary by saying that in Delphi was visible, and still is today, 'la roccia da cui Femonoe aveva pronunciato i primi esametri',<sup>69</sup> and thus reverence for poetry could have dictated his behaviour. But in my view this also indicates Orpheus's

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<sup>68</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 363.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

patriarchal-solar unease with the feminine markers present at Delphi, with the fact that verse had been first entrusted to women.

#### **IV.c *La Pizia* – Sexual politics in Delphi**

Anzi, proprio allora gli uomini appresero che cosa vuol dire la parola perfetta, perché l'esametro era stato un dono di Apollo a Femonoe, sua figlia, sua ninfa dei monti, sua Sibilla.<sup>70</sup>

This entrusting of the verse to woman is an 'undecidable' action of the Loxias, around which the texture of Calasso's text achieves remarkable density. Apollo is not, like Zeus, interested in a woman's beauty per se, but in controlling her power, 'la follia che viene dalle Ninfe': 'Apollo non possiede le Ninfe, non possiede la possessione, ma la governa.'<sup>71</sup>

But this *possessione* has another surprising monstrous name. If the patriarchal Apollo is the 'capostipite degli uccisori di mostri', his slaying of Python in *Le nozze* is employed to put forward a remarkable suggestion. It has been recognised that, in *Le nozze*, Calasso only veiledly hints at this<sup>72</sup>. However, as early as *L'impuro folle*, and more diffusely in 'La follia', the author has suggested the possibility that the snake/dragon Python – the monster whose slaying makes of Apollo 'il capostipite degli uccisori di mostri', may actually be female.<sup>73</sup>

Apollo's assimilation of the monster now reveals all its contradictoriness. As well as being Dionysus, Zeus, and the monster, Apollo's 'other' is also the woman.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 168.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 173.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 174, where Calasso suggests of Python: 'Pitone sepolto anch'esso (o anch'essa?) nell'*adyton*.'

<sup>73</sup> id., 'La follia', p. 12.

However, the patriarchal Apollo ‘isolato e sovrano’ needs contact with the nymph, who would rather succumb than give him her ‘secret’, as shown in the space given to the narration of the nymph Telphusia’s plot to have Apollo murdered by Python in ‘La follia’. This nymph, as Calasso observes, appears almost like a double of Python: ‘Verso Telfusa come verso le Thriai, Apollo seguì lo stesso impulso: deprezzare, umiliare degli esseri femminili portatori di un sapere a lui precedente.’<sup>74</sup>

In *Le nozze*, the importance of this secret knowledge is clarified through his treatment of Theseus, creature of Apollo: ‘In tutta la vita di Teseo, Apollo dirà una sola frase: «Prendi Afrodite come guida».’<sup>75</sup> Theseus, who, being also undistinguishable from Dionysus, appears more at ease with the feminine and able to induce women to voluntarily hand over their secret;<sup>76</sup> and who, because of this ability, obtains ‘quella distanza da se stesso che il moderno esige,’<sup>77</sup> mirrors differently the Loxias relationship with the nymph.

We saw earlier that, according to Calasso, it is to women that Apollo leaves the duty of ‘revealing’ the verse, and they uttered exameters before men. This is how the text continues:

Il dio sapeva che la potenza veniva dalla possessione, dal serpente arrotolato intorno alla fonte. Ma questo non gli bastava: le sue donne, le sue figlie vaticinanti dovevano rivelare il verso, non solo gli enigmi del futuro. La poesia si presentò come la forma di quelle parole ambigue che i consultanti chiedevano per decidere della loro vita e di cui spesso capivano il significato solo quando i fatti erano già avvenuti.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>75</sup> Id., *Le nozze*, p. 71.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., pp. 78-79.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 168.

Feminist reading and writing recognizes in language a male construct and a medium through which patriarchy obtained and maintained its hold on reality, Calasso in this text appears instead to confer on women a hold on the linguistic medium of Apollo's contact with men, thus, paradoxically, access to their Olympian enemy. It also appears to point to the linguistic nature of the secret knowledge Apollo and the nymphs fight over. These elements are emblematised in the pages on Delphi and the Pythia, which enable us to seize the complexity of Apollo's relationship with the nymph, in terms of both patriarchal and artistic/linguistic mastery.

In his re-writing of the ancient sources on the Delphian oracle, Calasso lays in front of the reader a number of elements, which, in my view, lend themselves to a Freudian/Lacanian reading. For example, the opening in the earth of the *omphalos* can be read as female genitals or womb, and it is possible to recognize a phallic symbol in the tripod. Yet this Freudian scene is enriched by a number of irregularities and ambiguities. For example, the fact that the tripod in *Le nozze* can be read as the resting place of the bones of the monster would support the phallic symbology and demand a patriarchal reading, whilst the allusion to its having acted as resting place of Zagreus-Zeus contradicts it. Similarly the subordinated position of the *omphalos*, which lies under the tripod, encourages a reading of the female element as defeated by the male, whilst the position of the female priestess, who actually sits on the tripod, reverses it.

The position of the priestess in relation to her master Loxias is similarly contradictory. The Pythia, whose name derives from that of the snake/dragon(ess) Python, is subject to Apollo, yet she is also the channel through which he obliquely communicates with mortals. Elsewhere in *Le nozze*, Calasso explained that Apollo was 'capostipite degli uccisori di mostri' and Io 'delle traditrici'.<sup>79</sup> The Pythia in *Le nozze* is

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

simultaneously “traduttrice” and “traditrice”, as in the Italian proverbial expression: she “translates” Apollo’s knowledge into human language and verse, yes she “betrays” him, through her belonging to that ‘otherness,’ which Apollo simultaneously needs and rejects through assimilation.

An excerpt from *La letteratura e gli dei* can be used to support the view that Apollo’s teaching of the hexameter to the Pythia may be sanctioning his imposition of his power over the ancient verbal knowledge of the nymph: ‘Il metro è il giogo della parola [...] Come la «mente», manas, non può che dissiparsi [...] se non viene aggiogata e ogni disciplina della mente, ogni yoga, è innanzitutto un «giogo»), così la «parola», vāc, l’onnipresente, pervasiva, colei che «soffia come il vento, investendo tutti i mondi», accetta di recingersi di metri, di adornarsene quasi fossero vesti variegata, di avvilupparsi in una scansione preordinata di sillabe.’<sup>80</sup>

However, this statement may be used both to make of the Pythia purely a channel of an art form fully controlled by Apollo, and as a proficient poet who has mastered her medium, thus a version of Calasso’s Talleyrand, adding her own *colpo di pollice* to the god’s words, and thus achieving authorial revenge over him.

Calasso’s discussion of meter in *La Letteratura* also lingers on a Greek word rich in religious undertones: ‘I metri sono il nostro *témenos*, la forma entro la quale appaiono tutte le forme.’<sup>81</sup> Used to refer to the enclosure of a temple, *témenos* is a word that allows a metaphorical reading of Delphi, birthplace of verse, as the *omphalos*, the enclosure, in which all forms come to light, thus as a birthplace of writing. By framing the ‘mito innominato’ of the Loxias within the sign of Delphi, which being a *témenos*, is, like Zeus’ garland, a macrometaphor for ‘absolute literature’, Calasso had to accommodate the implications of the frieze in the sky named Apollo as a sun god, as the

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<sup>80</sup> Id., *La letteratura*, p. 124.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

representer of ‘presence’ as well as of ‘otherness.’ The *omphalos* between ‘presence’ and ‘otherness,’ between ‘perfect’ and ‘indifferentiated,’ appears, as could be expected in an author exposed to the poststructuralist debate, to be the *graphein*.

Calasso reflects on the *epsilon* of Delphi, a reflection that drives the reader to see in Delphi not just a sign, but an engraving, writing. Other elements support this interpretation of the Delphi of *Le nozze* as loaded with symbols of writing: the tripod marking the earth where the god’s words are made intelligible; the *omphalos* as a ‘punto’, as the incision of a pen; the offering of statues, thus of forms, to the god. These intimations are reinforced and synthetised in the figure of the Pythia, acting as translator, as renderer of the Heraclitean *cenno* of the god in intellegible and poetic form. In ‘La follia’ Calasso reveals that the nymphs pass to Apollo not only the oracular knowledge of the snake Python, but also the art of archery,<sup>82</sup> often employed as a metaphor for writing.

## **V. From Daphne to Python – Apollo and representation**

The ultimate confirmation of this reading of Delphi as a macrometaphor of ‘absolute literature’ and as the *ghirlanda innominata* of the *mito innominato* of Apollo can be traced by following further two nymphidic tales already discussed. In two stories that are each ‘l’ombra dell’altra’, Apollo kills Python – who may have been a woman, and the nymph Daphne choses death and metamorphosis into a laurel over the god’s passion.<sup>83</sup> However, ‘Osservando Pitone, riconosciamo nel serpente la delicata Dafne.

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<sup>82</sup> Id., ‘La follia, p. 14.

<sup>83</sup> Id., *Le nozze*, p. 172.



Osservando le foglie dell'alloro, vi riconosciamo anche le squame di Pitone.<sup>84</sup> With the interchangeability between the monster and the woman in the realm of Apollo, their 'undecidability' with the garland of literature is also laid open. As we know from 'La follia che viene dalle Ninfe', both Python and Daphne are nymphs, their stories possibly each other's 'variation'. As a matter of fact, in *Le nozze*, it is after reflecting on them that Calasso utters his postmodern claims on the power of the 'variation' as origin in mythology.<sup>85</sup> Yet these claims appear puzzling in the context of Calasso's presentation of Apollo, as the 'variation' in *Le nozze* is associated with the mythologizing power of Zeus.

Through the fragments of the *mito innominato* of Apollo's subversion, which he is attempting to re-write, Calasso provides the following clarification: 'Apollo non riesce a possedere la ninfa, e forse neppure lo vuole. Dietro la Ninfa, cerca la corona di alloro che gli rimane in mano quando si dissolve il corpo di Dafne: vuole la rappresentazione.'<sup>86</sup> Apollo's chase of the power of the nymph is clarified simultaneously as an aspiration to 'rappresentazione' and 'corona'. In 'La follia' we are told that Apollo, having defeated Python, Telphusia, and the Thriai, reclaims for himself the power of Zeus, and that the secret knowledge he was after was 'conoscenza metamorfica', 'addensata in un luogo, che era insieme una fonte, un serpente e una Ninfa',<sup>87</sup> as seen at page 69. Thus, in the nymph/garland the god of meter and possibly of writing – through his indirectedness and Delphic characteristics – chases the artistic power of Zeus, the *pāter's* creative hold on the stories of mythology through representation. Rather than a yoke, the meter now can be read as a gift given to the

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>85</sup> 'Appena lo si afferra, il mito si espande in un ventaglio dai molti spicchi. Qui la variante è l'origine.'  
Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>87</sup> Id., 'La follia', p. 16.

nymph in exchange for a higher power. It's only through the nymph that Loxias can reconnect to the mythical universe of Zeus and turn into a fragmentary 'representation' his own *mito innominato*.

A long reflection on the 'difference' between monster-slaying and betrayal allows us to draw some further conclusions:

L'uccisione dei mostri e il tradimento femminile sono due modi di agire della negazione. Il primo sgombra uno spazio, lascia un vuoto evocatore là dove era un troppo pieno, folto di teste e tentacoli, un arabesco di squame. Il tradimento femminile non muta gli elementi dello spazio, ma li ridispone. Certi pezzi sulla scacchiera invertono il loro potere. Il bianco colpisce il bianco. Il nero colpisce il nero. È un effetto di confusione, innanzitutto, di sconcerto. I ruoli per la prima volta si rovesciano. Ed è sempre una donna a rovesciarli. C'è un'ottusità dell'eroe che lo obbliga sempre a seguire una sola traccia. Perciò l'eroe ha bisogno di un completamento, di un altro modo della negazione. La donna traditrice completa l'opera dell'eroe: la porta a compimento e la estingue. Ciò avviene in accordo con l'eroe. Fa parte dell'opera civilizzatrice dell'eroe sopprimere se stesso. Perché l'eroe è mostruoso. Subito dopo i mostri, muoiono gli eroi.<sup>88</sup>

Through the chess-pieces of the woman and the monster-slayer this passage dramatizes the contrast between *mythos*, or 'absolute literature', which has assimilated the monster, and the pure logos of metaphysics. The woman/nymph, who reorganizes the game and moves around the chess-pieces, appears like the custodian of the power of the 'variation', of the fluid, metamorphic language, which, in a manner very akin to poststructuralism, has always already moved on, thrives on a plurality with a post-Nietzschean *jouissance*. The hero, capable of following only one trace, appears like a

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<sup>88</sup> Id., *Le nozze*, p. 87.

bearer of the standard of the *logos* of metaphysics, the pre-Nietzschean and pre-Saussurean language capable of striving to conclusively know and describe reality.

As a monster-slayer, but also as an assimilator of the power of the monster-nymph-Zeus, Apollo's *mito innominato* can be read as what Gaiatry Spivak discussing Derrida's term 'dissemination', calls 'hymeneal fable,'<sup>89</sup> with the Delphic *omphalos* as the hymeneal fold, through which, thanks to the *traduzione/tradimento* of the Pythia, Apollo emerges as exhalation, thus as always already 'disseminated', as assimilating the power of 'variation.'

This makes of Apollo a *mito innominato* in a number of ways. First of all, it unveils the possible subversion of the power of Zeus which, to use Derrida's terminology, is at once 'suppléé' and 'supplante'.<sup>90</sup> Secondly, it sanctions the "undecidability" between the sun-god and his female opponent. Thirdly, by passing the 'monstruosity' on to the solar hero, he sanctions the 'undecidability' between the *logos* of metaphysics and the monstrous written word of the poet.

Given the number of analogies in themes and even images with Derrida's thought, it also offers a preliminary answer to the question of whether Derrida's deconstruction may be at least one of the *miti innominati* consciously or subconsciously dealt with by Calasso in the writing of *Le nozze*.

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<sup>89</sup> Spivak, 'Translator's Preface' to *Of Grammatology*, p. lxvi

<sup>90</sup> Derrida, 'La pharmacie de Platon', p. 112.

## Chapter VIII

### Dionysus – the *entre/antre* of literature

#### [Abstract]

After identifying the appearances of Dionysus as ‘frieze in the sky’ in Calasso’s text, I will demonstrate that this god is also employed as an authorial image, both to deconstruct Zeus in patriarchal terms, and to undo the classical (logocentric) opposition between himself and Apollo.

I will then proceed to demonstrate how Dionysian elements are employed by Calasso to foreground a relationship of *indécidabilité* between literature and sacrifice, a relationship whose ‘site’ becomes the space of metaphor, in which signifiers constantly exceed their expected signified and allow the reader and writer to enter the game of signification.

I will further highlight how the simulation which marks the Dionysian behaviour moves in the same direction and how the four metaphors around literature – the crown/garland of the starry sky, the cave, Delphi and the theatre all metanarratively come together to define the space of the metaphorical leap as the space of ‘absolute literature’. I will accompany this demonstration with a number of Derrida’s passages, to demonstrate the similarity in thought and approach between the two authors.

## I. More writing in the sky – Patriarchy revisited

In Chapter III, I highlighted in Calasso's critical works a recurring reading of Dionysus as god of literature. The fictionalised Dionysus of *Le nozze* embodies mimetically the same view.

Whilst with his false opposite, Apollo, Calasso had made a limited number of astral connections, the emphasis on Dionysus as frieze in the sky is as strong as Zeus', and displays a number of similarities, as well as meaningful differences, with the treatment of the Olympian ruler as an astral and authorial figure.

In this emphasis on the astral images underlying the Dionysian myth we can recognize once again the influence of De Santillana, as well as the Greek author Nonnus of Panopolis. The latter's *Dionysiaca*,<sup>1</sup> which, as highlighted by De Santillana, establish references between Greek tales and the cosmic events or images that first inspired them, appears to have strongly influenced Calasso.

Calasso dedicates a couple of pages – written with the enthusiasm of a pioneer – to the re-discovery of the work of Nonnus, and gives his absolute reader some clues about the importance of this author to the birth of *Le nozze*. His allusion to the only other Italian author to 'discover' Nonnus, the baroque poet Marino, states that Marino paid to Nonnus 'il gesto supremo di omaggio che uno scrittore possa dedicare a un altro: il furto',<sup>2</sup> thus inviting the reader to consider the hypothesis that *Le nozze* may be another instance of the same type of homage to the poet of Panopolis. A brief look at the treatment of some of the episodes of Dionysus's life presented by Calasso confirms that the clue was planted deliberately.

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<sup>1</sup> Calasso credits De Santillana for bringing it his attention. Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 372.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 371.

The choice of episodes of Dionysus's life to be included in the text of Calasso's own *crown* of myth, and the treatment of these episodes, confirm that in many ways Calasso's Dionysus is a contemporary re-writing of Nonnus, just as Marino's work aimed at 'intrecciare in un epos sconfinato una moltitudine di ghirlande erotiche.'<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, Calasso's fascination with the number of *varianti* of the same story is indicated by the author as having an ascendant in Nonnus, whose *Dionysiaca* he celebrates as 'una summa debordante della paganità'<sup>4</sup> and as 'la più fastosa celebrazione che si conosca della variante inutile, della superfluità dilagante.'<sup>5</sup>

Whilst this may be a way of deflecting the absolute reader from the analogies between Calasso's thought and poststructuralism, in my view Calasso simply finds in Nonnus a precursor of the contemporary *letterato assoluto*. Calasso intrigues his readership with the information that Nonnus had written, possibly simultaneously, the pagan *Dionysiaca* and the Christian *Paraphrases* of the Gospel of St John, which he employs to foreground Nonnus as the writer of 'undecidability': "Con una mano disegnava le avventure di Dionysus, con l'altra evocava il processo di Gesù. [...] E forse non aveva neppure bisogno di chiedersi se credeva in entrambi, perché li scriveva.'<sup>6</sup>

In agreement with this emphasis on Nonnus's textual performance, Calasso's presentation of Dionysus as frieze in the sky, like that of Zeus, calls attention to the god not only as authorial *persona* but as writing, as a sign. Furthermore, both are presented under the *segno del toro*, a zoomorphic/astral image, which echoes Derrida's

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 371.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 369.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 370.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 369.

reminiscence of the Egyptian god of writing as ‘taureau parmi les étoiles,’<sup>7</sup> and confirms the extent of their ‘undecidability’.

The poststructuralist halo that surrounds Calasso’s representation of the astral *frieze* of Dionysus becomes clear when we review the patriarchal relationship between Dionysus and Zeus not only under the sign of the bull, but also through the figure of Zagreus, ‘il grande cacciatore,’ represented in the sky as Orion.

In *Bacchae*, Euripides remembers the infant Zagreus, who ends up dismembered, as the first Dionysus, of whom he would be a ‘variation’. Calasso, however, reminds us of another tradition, possibly echoed by Nonnus,<sup>8</sup> making of Zagreus, instead of a first Dionysus, a second Zeus. Through Zagreus, Calasso deconstructs Zeus *pāter* on a double level: Zeus-father and Dionysus-son are brought to coincide in the image of the dismembered god. So are the hunter and hunted (Zagreus and the bull). If ‘Molti dei sono grandi cacciatori,’<sup>9</sup> ‘in Dioniso Zagreus si copre la più violenta identificazione, quella tra cacciatore e preda.’<sup>10</sup>

This aspect of the Dionysian myth Calasso finds in *Bacchae*, where the first chorus recounts the dismemberment of Dionysus Zagreus, so foregrounds Dionysus as ‘preda’, and ends by making of Dionysus a metaphorical hunter, causing his Maenades to dismember his rationalistic enemies on his behalf.

Furthermore, Calasso reminds us that before being dismembered the little Dionysus-Zagreus had seen himself and his murderers in a mirror – an element he finds in Nonnus.<sup>11</sup> Derrida’s lines on Mallarmé’s *Mimique*, a text which fascinates the philosopher, amongst other things, for his Nietzschean-Dionysian focus on theatre and

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<sup>7</sup> Derrida, ‘La pharmacie de Platon’, p. 114.

<sup>8</sup> Nonno, *Le Dionisiache*, BUR, Milano, 2003, X, v 297.

<sup>9</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 343.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 344.

<sup>11</sup> Nonno, *Dionisiache*, VI, vv. 169-173.

simulation, spring to mind as an apt commentary on Calasso's operation, and bear witness to the strong commonalities between the two thinkers's reading of literature:

[...] le Mime ne lit pas son role, il est aussi lu par lui. Du moins est-il à la fois lu et lisant, écrit et écrivant, entre les deux, dans le suspens de l'hymen, écran et miroir. Dès qu'on interpose un miroir quelque part, l'opposition simple de l'activité et de la passivité, comme du produire et du produit, ou encore de tous les participes présents et de tous les participes passés (imitant/imité, signifiant-signifié, structurant-structuré etc.) devient impraticable.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, Zagreus' mirror is a clue to an absolute reading of Dionysus as the post-Nietzschean artist, which overcomes logocentrism's neat distinctions between act and actor, product and producer of a literary work.

Another reason why Calasso chooses to simultaneously support two *varianti* of the myth of Zagreus also reveals a literary concern. The 'variation' claiming that Zagreus is Dionysus is re-written with a focus on Zeus's image-making creativity. When the infant Dionysus is dismembered in a cave in Crete, Zeus creates the first statue, in which he houses the beating heart of Zagreus Dionysus,<sup>13</sup> so that he can survive. Calasso's Dionysus would thus be a survivor through mimetic art and a creature of his *pāter*.

The statue, a clear reminder of presence, in logocentric terms, could be seen as sanctioning Zeus's authorial/patriarchal power. Yet, as we have seen through the representation of the chrysolephantine creation of Phidias, Zeus is a creature of Phidias, just as much as the creator, or preserver, of Dionysus, thus once again, deconstruction in *Le nozze* allows the mirrorring of the 'absolute' fluidity of free literature.

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<sup>12</sup> Derrida, 'La double séance', p. 276.

<sup>13</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 343.



The death of Zeus-Zagreus in the Cretan cave, rather than simply an instance of the Nietzschean death of god, can also be read as ‘death of the author’ in contemporary terms, particularly as *Le nozze* indicates that the Cretans were showing their visitors a tomb of Zeus. This tomb lends itself to be read as a sign (the Greek *sema* holds both meanings), thus forerounds once more the ‘undecidable’ text(uality) of Zeus-Zagreus-Dionysus. Cretan lies thus become artistic truths: ‘A Creta da sempre il segreto è davanti agli occhi di tutti [...] Dicevano la verità che non si può dire. Da allora si usa dire: i Cretesi, tutti mentitori.’<sup>14</sup>

## II. The Cretan cave – a different filial scene

*Le nozze* retells the birth of Dionysus, the god of mysteries, and of Zeus, the *pāter* of apparition, in the darkness of a Cretan cave. As well as the sky, Dionysus and Zeus thus share another site. However, if we follow current criticism of neoplatonic writing, the cave can be recognized as an allegory of the sky. Porphyry’s *Cave of the Nymphs*, a neo-Platonic text repeatedly quoted by Calasso, for example ‘interpreta come un’allegoria del cosmo la grotta di Itaca dove le ninfe tessono su telai di pietra.’<sup>15</sup>

The motif of the god in the cave, which appears to matter to Calasso as it is recurrently discussed, is rich in philosophical undertones ranging from Plato to Nietzsche. However, in his re-writing of the birth of Zeus and Dionysus, Calasso appears to employ the symbol of the cave as part of his quest to determine the role of ‘absolute literature’.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 339.

<sup>15</sup> See Daria Gigli Piccardi, ‘Introduzione’, in Nonno di Panopoli, *Le Dionisiache*, pp. 7-83, p. 15.

In opposition to Plato's myth of the cave, which – with its attack on illusion and appearance in the name of truth – may be marking the birth of 'logocentrism,' Calasso's caves appear, like his sky, to be places of artistic initiation.

As anticipated at the end of the last chapter, the image of Apollo slaying Python, as well as some other elements of Delphic symbology, foreground in Apollo the mimetic artist, and his mimesis/mimicry as the magic power, by which he can overthrow Zeus. Like Apollo, Dionysus in Calasso is also closely connected with the idea of mimicry/mimesis, or, to use Calasso's favourite word for this theme, 'metamorphosis,'

In *Le nozze*, Calasso does not linger on the myth of the cave, however, as mentioned at page 156, in his thanksgiving speech for the Prix Charles Veillon, he emphasizes to the 'absolute reader' that Plato had not literally expelled from his *Republic* the poets, but the Homeric deities, and men capable of metamorphosis ['di trasformarsi sapientemente in tutto'<sup>16</sup>]. Calasso's fascination with this Platonic piece deserves a number of considerations. He uses Plato's text to turn gods and artists into actors, and thus explicitly puts gods and humans on the same levels, as creative performers. 'Da ciò s'intende che l'opposizione platonica, prima ancora che a un certo uso della parola, si rivolge a una certa pratica della metamorfosi.[...] Platone allude qui al trauma, alla spaccatura nella storia della conoscenza, che avviene quando, invece di dire: a si trasforma in b, si dice a è b.'<sup>17</sup> Besides, through the emphasis given to transformation, Calasso clearly agrees with a view of art/metamorphosis as a Nietzschean a-logical way to knowledge through performance and experience.

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<sup>16</sup> Calasso, 'Il terrore delle parole', pp. 17-18.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp.17-18. Section III of this chapter will discuss in depth the implications of Calasso's view of metaphor.

This interpretation of mimesis may also have been influenced by Nonnus, who in the opening lines of his Dionysian opus referred to Proteus, to symbolize, according to Gigli Piccardi, ‘uno stile che si rifà alla *poikilia*, alla varietà.’<sup>18</sup> Nonnus’ Dionysus, thanks to the variety of style, language, and literary genres involved in the *Dionsysiaca*, ‘corrisponde magistralmente a una divinità che fa del principio metamorfico, della realtà illusoria e stravolta il proprio ambito d’elezione.’<sup>19</sup>

The ‘specularità tra forma e contenuto’ under the governing principle of *poikilia*<sup>20</sup> which marks Nonnus’s work can be detected in Calasso’s use of genre contamination. It appears to be his way to foreground the linguistic nature of his text, as well as evoking the manifestation of ‘absolute literature’. Employing genre contamination and changes in style to celebrate the power of literature in reaction to *la mort de l’auteur* is also typical of postmodern writing.

The focus on *poikilia* and plural style, which can be traced back to the author’s devotion to Nietzsche (particularly in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*), is one that Derrida also draws attention to. In an essay from *Marges de la philosophie*, ‘Les fins de l’homme’, he writes: ‘c’est d’un changement de « style », Nietzsche le disait, que nous avons peut-être besoin; et s’il y a du style, Nietzsche nous l’a rappelé, il doit être pluriel.’<sup>21</sup> This theme is also widely developed in *Éperons*, one of the two Derridean texts published by Adelphi, translated as *Sproni* in 1991. Gayatri Spivak already commented on the fact that Derrida’s own ‘confounding of opposites, with the attendant switching of perspective, might be an example of that plural style.’<sup>22</sup> She maintains that the plural style is, for Derrida, an attempt at holding an action against the impossibility

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<sup>18</sup> Gigli Piccardi, ‘Introduzione’, p. 47.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 47-48.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 78-9.

<sup>21</sup> Derrida, ‘Les fins de l’homme’ *Marges de la philosophie*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1972, p. 163.

<sup>22</sup> Spivak, ‘Translator’s Preface to “Of Grammatology”’, p. xxix.

of breaking out of the enclosure of “interpretation.” This appears to be precisely what Calasso attempts to do through his focus on metamorphosis, transformation, and performance, to allow literature to ‘break free.’

Going back to Calasso’s quotation on the metamorphic artist, we can now appreciate in its fullness the meaning of the artistic initiation in the Dionysian cave/sky. Calasso calls ‘iniziato’ ‘chi che ha toccato un sapere che è invisibile dall’esterno e non comunicabile se non attraverso lo stesso processo di iniziazione.’<sup>23</sup> Both creation, and acting, of which metamorphosis can be seen as a synonym, appear as a form of initiation, through whose performance the artist gains knowledge, which could not be attained outside the creative experience. However, if we push to the extreme the hypothesis that the caves of divine initiation may be mirroring the writing in the sky, we may be able to read in these gods themselves the end of ‘logocentrism.’ Zeus and Dionysus not only deconstruct each other as presence through their mere existence, but also, through their manifestation as writing, they go from being patriarchal images par excellence to being signs in the sky, thus symbols. This is one of the areas where Derrida and Calasso’s thinking and imagination come closest.

### **III. Symbol as metaphor – *Come se***

Calasso’s discussion of Plato’s passage on the poet in the *Republic*, discussed earlier, contains an allusion to Calasso’s key words of *analogia* and *sostituzione*, which he employs recurringly to draw attention to the metaphorical power of language, and to the

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<sup>23</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 293.

writer as a metaphor-making man, as we can see in *I quarantanove gradini*, whereby through his discussion of Marx, he displays a belief in the possibility of survival for ‘absolute literature’ in the world of ‘substitution.’ Calasso reflects on ‘il carattere teatrale della post-storia’, and adds that the hollowness of ‘signified’ in *post-storia* had enlarged its need for ‘signifier.’<sup>24</sup> However, images move from being ‘*feticci*, concrezioni uniche, insostituibili e irriducibili della potenza, to ‘cose [...] la cui virtù è appunto la sostituibilità.’<sup>25</sup>

This text seems to suggest that what cannot be given back by the individual figures in the world of substitution, can be given back by the process of the authorial/textual performance. It also suggests an emptiness of signified in *post-storia* which appears to coincide with Lyotard’s fall of the great metanarratives, or of ‘logocentrism’ and foreground the same game of signification expressed by Derridean *différance*.

Derrida, in *Marges de la philosophie* (1972) proceeds to explain *différance* in terms that echo Calasso’s concept of *sostituzione/sostituibilità*. Speaking of how ‘*différance*’ had been central to Saussure’s thought, he notes that: ‘Dans une langue, dans le système de la langue, il n’y a que des différences.’<sup>26</sup> Even more importantly, a ‘*difference*’ generally implies ‘positive terms between which the ‘*difference*’ is set up; but in language there are only ‘differences’ without positive terms:

Tout concept est en droit et essentiellement inscrit dans une chaîne ou dans un système à l’intérieur duquel il renvoie à l’autre, aux autres concepts, par jeu systématique de différences. Un tel jeu, la *différance*, n’est plus alors simplement un concept mais la possibilité de la conceptualité, du procès et du système conceptuels en général.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Id., ‘Déesses entretenues’ p. 273.

<sup>25</sup> Id., *Kasch*, p. 315.

<sup>26</sup> Derrida, ‘La *différance*’, p. 11.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

Derrida's *différent* is also dependent on a process, on 'jeu', a concept of which he recognizes the Nietzschean origin ['Il faut au contraire l'affirmer, au sens où Nietzsche met l'affirmation en jeu, dans un certain rire et dans un certain pas de la danse.'<sup>28</sup>] in a text that employs theatrical metaphors. Play enables 'difference' to take place, we hear: 'Cet innommable est le jeu qui fait qu'il y a des effets nominaux, des structures relativement unitaires ou atomiques qu'on appelle noms, des chaînes de substitutions de noms, et dans lesquelles, par exemple, l'effet nominal « différence » est lui-même entraîné, emporté, réinscrit.'<sup>29</sup> Derrida's play of *différence* thus appears to require substitution just as much as Calasso's 'absolute literature'. Furthermore, both focus similarly on the themes of *mimesis/metamorphosis*, the residue-supplement, and on the view of the metaphorical play of language.

As anticipated, one of Derrida's most famous texts, 'La double séance' (1972) – a juxtaposed re-reading of Mallarmé's *Mimique* and Plato's *Philebus*, through which Derrida attempts the answer to 'la question *qu'est-ce que la littérature*'<sup>30</sup> lingers on other possible names for *différence*, and discusses specifically that of *entre* (between), and its assonance in French with *antre* ('cave').<sup>31</sup> If we try and read Calasso through this vocabulary, the analogies between some of his views and Derrida's become remarkable.

In Derrida, *entre/antre* is the space in which the game of signification occurs. In Calasso, we recognize the cave/sky as the site of the 'variation,' thus of signification. In both cases a special place is conferred to a mark (what Derrida would call a *hymen*), subsequently discussed by Calasso later in *Ka* through the term 'simbolo'. As

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>30</sup> Id., 'La double séance', p. 219.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 261.

anticipated in the earlier section, I will now proceed to a full review of the theme of symbol and metaphor in Calasso theory and practice of writing.

Vi sono due specie di sostituzione: l'una dice che a sta per b, e implica che a annulli b, lo uccida, talvolta per scoprirne il funzionamento; l'altra dice: a sta per b, ma come una scheggia di granito sta per la montagna da cui si è distaccata. In queste due specie della sostituzione si biforca una Y che a lungo aveva vagato nel cosmo e ora si è ritratta nella mandorla della mente. Il simbolo, non quello dei linguisti ma quello dei Misteri, appartiene alla seconda specie della sostituzione, torna sempre a sovrapporsi a un'invisibile montagna. Che il simbolo sia un'increspatura discontinua perennemente rivolta al continuo si rivela nell'origine del suo nome: *symbolon* è il combaciare delle due metà spezzate di un pezzo di legno o di coccio: torna così a formarsi una superficie liscia e compatta, appena incisa da una lesione trasversale. Più che la sostituzione, a cui pur deve rendere omaggio, il simbolo insegna l'interpretazione, la sovrapposizione indissolubile delle cose: simbolo è un fantasma che entra in un altro fantasma, vi si mescola, vi si dissolve, evade. Il simbolo trascina dietro di sé, *aurea catena*, tutto ciò che ha attraversato.<sup>32</sup>

In the quotation that follows, the term 'simbolo' is presented by Calasso in terms echoing those employed by Laura Simonini in her introduction to the Adelphi edition of Porphyry's *Cave of the Nymphs*. Simonini defines *symbol* as 'la tessera che, divisa in due, permetteva l'identificazione dell'ospite', 'quindi ciò che rivela e nasconde nello stesso tempo'. She concludes that:

Quella del simbolo è una funzione esplicante e complicante insieme, che condensa in sé tutta una fitta trama di strati allusivi, concentra (*syn-bolon* da *syn-ballō*) tempi, linguaggi, significati; per il fatto stesso di collocarsi fra il celato e il manifesto, è polarità di opposti

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<sup>32</sup> Calasso, *Kasch*, p. 273.

che coinvolge e confronta, è interpretazione e, insieme, stimolo all'ermeneutica e all'euristica.<sup>33</sup>

Calasso has thus come to posit two different types of *sostituzione*, one of which becomes the space of literature. In *Le nozze*, this view is mimetically embodied in the tale of Athena and the Palladium, the little wooden statue carved by Athena to evoke her playmate Pallas, killed by the goddess in error.<sup>34</sup>

Here Calasso speaks about two types of 'doppio', the real Palladium and the number of false Palladia scattered throughout the Greek world', who both reproduce themselves in 'simulacro': 'nell'unico Palladio vero, che poteva ardere negli occhi e coprirsi di un sudore salato, se la dea vi scendeva; ma anche negli innumerevoli altri Palladi, dispersi nel mondo e ingannevoli.'<sup>35</sup>

The 'substitution' allowed by the *simbolo dei misteri*, the one whose result is the real Palladium, could be defined as the rhetorical figure of metonymy/synecdoche, or more generally as metaphor. The pages on the Palladium/a also help us appreciate that Calasso's 'substitution' can be seen as a dialogue with that fascinating element of Platonic thought, that Derrida keeps on coming back to; the fact that, despite his hostility to writing, Plato makes recourse to a metaphor of the inscription of truth in the soul: 'il n'est pas moins remarquable ici que la parole soi-disant vive soit tout à coup décrite par une "métaphore" empruntée à l'ordre même de ce qu'on en veut exclure, à l'ordre de son simulacre. [...] La metaphoricité est la logique de la contamination et la contamination de la logique. [...] on pourra dire que la philosophie s'est joué dans le jeu de deux écritures.'<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Laura Simonini, 'Introduzione', in Porfirio, *L'antro delle Ninfe*, Adelphi, Milan, pp. 9-32, p. 21.

<sup>34</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 258.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>36</sup> Derrida, 'La pharmacie de Platon', pp. 186-187.



Similarly Calasso's 'symbol', *aurea catena*, thus a microcosmic image of the Milky Way, and of the snake of mythology, is a 'play between', thus a space which requires traversing, thus experience, like in Dionysian ritual, or in Nietzschean theatre. The 'wound' in the symbol appears to play a similar role to the 'hinge' or 'hymen' in Derrida, to highlight a space, an *entre* within which to release the power of interpretation. This *entre* may have another name, which emerges clearly in Calasso's text through the reference to the mystic 'sostituzione', that of metaphor.

The Derridean reflection on metaphor below confirms that his undoing of opposites is supported by a visionary belief in the power of this rethorical figure akin to Calasso's.

Certes, l'animalité de la lettre paraît d'abord comme une métaphore parmi d'autres.<sup>37</sup>

Mais elle est surtout la métaphore elle-même, l'origine du langage comme métaphore, où l'Être et le Rien, conditions, outre-métaphore, de la métaphore, ne se disent jamais eux-mêmes. La métaphore ou animalité de la lettre, c'est l'équivocité première et infinie du signifiant comme Vie. Subversion psychique de la littéralité inerte, c'est-à-dire de la nature ou de la parole redevenue nature. Cette sur-puissance comme vie du signifiant se produit dans l'inquiétude et l'errance du langage toujours plus riche que le savoir, ayant toujours du mouvement pour aller plus loin que la certitude paisible et sédentaire.<sup>38</sup>

For both authors, metaphor conceals the real power of a language richer than knowledge, the 'absolute' language of Dionysian-Nietzschean experience.

Cette substitution, qui s'opère donc comme un pur jeu de traces et de suppléments ou, si l'on veut encore, dans l'ordre du pur signifiant qu'aucune réalité, qu'aucune référence absolument extérieure, qu'aucun signifié transcendant ne viennent border, limiter,

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<sup>37</sup> Id., 'Edmond Jabès et la question du livre', p. 109.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

contrôler, cette substitution qu'on pourrait juger "folle" parce qu'elle se tient à l'infini dans l'élément de la permutation linguistique de substitués.<sup>39</sup>

The language 'richer than knowledge' is the language of 'substitution' as 'simulation,' a word crucial to an understanding of those post-Nietzschean elements traceable in Calasso's *Dionysus*, and in Derrida. In his discussion on 'Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinn,' Calasso presented language, which is probably the most obvious type of metaphor used by man, a house built on bricks of 'as if,' of analogies and simulations. Derrida's discussion of mimesis in 'La différance' also foregrounds the power of simulation within language. Reflecting on Heidegger's hope in the Anaximander fragment comes to the conclusion that language may not have the 'unique' word needed to name 'being,' however 'Beings speaks always and everywhere throughout language':

Telle est la question: l'alliance de la parole et de l'être dans le mot unique, dans le nom enfin propre. Telle est la question qui s'inscrit dans l'affirmation jouée de la différance. Elle porte (sur) chacun des membres de cette phrase: «L'être/parole/partout et toujours/à travers/toute/langue.»<sup>40</sup>

The power of absolute language is clarified by Calasso, more obscurely in *Le nozze* and more explicitly in *Ka*, as depending on the power of what he calls 'residuo', a theme which appears to mirror Derrida's *supplément*,<sup>41</sup> and which emerges through his

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<sup>39</sup> Id., 'La pharmacie de Platon', pp. 110-111.

<sup>40</sup> Id., 'La différance', p. 29.

<sup>41</sup> Discussed at length in *Grammatologie*

reflections on the relation between literature and sacrifice.

#### **IV. Literature as sacrifice**

Sacrifice is a strong feature of the Dionysian myth, and appears connected to the god as bull. In the tale of Zagreus, the child Dionysus is dismembered by the Titans, like a sacrificial victim, whereas in the tale of the Theban victory of Dionysus it is his enemy Pentheus who ends up dismembered. Calasso, who carefully following Nonnus, traces the Theban ascendance of the god, on the maternal side, from the *genos* of Cadmus, can be seen as having extended the sacrificial space even further. The founding of Thebae is marked by the sacrifice of a bovine, and the death of Dionysus's mother Semele, incinerated by Zeus's lightning, also assumes sacrificial contours. Calasso reminds the reader of the smoke exhaling from her tomb, and elsewhere has linked smoke to sacrifice.

In *Kasch*, a book whose title refers to a legend, showing how 'Il «dono di raccontare»[...] si sostituisce alla «scrittura del cielo»,<sup>42</sup> Calasso reflected on sacrifice in terms echoing Derrida's discussion of Rousseau's *supplément* in *De la grammatologie*. Rather than supplant sacrifice, 'racconto' becomes the 'offerta sacrificale.'<sup>43</sup>

Il nominare stesso, nell'arbitrio che permette di cancellare una cosa e sostituirla un suono, contiene quel primordiale assassinio che il sacrificio, al tempo stesso, svela e tenta di

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<sup>42</sup> Calasso, *Kasch*, p. 173.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

medicare. La tessitura sempre rinnovata delle corrispondenze, i significati ogni volta attribuiti alla singola sillaba, al singolo metro: è tutto un immane tentativo di ricucire la trama intorno a quel minuscolo squarcio prodotto dalla parola, dalla immagine mentale, che annulla un presente per evocare un assente, dal segno: da tutto ciò che sostituisce qualcos'altro, e su cui si edificherà un'altra mirabile costruzione, inversa a quella del sacrificio vedico, che nel suo incessante espandersi sembra presagirla – e volerla ancora celare, finché il ciclo non la susciti quale è oggi, intorno a noi.<sup>44</sup>

Thus the 'minuscolo squarcio', the differential *brisure*, produced by the word, which mirrors sacrifice, also creates the space of 'substitution' and metaphor, which as he explains later in *Ka*, allows the generation of meaning:

Il tempo dedicato al racconto, che all'inizio era stato un'appendice al sapere, crebbe nei suoi interstizi come l'erba fra un mattone e l'altro dell'altare del fuoco, si espanse e si moltiplicò in storie che generavano storie, fino ad avvolgere l'intera costruzione del sapere entro cui era apparso furtivamente, come un intermezzo. Così ha inizio la letteratura. Letteratura è ciò che cresce negli intervalli del sacrificio. Prima è un'erba, poi un rampicante che entra nelle commisure dei mattoni e le spezza dall'interno.<sup>45</sup>

Speaking about the altar of fire of Hindu mythology – not forgetting that through the incineration of Semele and the heat of Sirius, Dionysus is also linked to fire – Calasso's text reveals the link between literature and sacrifice which takes place in the territory that Derrida terms 'entre/antre'. Through words like 'intermezzo', 'intervallo', 'interstizio', and prepositions like 'fra', 'entro', Calasso takes us to the same Dionysian cave as the philosopher of 'difference'.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 181.

<sup>45</sup> Id., *Ka*, p. 362.

Is this cave, as suggested, also Plato's cave? The answer may be *indécidable*. However if we look at Adorno's definition of art, which haunts Calasso, we can recognise in Calasso's search for art in/through the cave an attempt to deal with the metaphysical curse placed on art by the *Republic*. Adorno's definition of art appears to play with the same terms employed by Plato to damn literature. We could thus argue that the Dionysian artist's initiation in the cave has the same starting point – with a different conclusion – as the logocentric damnation of writing. The 'difference' is in the Nietzschean-Dionysian emphasis on sacrifice, metaphor, and play that Calasso constantly reflects on.

«Arte è magia liberata dalla menzogna di essere verità». Dell'arte, inafferrabile per costituzione, si può dare solo una definizione genetica – e quella di Adorno è forse la più bella. Sfuggire alla coazione magica, quale esige il sacrificio, non è soltanto un'astuzia della ragione, che si scarica delle potenze. È anche un gesto che apre una dimensione inaudita: il gioco con gli oggetti sacrificali, con reliquie e relitti che il naufragio del mondo magico abbandona sulle rive della psiche. Tutti i caratteri dell'arte, dalla pervadente ambiguità alla funzione catartica, svelata dal naturalista Aristotele, fino al suo essere «disinteressata», nella formulazione di Kant, sono vestigia sacrificali.<sup>46</sup>

Amongst the 'relitti', the sacrificial residues of art, is the image of the 'scarti', *Sesa*,<sup>47</sup> of the Hindu sun, shaven by the *artifex*:

«Più che per la cosa stessa, per la sostanza, che è sempre inafferrabile e comunque sopraffacente, ci siamo battuti per i residui, gli scarti. E in mezzo ai residui. [...] Ricordiamo sempre che in fondo anche gli dei più nobili, i Dodici, gli Āditya, si formarono quando Tvaṣṭṛ, l'Artefice, ridusse il Sole, perchè la sua luce allagava il mondo. Chiuso

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<sup>46</sup> Id., *Kasch*, p. 203.

<sup>47</sup> Id., *Ka*, p. 460.

nella sua officina, Tvaṣṭṛ lo tosava, lo potava, lo passava e ripassava alla mola. E a terra cadevano trucioli di luce come nella bottega di un carpentiere. Da quei trucioli nacquero gli Ādytia. E se loro furono scarti, ancor più la terra e coloro che la abitano». <sup>48</sup>

Even the gods presiding over ‘absolute literature’ are ‘supplements’ of another god. If this passage echoes the double meaning of the French *supplément* discussed by Derrida in *De la grammatologie*, then the noblest of the gods, the Hindu *Dodici*, are both ‘addition’ and ‘replacement’ of the Sun.

Anche se la sovranità di Zeus rimase intatta, e quel figlio non nacque mai, l’evento in qualche modo si era compiuto: un dio può soltanto spostare il significato delle forme del destino, non cancellarle. Nel suo primo manifestarsi, il simbolo è autodifesa degli dei dal destino. Imponendo alla terra di inghiottire innumerevoli corpi di eroi, Zeus accettava che anche il suo stesso corpo si assottigliasse. Apriva così lo spazio alla parola, vuota intercapedine nel corpo stesso del dio, ricordo di quell’altro Zeus, che era esistito prima di Achille e ora i poeti cantavano, in quanto concedeva loro di cantare Achille. <sup>49</sup>

The magic power of narration-sacrifice, betrays the character of ‘absolute literature’, a residue that frees itself, a Warburgian ‘fugitive’ whose freedom entails some kind of destruction of the author:

Nietzsche parla sin dall’inizio in termini sacrificali, come vuole Dioniso, il suo Dio. Freud vuole svelare il sacrificio originario; Jung vuole che il sacrificio si compia. La letteratura non ha neppure bisogno di parlare del sacrificio: in una sua certa forma – la letteratura assoluta (genealogia della *décadence*: Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Benn, o Flaubert, Proust) – la

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 226.

<sup>49</sup> Id., *Le nozze*, pp. 375-36.

scrittura assume i tratti dell'offerta sacrificale, che implica una qualche distruzione dell'autore.<sup>50</sup>

Is the 'destruction of the author' proposed by Calasso the same as the postmodern death of the author in his textuality? It is a tempting hypothesis. It is certainly remarkable that the death of the author may take place in the realm of Ariadne, a figure who attempts to deal with the multiform textuality of a god who appears 'undecidable' with his Delphic twin, as well as with the human Theseus, as well as with his *pāter* Zeus. If we follow Calasso and employ her representation as an entry point into the figure of Dionysus, and review the references to Dionysus as the astral bull, the 'toro totale' known to Ariadne, rather than the Milky Way, we may find ourselves on familiar ground. The bull as the sacrificial victim becomes the postmodern incarnation of the writer as scapegoat, as 'destroyed' by the power of his 'absolute' writing.

Sacrificando qualcosa che sta per un'altra si avvia la macchina stessa del linguaggio e dell'algebra, la digitalità conquistatrice [...] Il puro scambio, che sistematizza la sostituzione, espunge a poco a poco l'unicità, ricordo della vittima primordiale. Il mondo, alla fine, sarà abitato solo da sostituti.<sup>51</sup>

The world of copies of copies, inhabited by 'substitutes,' is the post-Platonic world of *grammé*, whose creation and interpretation both require the residuality of metaphor, as echoed in Derrida's pages on Zarathustra:

[In Zarathustra] Il faudra descendre, travailler, se pencher pour graver et porter la Table nouvelle aux vallées, la lire et la faire lire. L'écriture est l'issue comme descente hors de soi

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<sup>50</sup> Id., *Kasch*, p. 216.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 215.

en soi du sens: métaphore-pour-autrui-en-vue-d'autrui-ici-bas, métaphore comme possibilité d'autrui ici-bas, métaphore comme métaphysique où l'être doit se cacher si l'on veut que l'autre apparaisse.<sup>52</sup>

We have seen that the theme of literature as sacrifice is one of the most obviously prominent features in Calasso's work. On the basis of the discussion so far, its emergence should however be read as a contemporary trait of his writing. Once again, in theorising literature as sacrifice, Calasso relies on the inspiration of Nietzsche but comes to conclusions similar to Derrida.

## **V. Ariadne and the theatre of the Milky Way**

### **V.i The garland/crown and sacrifice**

The theme of sacrifice offers a good opportunity to link into another of the themes emerging out of Calasso's portrayal of the artist as Dionysus. This is the metaphorical image of the garland/crown of mythology, linked directly and explicitly with sacrifice, in a discussion which generates a number of further reflections.

Calasso exemplifies his views through the re-writing of one of the most memorable pages of Greek theatre, the sacrifice of Iphigenia: 'Nella corona, in origine, era essenziale la separazione. Primordiale cerchio magico, spartiva il mondo tra un sacro frammento (la vittima sacrificale, la sposa, la statua) e tutto il resto.'<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Derrida, 'Force et signification', p. 49.

<sup>53</sup> *Le nozze*, p. 132.



The author fluctuates between anthropology and ‘absolute literature’, and references the simulacrum alongside the sacrificial victim (‘Il sacro è impregnante, invade una fanciulla, una bestia, un simulacro, e li colma.’<sup>54</sup>), before rapidly moving on to a conclusion that appears to contain a reference to the golden age of Greek tragedy, the age before philosophy and the ‘metaphysics of presence’ corroded the foundations of theatre as ritual: ‘La corona un tempo racchiudeva il sacro, separandolo dal mondo comune. Alla fine, racchiuderà il perfetto nella sua pienezza autosufficiente. Operando un accorto e tacito slittamento di piani, i Greci sottrassero la corona al rito e al sangue.’

<sup>55</sup> Calasso continues:

I Greci evasero dal sacro verso il perfetto, confidando nella sovranità dell’estetico. Fu un’evasione brevissima, che si mantenne finché durò la tensione tra il sacro ed il perfetto, finché il sacro e il perfetto riuscirono a convivere senza diminuirsi. Ma nessun’altra tribù l’aveva tentata.<sup>56</sup>

Between the lines of this discussion, which also seems influenced by the reading of Colli and Nietzsche, can be detected Aristotle’s and Eratosthenes’ lines on the birth of tragedy from a song/ sacrifice of/on a goat, explicitly discussed earlier in *Le nozze*.<sup>57</sup> The text also appears to be extending the macro-metaphor of the *corona*, under the name of Dionysus, in a new direction. Having already been linked to the starry belt of Aphrodite and the metafictional simulacrum of Helen, Calasso moves the *corona* to the stage of the Aeschylean Agamemnon, the tragedy on a murder, pervaded, as he notes,

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., pp. 54-55.

by ‘terminologia sacrificale,’<sup>58</sup> and which results in one of the best known scenes of Greek theatre.

Nel cinto di Afrodite, nella corona, nel corpo di Elena e nel suo simulacro il bello si sovrappone alla necessità, avvolgendola nell’inganno.[...] La vera spaccatura della greicità,[...] si ha quando Platone per la prima volta afferma “quanto differiscano nel loro essere la natura del necessario e quella del bene.”[...] Il Bello, allora, o sarà bruscamente riassorbito nel Bene, come suo agente, strumento e pedagogo, – o rimarrà sospeso nell’aria, come una fattura (goēteuma) maligna, che illude la mente per sottometterla ancor più all’impero della necessità. In Omero, ancora, il Bene non è neppure nominato: felici e infelici, i suoi guerrieri conoscono soltanto la stoffa screziata della necessità, si appagano di quello splendore, che alla fine li uccide. “Il mortale non può calcare senza paura le bellezze variegata” dice Agamennone, pochi attimi prima di cadere sotto l’ascia di Clitemnestra.<sup>59</sup>

The *corona* becomes ‘le bellezze variegata’ of the last sentence pronounced by Agamennone before he was slain by Clytemnestra. For the Aeschylean spectator this could be a metanarrative reference to the stage Agamemnon-actor is treading. Thus, Calasso may be deliberately drawing attention to the *corona* as a metaphor for the theatre.

## V. ii Ariadne’s *spiazzo*

La storia di Arianna è intrecciata tutta in una corona.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., pp. 136-7.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

I will now take a step back and reflect on Ariadne-reader's reception of the other astral symbol connected with Dionysus, that of the snake. Calasso often stresses that two astral symbols, which mark the authorial Zeus *pāter*, the bull and the snake, also characterize Dionysus. Thus the frieze in the sky of Dionysus can be recognized not just as a 'variation' of the astral bull, but as snake and double of Zeus, also of the Milky Way. This element is made prominent in the text through the re-working of the figure of Ariadne, and its authorial/theatrical implications.

I draw attention once more to the tale of Ariadne and Theseus, used by Calasso to present Apollo not as the opposite of Dionysus, but a misleading ('loxias') and blinding way back into him. 'Da una parte Teseo ripeteva il gesto del dio, dall'altra Arianna tradiva il dio perché lo straniero potesse uccidere il Minotauro, che al dio Toro apparteneva.'<sup>61</sup> But also Arianna is misled, in her belief that Teseo will bring her outside 'il cerchio del Toro', when he also belongs to the bull:

A Nasso, quando riapparve, Dioniso brandiva una corona raggiante. Arianna la guardava e pensava alle altre corone che erano state pe lei l'origine di tutti gli inganni. Ora sapeva che quella corona erasempre stata la stessa. Ora la storia era davvero finita, e prigioniera di quella corona raggiante Arianna sarebbe rimasta solitaria nel cielo: Corona Borealis.<sup>62</sup>

I will discuss other elements of the connection between Arianna and the *corona* in section III of chapter 10, including footnote 41. For now, I would like to draw attention to the fact that, as well as declaring Dionysus a bull, the text actually hints strongly to Dionysus as the snake of the Milky Way, symbolized through the *corona* given to Ariadne by Dionysus. As well as the snake of mythology, embodied by Calasso's Zeus,

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

it is possible to recognize in *Le nozze* another image behind the Milky Way and the snake: that of the theatre, which appears to be the only place where the ‘undecidability’ of Dionysus with both Zeus and Apollo can be fully experienced.

A theatrical element accompanies Ariadne from the beginning, and Calasso even employs it to foreground her ‘undecidability’ with Coronis. Coronis or Aegle, lover of Apollo and mother of Aesculapius, was from the city of Panopeus, called by Homer ‘bello spiazzo per la danza’, where the Thyades – followers of Dionysus, performed. Also the Labyrinth where Ariadne used to dance was a ‘spiazzo.’<sup>63</sup>

Through a number of *spicchi* of her myth, Ariadne is declared as a dancer and a performer. Furthermore in her tale the complex relationship between Apollo, Dionysus and Theseus appears under the mark of simulation, of *come se*. The gods, explains Calasso, were undertaking a ‘traslatio imperii’ from Crete to Athens. However, Theseus would provide the diversion, a simulation, which appears as a summary of the traditional motifs of Greek theatre: ‘E tutto avveniva attraverso Teseo, perchè di altro si doveva narrare: di fanciulle sacrificate, amori, duelli, abbandoni, suicidi, e il melodramma umano doveva coprire con le sue arie e con il suo chiacchiericcio la sostanza muta del patto divino.’<sup>64</sup>

In the text surrounding Ariadne, even the ‘cerchio del toro’ could be seen as a metaphor for theatre, the place where actors were wearing masks to mimic and re-enact metamorphosis. The quotation above should be reviewed in the light of the constant celebration throughout *Le nozze* of the epistemological power of a Nietzschean-Dionysian ‘theatrical’ practice of *as if*: ‘Noi non siamo fatti per sapere, ma per agire come se sapessimo.’<sup>65</sup> Calasso explains:

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>65</sup> Id., ‘Monologo fatale’, p. 40.

Per avvicinarsi alla necessità il pensiero ha bisogno della simulazione [...] come ne aveva avuto bisogno per difendersi dalla necessità stessa. Il mondo è bifronte in ogni punto: i suoi elementi restano costanti, il loro uso è perennemente doppio. Forse mai come in Nietzsche questo sospetto ha raggiunto l'evidenza, non a caso in forma teatrale.<sup>66</sup>

Even though the quote on the *translatio imperii* on the surface states the opposite, acting is not the prerogative of humans in *Le nozze*. If the theatre is the place of simulation par excellence, in the union between Ariadne and Dionysus, blessed by a crown, 'segno di ciò che è perfetto [...] perfezione dell'inganno',<sup>67</sup> there may be a metanarrative element. This possibility is supported by the constant reminders in the text of the presence of simulation ('inganno') within the 'crown.' For example in the already quoted 'Nel cinto di Afrodite, nella corona, nel corpo di Elena e nel suo simulacro il bello si sovrappone alla necessità, avvolgendola nell'inganno,'<sup>68</sup> or in the re-writing of the tale of Prometheus's deceit,<sup>69</sup> and of the betrayal of Eriphile.<sup>70</sup>

If all gods can be read as actors because of metamorphosis, Calasso, like Nietzsche, appears strongly bent on portraying Dionysus as the 'comedian,' the writer whose knowledge, as per 'Monologo fatale', is 'commedia della conoscenza.'<sup>71</sup> His portrayal is an acknowledgement of the god as represented in Euripides's *Bacchae* – a Dionysus displaying the traits of an actor, and of an artist's alter ego. This is also an apt representation of the contemporary writer, which resists the 'death of the author' by playing the Proteian game of metamorphosis, by offering to critics/readers its fragmented and multiform textuality. Thus Ariadne's wedding to Dionysus in the cave is part of her reading, of her experience of multiform textuality, the *poikilia* of

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>67</sup> *Le nozze*, p. 33.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., pp.136-137.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., pp.130-131.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., pp.134-135.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

Dionysus-actor-writer-written and accomplice of Theseus and Apollo, in a sense clearly akin to Derrida's key tenet of *indécidabilité*.

The text seems to suggest that, like the oracle of Delphi, the theatre of Dionysus is also the site of the theatre of Apollo. Colli may have inspired this interpretation, as, in what appeared like a transgression of *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, he underlined a theatrical element of Apollo. Nietzsche, he claims, has revealed that:

quanto lo spettatore ateniese vede laggiù [...] non è altro che uno spettacolo per il coro, una visione che appare al coro. Quindi chi agisce – l'attore sulla scena – non esiste, è soltanto uno spettacolo in assoluto, e quanto al coro, che agisce e contempla assieme, è spettacolo per lo spettatore. Costui guarda un'azione che è già spettacolo per chi agisce, non è spettatore direttamente, ma soltanto – per magia di Apollo – vede qualcuno che contempla uno spettacolo e glielo racconta.<sup>72</sup>

Derrida similarly stressed that Dionysus 'est travaillé par la différence' and particularly that 'il a rapport à son dehors, à la forme visible, à la structure,'<sup>73</sup> and thus to the Apollinean light. Dionysus 'voit et se laisse voir,'<sup>74</sup> like the actor on stage.

But it is not only Dionysus's (and Apollo's) theatre that we recognize as one with Ariadne's crown. Calasso underlined that the first love encounter between Dionysus and Ariadne – the one blessed by a crown – takes place in a cave.<sup>75</sup> The crown she receives in this cave is 'una seduzione avvolgente', 'la perfezione dell'inganno.'<sup>76</sup> Thus, I would suggest that Ariadne-reader meets Dionysus-author-text in Plato's cave, the site employed by the Greek philosopher to question representation, and the relationship

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<sup>72</sup> Colli, *Scritti di Nietzsche*, p. 28.

<sup>73</sup> Derrida, 'Force et signification', pp. 47-48.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>75</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 33.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

between mimetic art and reality.

We can thus extend the macrometaphor of the *corona* into a number of directions, all ‘variations’ linked by the game of ‘difference’: the *corona* of the writing in the sky of the Milky Way, the *corona* of mythology-mithography of Zeus, the *corona-omphalos* of Delphi where Apollo and Dionysus-Python merge into a symbol with a *brisure* in the name of *mimesis*, the *corona* of the Cretan cave, where the ‘undecidability’ between Zeus and Dionysus is played out and the *corona* of the theatre. All of the aforementioned *varianti* have in common their celebration of an inscription, and the ‘undecidability’ of the text in that inscription.

The passage from the neoplatonist Salust, whom Calasso holds so dear, acquires new relevance in the light of this connection:

Dice Salustio in *Degli dei e del mondo*: “Poiché il mondo stesso lo si può chiamare mito, in quanto corpi e cose vi appaiono, mentre le anime e gli spiriti vi si nascondono.” Occorreva dunque, alla fine della paganism, questo oscuro trattatello neoplatonico, perchè del mito ci fosse offerta una definizione così abbagliante nella sua semplicità da vanificarne ogni altra. Dunque quando guardiamo intorno a noi lo spettacolo del mondo, ci troviamo già dentro a un mito. Dunque ora possiamo capire perchè le storie mitiche, anche quando giungono a noi frammentate e mutilate, ci suonano familiari e diverse da tutte le altre storie. Quelle storie sono un paesaggio, sono il nostro paesaggio, ostili e invitanti simulacri che nessuno ha inventato, che continuiamo ad incontrare, che aspettano da noi soltanto di essere riconosciuti.<sup>77</sup>

We may still be in the ‘paesaggio’ of Plato’s cave, after all, because Plato’s cave, Mallarmé’s cave, and the ‘cave of the Nymphs’ of ‘absolute literature’ may be just instances of *différence* and repetition. Beyond the metaphorical affinity we can detect a

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<sup>77</sup> Id., ‘Il terrore delle parole’, pp. 21-22.

theoretical affinity. For Calasso, as for Plato, we are surrounded by myth, veiled by art. But is precisely through myth – the myth of the Cave – that we are led to truth. It is in the judgement of that ‘veil’ that Calasso and Plato may differ. Plato was using art yet retained concerns about it, whereas in ‘absolute literature’ art is the ultimate experience of truth.

As Ariadne, Europa and the Pythia all demonstrated, whichever name and metaphor we may choose as an entry point into the experience of the garland of *mitografia*, these *corone* rely on the figure of a woman to be deciphered/mediated/mastered. The representation of Dionysus, because of his closeness to Ariadne, but also because of his *mixis* with the feminine, is a good channel for appreciating further this element of Calasso’s text.

## VI. Dionysus and the ‘other’

Il visionario Bachofen, lo scopritore del Dioniso più acutamente insidioso, perché complice non solo dell’Oriente ma della sovranità femminile.<sup>78</sup>

This reflection from *La letteratura e gli dei* goes hand in hand with the ones in *Le nozze* that make of Dionysus a god of *mixis*. Calasso clearly articulates his own vision of Dionysus as that of a bridge into ‘otherness,’ both cultural and sexual. I recommend dealing with his vision in the light of Lacan’s view that ‘Nella dialettica fallocentrica essa [la donna] rappresenta l’altro assoluto,’<sup>79</sup> which Calasso’s Dionysus appears, if not

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<sup>78</sup> Id., *La letteratura*, p. 61.

<sup>79</sup> Derrida, *Il fattore della verità*, p. 106. For Lacan’s discussion, see Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, Seuil, Paris, 1966, p. 372.



to reverse, to play with, to deconstruct.

The Dionysus of *Le nozze* is clearly marked by the feminine. Following tradition, Calasso tells us that in the lineage of this astral bull/snake are the nymphs, whose beauty put in motion the world of metamorphosis: Io, Europa, Semele. Furthermore, according to one *variante*, known to Nonnus, the first Dionysus, Zagreus, was generated by Zeus with his daughter Persephone, or Kore, a ‘fanciulla’, thus, the nymph par excellence,<sup>80</sup> of whom Porphyry states: ‘Anche Demetra alleva Kore in un antro tra le Ninfe.’<sup>81</sup>

The god’s ‘femininity’ is traditional – Pentheus in *Bacchae* attacked the new god for being effeminated. However, between the lines of his Dionysus’ femininity, it is possible to detect elements that enrich Calasso’s self-reflective image of Dionysus as the god of post-Nietzschean (poststructuralist) textuality. ‘Evocato dalle donne di Argo come un toro che emerge dalle acque, Dioniso è il dio che ha estrema familiarità con le donne [...] Se le Cariti gli fanno un regalo, sarà un peplo, che è veste femminile.’<sup>82</sup> As ‘toro che emerge dalle acque’ the god is connected with that (mental) water that Calasso saw as symbolic of the Warburgian nymph. His ‘estrema familiarità’ with women appears justified by a connection to vegetation, and with humidity and with fluids. The god of wine, and thus of grapes, shares with the nymphs ‘la fisiologia’ and ‘la natura umida.’<sup>83</sup>

Whilst this can be explained with the symbolism of the grape juice, a liquid that becomes wine, present in Nonnus, who in Book VI of *Dionysiaca*, [‘tramite la vite] goes as far as turning Dionysus into a sort of ‘albero della vita’,<sup>84</sup> it can also be reconnected to the Warburgian triad, and thus to mythology. The water and the snake

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<sup>80</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 235.

<sup>81</sup> Porfirio, *L’antro delle Ninfe*, pp. 78-79.

<sup>82</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 59.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>84</sup> Gigli Piccardi, ‘Introduzione’, pp. 7-83.

both pre-announce the nymph in the German critic, thus not just the ancestry but even the symbology of Dionysus is feminine. Dionysus's wine can be seen as a simulation of the Nymphs' mental water, as well as a way into it, through *ekstasis*. Thus, the god of theatre appears to simultaneously be and simulate that middle ground, that space of metaphor, into which the hymeneal power of 'absolute literature' manifests itself.

As seen in the discussion of the fight between Apollo and Python, which can be read as an image of Dionysus,<sup>85</sup> Apollo recognizes in the snake 'la rappresentazione'. Dionysus is/simulates the *rappresentazione* through *mixis/mimesis*, and through this simulation attempts to attain the truth of art, a truth which is itself 'feminine', and that he mimics by becoming feminine.

This is his way to access the 'knowledge through metamorphosis', which concentrates itself in one place, which was simultaneously a spring, a serpent and a nymph.<sup>86</sup> The 'difference' between Apollo and Dionysus in Delphi is all played out in the name of this primordial 'nymphidic' knowledge, whose understanding escapes the modern,<sup>87</sup> accessed through *mixis* by Dionysus and through violence by Apollo – who aspires to the control of *possessione*. Colli was well aware of these concepts and uses *possessione* to undermine the traditional opposition between Apollo and Dionysus:

Su questo intreccio religioso, sul suo simbolismo e la sua apparente gerarchia ci ammaestra Platone nel Fedro, con un discorso sulla follia. "Mantica" deriva da "mania" etimologicamente (i moderni sono d'accordo) e per essenza, cioè l'arte della divinazione, l'apice del culto di Apollo, discende dalla follia. A questa mania apollinea è strettamente collegata, e per di più, almeno secondo l'acciaio platonico, in posizione subordinata, la mania dionisiaca dell'orgiasmo e dei misteri. Che l'esaltazione, il furore, l'ebbrezza, il

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<sup>85</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p.174, where Python is indicated as 'vicino a Dioniso'.

<sup>86</sup> Forsters, 'Introduction', p. 21.

<sup>87</sup> Calasso, 'La follia', pp. 27-28.

superamento dell'individuo, dei suoi giudizi e delle sue menzogne costituiscano la manifestazione culminante di Apollo, era stato dichiarato altresì da Eraclito: “la Sibilla con bocca folle dice, attraverso il dio, cose senza riso, né ornamento, né unguento.”<sup>88</sup>

Thus, Colli helps us clarify what remains more implicit in *Le nozze*'s statement that Apollo and Dionysus are ‘falsi nemici’ because ‘entrambi sanno che la possessione è la più alta forma della conoscenza ed il più alto potere.’<sup>89</sup>

Calasso, as seen at page 217, reminds the reader that Dionysus may even have been the first Pythia [‘Dioniso, secondo alcuni, fu il primo a vaticinare dal tripode [...] un serpente si attorcigliò intorno alle zampe del tripode’<sup>90</sup>], and reconnects *mania* to a feminine element, as it is the result of the arrow (‘dardo’) introduced by Aphrodite [‘perché la possessione erotica è il fondo di qualsiasi possessione. Per Afrodite è un giocattolo ciò che a Delfi è un enigma’].<sup>91</sup>

The Dionysus ‘insidioso’, ‘complice’ of the ‘otherness’ ‘dell’Oriente e della sovranità femminile’, is also the god of *mania*, the madness that takes to *ekstasis*, thus of the undoing of the Nietzschean ‘I’. It is worth comparing Colli and Calasso’s reflections on *ekstasis* and *mania* with Foucault’s definition of a ‘pensiero del di fuori’:

Cette pensée qui se tient hors de toute subjectivité pour en faire surgir comme de l’extérieur les limites, en énoncer la fin, en faire scintiller la dispersion et n’en recueillir que l’invincible absence, et qui en même temps se tient au seuil de toute positivité, non pas tant pour en saisir le fondement ou la justification, mais pour retrouver l’espace où elle se déploie, le vide qui lui sert de lieu, la distance dans laquelle elle se constitue et où s’esquivent, dès qu’on y porte le regard, ses certitudes immédiates – cette pensée, par

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<sup>88</sup> Colli, *Dopo Nietzsche*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>89</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 169.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

rapport à l'intériorité de notre réflexion philosophique et en rapport à la positivité de notre savoir, constitue ce qu'on pourrait appeler d'un mot «la pensée du dehors».<sup>92</sup>

The poststructuralist search for the site of a thought unbound by the limits of the 'metaphysics of presence,' and Calasso's search for the site of 'absolute literature', appear, once again, strangely similar.

In Calasso, the Dionysian access to the *autre*, and to the *pensée du dehors* is granted through simulation. This, as seen, is an art mastered by Ariadne as well as Dionysus. Remarkably, the brief text read by Derrida at Cérisy, where he reflected on the 'donna dionisiaca' of Nietzsche, published by Adelphi, puts forward the view that Nietzsche saw truth as specular of the woman, exemplified through a metaphor of 'Verità come velo.'<sup>93</sup> In this text Derrida claims that in Nietzsche, 'la donna viene riconosciuta e affermata quale potenza affermativa, dissimulatrice, artistica, dionisiaca.'<sup>94</sup> The access of Calasso's Dionysus's to 'otherness' may have granted him the revelation/simulation of a similar truth: 'Giacché se la donna è verità, *essa* sa che la verità non c'è, che la verità non ha luogo e che la verità non si possiede. Ed essa donna in quanto, per quello che la concerne, non crede alla verità, non crede, cioè, a quello che essa è e a quello che si crede che che sia: e cioè che non è.'<sup>95</sup>

I will discuss this theme in detail in chapter X, so for now I will limit myself to the conclusion that Dionysus's markers of 'otherness' are strong throughout *Le nozze*, and clearly concur in defining him as the enemy of Apollo precisely under the sign of *mimesis*, thus of dissimulation. The secrecy around Dionysus's role at Delphi is according to Calasso an attempt to disguise 'il loro passato in quel luogo', because

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<sup>92</sup> Foucault, 'La pensée du dehors', p. 549.

<sup>93</sup> Derrida, *Sproni*, p. 57.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., pp. 89-90.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

Dionysus's role in relation to the opposition between Apollo and the serpent(ess) Python would have unveiled Dionysus 'nella sua occulta figura di Nemico, emanazione di Pitone, della potenza che Apollo uccise e lasciò a putrefarsi al sole.'<sup>96</sup> Thus, to go back to Lacan's statement that in *phallogentric* dialectic woman is 'l'altro assoluto,' we can say that Calasso employs his Dionysus as an opportunity to play with 'otherness', to simulate, and know through mimesis 'l'altro assoluto', but also possibly – and undecidably – to partake of the *other*'s nature as well as Apollo's.

It is worth underlining that dissimulation is a cipher Dionysus shares not only with the woman-nymph, but also with another Olympian brother, recurring in Derrida's thought, and, in appearance, almost absent in *Le nozze*, yet constantly evoked throughout it: the god Hermes.

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<sup>96</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 174.

## Chapter IX

### The hidden god – ‘Hermetic’ theory and practice

#### [Abstract]

In this chapter I will explore Calasso’s cryptic treatment of the god Hermes, concealed throughout *Le nozze*, where typical Hermetic characteristics are instead explored, which contribute to making of the wandering heroes Odysseus and Cadmus figures of *letterati*. Through my discussion of the representation of Theseus, I will call attention to the notion of ‘exchange’, in which we can recognise the shadow of the god of commerce, and how it affects the image of literature emerging from *Le nozze*.

I will then explore the textual images of Cadmus and Odysseus in search of clues to the reasons for his concealment of Hermes, and discuss these clues in the light of the treatment reserved for Hermes in Derrida’s ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’. I will use this text to demonstrate that Calasso’s ‘representation’ of Hermes through ‘absence’ echoes a poststructuralist belief in the ‘differential’ power of writing, embodied by Hermes and his emissaries Odysseus and Cadmus.

I will further highlight that his *critpografia* of the god Hermes between the lines of the text actually results in formal games, which foreground the metanarrative role of the god of writing on the border between theme and form of the text.

## I. Hermes – The absent god

Sans doute le dieu Thoth a-t-il plusieurs visages, plusieurs époques, plusieurs habitats.<sup>1</sup>

If Calasso foregrounds Dionysus's bridge into 'otherness' through the figure of the nymph, he appears to avoid discussing another 'other' of Dionysus, a third Olympian brother, whose 'undecidability' with Dionysus and Apollo has extremely powerful implications for 'absolute literature'. It is Hermes, the god presiding over 'substitution' and 'exchange,' thus the closest to the condition of a *letterato of post-storia*.

Even when he references Praxiteles' *Hermes*, in his re-writing of Phidias' *Zeus*, Calasso does not describe the god of commerce, and avoids discussing the relationship between this deity and Dionysus, adumbrated in this statue.<sup>2</sup> His "omission" of Hermes is even more remarkable when we consider that in Nonnus, on whom Calasso so openly relies, Hermes is shown to save Dionysus four times,<sup>3</sup> and even to name him.<sup>4</sup>

This erasure of Hermes has affected even the materiality of the book. In the original Italian edition of *Le nozze*, Hermes, almost absent in the text, re-appears, in a Warburgian return, on the cover, armed with helmet and caduceus. On the most recent edition (2004)<sup>5</sup>, even this pictorial reference has been removed. Considering that Calasso believes that the 'forma' of book extends beyond its structure and style, to 'il modo in cui il libro si presenta in quanto oggetto. Perciò include la copertina, la grafica, l'impaginazione, i caratteri, la carta'<sup>6</sup> this conscious erasure reinforces my belief that

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida, 'La pharmacie de Platon', p. 106

<sup>2</sup> According to Fraser, whose travel notes on the footsteps of Pausanias has been published by Adelphi, Praxiteles's statue 'sul braccio sinistro regge il piccolo Dioniso' and 'il suo sguardo [Dioniso's] è fisso sull'oggetto che Hermes doveva reggere nella mano destra [...] Forse era un grappolo d'uva.' James Fraser, *Sulle tracce di Pausania*, Adelphi, Milano, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Daria Piccardi Gigli, notes to Nonno, *Dionisiache*, p. 639, note to vv. 27-9.

<sup>4</sup> Nonno, *Dionisiache*, IX, vv. 17-20.

<sup>5</sup> Roberto Calasso, *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia*, Adelphi, Milan, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Calasso, 'L'editoria come genere letterario', p. 118.

Hermes plays in *Le nozze* an important role, one that makes the author want to conceal him, in order to allude to him through/as absence: ‘La mercurialità, che preannuncia gli dei, è anche il segno della loro evanescenza,’<sup>7</sup> Calasso will say, fascinatingly, in *La letteratura*.

In my view, with the omission of Hermes, Calasso has chosen to deal with the literary and philosophical tradition which recognizes in him the god of writing.<sup>8</sup> In this tradition, which can be said to have started with Plato’s *Phaedrus*, the names of Joyce (Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man) and J.L. Borgés (‘La sphere de Pascal’ and ‘Tlön, Uqbar,Urbius Tertius’) stand out.<sup>9</sup> Making the god of writing disappear from the scene of a book dedicated to the return of the gods in books, is a choice that deserves some reflection. There is certainly an element of play with the absolute reader, invited to recognize the god in the text through one of the god’s traditional characteristics – furtiveness; the authorial decision of not representing him appears inspired precisely by ‘mercurialità’.

‘Hermes il ladro, Mercurio pieno di strategemmi, un malizioso monello, è lo psicopompo che conduce al nascosto, salvandoci dal letteralismo e dalla paranoia’.<sup>10</sup> So Hermes is defined by the Adelpi author Hillman, who concludes that Hermes’ playfulness is an invitation to play, to engage the reader in the creative activity: ‘L’esegesi diventa allora non già un disvelamento del significato nascosto, bensì piuttosto una *poiēsis*, un’elaborazione poetica del dato, condotta nel piacere di un incessante immaginare.’<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that Hillman proposes his reading of the

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<sup>7</sup> Id., *La letteratura*, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> See for example the entry ‘Hermes’ at <http://www.theoi.com/Olympios/Hermes.html>, visited on 21/06/08

<sup>9</sup> For a good review of Borgés’ place in this tradition and also his influence on Derrida see Emir Rodriguez Monegal, ‘Borges and Derrida Apothecaries’ in Edna Aizenberg ed., *Borges and his Successors*, Missouri University Press, Columbia, 1990, pp. 128-138.

<sup>10</sup> Hillman, *La vana fuga dagli dei*, p. 67.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 72.



playfulness of Hermes in contrast with the literal interpretation typical of Schreber<sup>12</sup> – Freud’s case study on paranoia that inspired Calasso’s *L’impuro folle*.

Rather than directly discussing the god Hermes, called by Hillman ‘il dio della rivelazione’, Calasso chooses to lend Hermetic characteristics to heroes, particularly Theseus, Cadmus, and Odysseus, for the reader to decipher. This choice of portraying Hermes indirectly, through other characters, may be in agreement with that secondariness of the god, which Derrida isolates as a typical trait of ‘mercurialità’: for example, in his discussion of *Phaedrus*, where the Egyptian ‘homologue’<sup>13</sup> of Hermes, that is portrayed by Derrida as ‘un personnage subordonné, un second [...] un serviteur ruse et ingénieux admis à comparaître devant le roi des dieux.’<sup>14</sup>

## **I.i The third brother**

Before moving on to his secondary, indirect representations, I will review the few appearances of Hermes in the text.

Tracing the ‘archaeology’ of Delphi, *Le nozze* – like *L’impuro folle*, and *La letteratura* – bears a trace of the mysterious role played by this god:

Apollo vuole l’invasamento scandito dal metro, vuole imprimere subito il sigillo della forma sul flusso dell’entusiasmo. Anche la logica viene imposta da Apollo. Come metro vincolante nel flusso della mente. Rispetto all’intelligenza guizzante, disordinata e furtiva di Hermes, Apollo tracciò una linea di confine: a Hermes la divinazione con i dadi e le ossa,

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<sup>12</sup> Hillman reflects: ‘Dove finisce il delirio e dove comincia la rivelazione? Hermes cammina sui confini. Ed Hermes, ha detto Jung in una conferenza a Eranos, è il dio della rivelazione [...] E poiché Hermes è il dio della rivelazione, alle rivelazioni va prestato ascolto solo con orecchio ermetico, mercuriale, intendendo i loro significati come finzioni, trasponendo la parola dello spirito in immagine poetica, un passo che il povero Schreber non poteva compiere a causa dell’assassinio dell’anima, perché era stato privato dell’eco psichica capace di mediare, e il messaggio era rimasto letterale.’ *Ibid.* p. 58.

<sup>13</sup> Derrida, ‘La pharmacie de Platon’, p. 109.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

a lui poteva anche concedere le Trie, le fanciulle del miele, che pure aveva amato; ma a sé Apollo riservava l'oracolo della parola, il supremo, invincibile.<sup>15</sup>

A first question the text generates is about the truthfulness of the claim that Apollo has exclusive access to 'la parola'. We have seen in the discussion of Dionysus that *Le nozze* indicates that Apollo's Delphic twin is also granted such access (and that in some way, as undistinguishable with from *rappresentazione*, he can be said to become that access). However, in a text rich in both allusions and direct references to Dionysus and Apollo's relationship with language, Calasso's decision to limit the presentation of the relationship with the word of the god Hermes to this brief allusion deserves consideration.

The passage on the two types of *possessione* suddenly does away with Dionysus and replaces him with Hermes. Whilst Calasso's Delphic discussion appears to focus on the false opposition between Apollo and Dionysus, between the lines it suggests an opposition between Apollo and Hermes, who may have ruled over Delphi before Apollo, thus inviting an "artistic" reading of Hermes, as a precursor of the Loxias.

An important element of this artistic reading is the role of the 'fanciulle del miele', who haunt Calasso's production, before and after *Le nozze*. In *L'impuro folle* Teiresias reveals that Apollo, 'nemico segreto del miele' got rid of the Thriai, three 'api-fanciulle' who had fed him, and who 'si inebriavano di miele prima di vaticinare',<sup>16</sup> by giving them to Hermes. He adds that Apollo replaced the first temple 'di cera e piume' of Delphi with one of bronze thus making the oracle 'la residenza del puro assassinio, la nobile colpa, l'eroico distacco, la grande sobrietà occidentale.'<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 170.

<sup>16</sup> Id., *L'impuro folle*, p. 111.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.112.

Specialists of Greek literature and culture like Simonini have used available information on the Thriai to support a relationship between Hermes and bees and to attest that ‘presso il Parnaso esisteva un oracolo di Hermes.’<sup>18</sup> Simonini however adds that ‘Una tradizione [from Pausanias and Philostratus] attesta l’antico rapporto tra Apollo e le api,’ and also that “Melissa” [bee] was ‘epiteto della Pizia’<sup>19</sup> and of the priestesses of Apollo. Thus Calasso’s text adumbrates a mysterious relationship between the two deities, which, from our contemporary standpoint, may only be received as *indécidable*. The Thriai, called simply ‘le fanciulle del miele,’<sup>20</sup> return in *Le nozze* and from their presentation in the discussion of the theme of possession seem to be employed to question the stated exclusivity of Apollo’s power over *logos* and ‘writing.’ Calasso’s ‘La follia’, which is in many ways a commentary on *Le nozze*, sanctions this interpretation. It relates that Apollo gives the Thriai to Hermes, with their dices, and ‘parole che le umiliavano.’<sup>21</sup> But it adds that the Thriai pass to Apollo not only the oracular knowledge of ‘vaticinio’, but even the art of archery,<sup>22</sup> whose metaphorical relationship with writing, as seen in the discussion of Apollo, is well documented.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, we can conclude that the simbology of the bee and the bee-nymphs, as well as corroding the image of Apollo as god of *logos* with the power of ‘undecidability’, lends support to a reading of Hermes as writer. So does the ‘undecidability’ between the figure of the *Pythia*, whose poetic connotations we have already explored, and the Thriai.

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<sup>18</sup> Laura Simonini, ‘Commento’, in Porfirio, *L’antro delle ninfe*, Adelphi, Milano, 1986, pp. 89-250, p.173

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 172-173.

<sup>20</sup> Omero, *Inni omerici*, BUR, Milan, 1996, vv. 552-563.

<sup>21</sup> Calasso, ‘La follia’, p. 14.

<sup>22</sup> Calasso mentions that according to the Homeric ‘Hymn to Hermes’ the Triadi instruct Apollo in this discipline. Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> It may be considered to have originated with the Homeric formular expression ‘alate parole’.

The emergence of artistic elements in Calasso's portrayal of Hermes is confirmed by another direct reference in Calasso's pages on Delphi, where we are told that in the Delphic tripod, 'mescolate sin dall'origine', were cooking together the flesh of a lamb dismembered by the Maenades, and 'le carni della tartaruga che Apollo usava, come Hermes gli aveva insegnato, per costruirci la lira e per suonare, sempre sul Parnaso, dinanzi alle sue Thriai.'<sup>24</sup> If this legend is used by Calasso to conclude that in the tripod 'bollivano insieme Apollo e Dioniso', the 'tortoise' adumbrates the possibility that the god 'mescolato' with Dionysus may actually be Hermes. Furthermore, the text adumbrates the possibility of an artistic master/apprentice relationship between Apollo and Hermes, as sanctioned by the 'undecidability' in the attribution of power over the Thriai, who appear devoted to Apollo in this passage, but elsewhere to Hermes.

The sparse textual references, in *Le nozze*, to the god of commerce's relationship with the Delphic twins, show that he partakes of characteristics of both. As 'logios',<sup>25</sup> Hermes displays the control 'isolato e sovrano' over the word of Apollo, whilst, as 'dis-simulator, 'mescolato' with Dionysus, under the sign of *mixis-mimesis*, he shows the Dionysian mastery of the mimetic power of language.

Just as through the site of Delphi, the 'undecidability' between Apollo and Dionysus had been played out in *Le nozze* through the figure of Theseus, yet also this figure can be read through the thread of Hermes:

Hermes, the herald of the Olympian gods[...] is the god of shepherds, land travel, merchants, weights and measures, oratory, literature, athletics and thieves, and known for

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<sup>24</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 183.

<sup>25</sup> An epithet making of him as the god of eloquence.

his cunning and shrewdness. Most importantly, he is the messenger of the gods. Besides that he was also a minor patron of poetry.<sup>26</sup>

The analogies between Hermes and Theseus stand out: Theseus sees conquest as play, ‘si alza e va,’<sup>27</sup> like a messenger, and like a traveller, ‘si libera dei trofei appena conquistati’— a reference to the hero as athlete and player, who had won Helen in a game of dice.<sup>28</sup> Calasso also tells us that Theseus and Peirithous, who, like Hermes, can journey to Hades and back, ‘si esprimono in ‘conversazioni cifrate,’<sup>29</sup> an interesting element as Hermes was also the god of numbers.<sup>30</sup>

Through the tale of Apollo and Admetus, Calasso tells us that Ischys (‘l’amante che Coronis ha preferito ad Apollo’<sup>31</sup>) is the father of Hermes, thus inserting Hermes by means of a *variante* in the game of ‘undecidability’ between Apollo and Dionysus. Ischys and Theseus suggest for Hermes a role ‘different’ from that of a ‘physical’ god, rather of the movement of *indécidabilité* between the two Delphic brothers.

This interpretation of Hermes as movement, extra and intra-textual, finds some further backing in Calasso’s re-writing of Theseus, presented as the founder of Athens, ‘i portici e la piazza’ sono il luogo della parola che ‘diventa sovrana, vibrante e riverita.’<sup>32</sup> As god of trade and markets Hermes once again appears concealed in the background of this reflection, whilst a specific type of movement, commerce, emerges.

The few scattered direct references to Hermes in *Le nozze* back up this interpretation. Two of them present Hermes as a messenger, the tale of Kore<sup>33</sup> and the tale of the

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<sup>26</sup> See the article on Hermes on the Encyclopaedia Mythica. Ron Leadbetter, ‘Hermes’, *Encyclopedia Mythica online*, <http://www.pantheon.org/areas/mythology/europe/greek/articles.html>, visited, 10/05/2007,

<sup>27</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 27.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>30</sup> Derrida, ‘La pharmacie de Platon’, p. 114.

<sup>31</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 93.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 249.

wedding of Cadmo and Armonia<sup>34</sup>, and in a third one he can be read as a trader, as he physically transfers Elena's egg into the womb of Leda<sup>35</sup>, thus becoming instrumental to her birth. In all cases the intervention of Hermes can be seen as simultaneously inter and intra-textual, as it changes the course of the events. In another brief appearance, Hermes embodies nymphidic exchange in the terms depicted by Calasso and discussed in chapter II. Scorned in his love by Aphrodite, the goddess/nymph par excellence, he eventually persuades her to grant him her love in exchange for her stolen shoe, which he has recovered.<sup>36</sup> The few instances of 'presence' of Hermes in the text, thus, appear to fully back up our interpretation of his 'absence.'

## **Lii The god of 'exchange'**

C'era anche qualcos'altro a cui i Greci, e soltanto i Greci, tenevano: uno spazio vuoto, assolato e polveroso, dove scambiare le merci e le parole. Un mercato, una piazza.<sup>37</sup>

Il cuore del desiderio non é un oggetto, ma la possibilità di scambiare oggetti.<sup>38</sup>

Hermes was the god of trade and the patron-god of merchants. He was one of the deities who presided over the agora (or city-market).<sup>39</sup>

The special relationship with the god of communication and trade strongly contributes to making Athens, city of Theseus, 'la città più sacra, la città più empia,'<sup>40</sup> and

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 427.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 305.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 277.

<sup>38</sup> Id., *Kasch*, p. 301.

<sup>39</sup> See entry 'Hermes', at <http://www.theoi.com/Olympios/HermesGod.html#Trade>, visited 10/January 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 80.

Theseus's link with the 'piazza' and commerce may play a part in the concealment of Hermes in *Le nozze*.

Whilst its god is notably absent, commerce recurringly slips within the texture of the book. The text opens with a thought of gift or commerce, of communication through objects and tokens, as Europa attempts to make her mother have her necklace,<sup>41</sup> and some of Calasso's most memorable pages, those on the discussion of the difference between Athens and Sparta, appear like a re-writing of Thucydides through a Derridean concept of residuality and dissemination. The Athens presented is clearly Theseus's city of the word, identified by Ariadne:

Fra Atene e Sparta, la discriminante è lo scambio. Nell'una provoca terrore, nell'altra fascinazione. Così si spacca l'unità del sacro, in due metà chimicamente pure. A Sparta l'oro entra, ma non esce.[...] Le monete sono così pesanti e ingombranti che non si possono trasportare. Ad Atene, "amica dei discorsi", la parola fluisce spontaneamente, è un rigagnolo che irroro ogni capillare della città. A Sparta, non si allentano mai le briglie alla parola.

Il moralismo laconizzante non si forma sulle gravi sentenze che compendiano il loro sapere, ma sulla decisione di trattare la parola come nemica, prima esaltatrice del sovrappiù. Sparta è un artificio per creare il massimo arresto dello scambio e la massima fissazione del potere. Questo spiega l'attrazione che sempre, sino alle tarde *Leggi*, Platone ha sempre sentito per Sparta: quell'ordine prometteva di paralizzare la proliferazione delle immagini.<sup>42</sup>

Sparta, the barrier against the Platonic nightmare of copies, or Derrida's dissemination, is a city with no poets. Calasso's belief in literature as 'exchange,' which haunts his production from *Kasch* through to *Ka*, finds his own explanation for this historical fact. The Spartan hostility to commerce is hostility to metaphor, to that use of language,

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 286.

which permits the appearance of ‘absolute literature’: ‘Commerce’ is ‘un uso improprio dell’oggetto, come per la metafora rispetto alla parola.’<sup>43</sup> A metaphorical relationship is thus traced, involving ‘merce’, language, and metaphor.

Hermes, god [‘potenza’] of commercial ‘exchange’ and of ‘arbitrarietà del segno’, is its embodiment, and as such, as the reader had been warned in *Kasch*, he is a god but also an ‘empio’, as can be appreciated in this reflection on the theme of ‘substitution’ (also discussed in section III of chapter VIII.)

Quella stessa potenza che già agiva «nell’arbitrarietà del segno», nella pratica della convenzione, in ogni gesto di sostituzione (x sta per y), ma non aveva ancora avuto l’empietà di formularsi quale entità autonoma, ora si dichiara — e osa mostrare che, invece di lasciarsi assumere e assorbire nel contesto delle altre potenze, può assumerle essa stessa, considerandole tutte sue applicazioni parziali. Già il magister Aristotele aveva detto: «In realtà di tutto si può fare scambio».<sup>44</sup>

We may be faced here with a possible reason for concealing the god of ‘exchange’ in a book that is an act of ‘exchange’: Calasso’s unease with the revelation that the *différance*, the cryptic substitutive movement of Hermes, is our only way of recovering the gods.

Sommamente ambigua è dunque la nuova epifania degli dei, come una salvezza accessibile attraverso l’inganno. Il luogo dove viviamo è la terra di nessuno dove si compie un doppio tradimento, una doppia infedeltà : degli dei verso gli uomini e degli uomini verso gli dei. E in quel luogo dovrà ora disegnarsi la parola poetica.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Id., *Kasch*, p. 300.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 299-300.

<sup>45</sup> Id., *La letteratura*, pp. 46-47.



‘Exchange’ foregrounds language’s ability to result only at times, undecidably, in ‘substitution’, which may be seen as questioning ‘absolute literature’ through the same act, with which institutes it:

la società dello scambio si fonda sulla trasgressione del limite, ma non accetta quello stato di naturale frammentazione in cui viene a trovarsi di momento in momento. Non lo accetta perché mantiene come punto di riferimento la totalità. Non importa che l’immagine incessantemente sia diversa, importa che abbia sempre una cornice, e che la cornice, finché possibile, rimanga sempre la stessa. Altrimenti le immagini dilagherebbero per i corridoi. Dalla totalità compiuta e imperfettibile del canone si passa così a una totalità che incornicia ogni frammento come suo telos: ogni frammento sarebbe provvisorio, in attesa di un tutto promesso, che lo redimerebbe.<sup>46</sup>

The postmodern, or at least post-Borghesean artist who speaks self-reflectively in this statement, maintains fragment as a hope of presence (origin, totality) precisely by making the fragment provisional, a residue, a pearl from Harmony’s necklace (or ‘crown’, or ‘frame’). Myth, and ‘absolute literature’, produce ‘mysteric’ substitution, and thus ensure their own survival, through the transgression of a ‘limite,’ an art in which Odysseus – descendant of Hermes – will be a master, and Talleyrand, with his ‘colpo di pollice’, an epigone. This transgression of the ‘limite’ is an art whose provisional, everchanging truthfulness is better reflected through an allusion than a direct statement. It is a synonym of the leap of meaning in metaphorical language, and of poststructuralist ‘*difference*’, which also recognises ‘l’impossibilità dell’innocenza.’ Calasso’s message seems to be that there is no need to mention Hermes, from *Kasch* through to *Le nozze* and *Ka*, if we accept that we live under his sign: ‘Basta dire che si

vive *nel segno* del valore di scambio, e che il valore di scambio è il *nome* economico di una potenza che altrimenti si manifesta nella sostituzione, nella convenzione, nel rappresentare in genere, in tutte le sue forme.<sup>47</sup> Hermes is not mentioned in *Le nozze*, because, as this passage from *Ka* reveals, his ‘nome economico’ is.

Translation, the movement of signification between languages and over time, can easily be taken as another name for commerce and ‘exchange,’ as it also sits under the rule of Hermes. Calasso is aware of the self-referential allusions that the use of such a word generates in a reader of *Le nozze*, which is in itself a translation into modern terms and contemporary Italian of Greek mythology. In the rape of Europa, he chooses to foreground *translatio*, through the story of Io’s basket, which is transferred, translated to Europa,<sup>48</sup> together with her story. That it is a mercurial story is made obvious by the reference to Io’s kidnappers as Phoenician ‘lupi mercanti.’<sup>49</sup> The retaliation for this kidnapping is the kidnapping by the Cretans of Europa, in the ‘political’ version of the tale of Europa. As traditional liars, the Cretans can be recognized as agents of Hermes.<sup>50</sup>

Yet Europa’s basket itself enshrines a positive view of the artist as translator, which may be influenced by Colli’s reflections on the artist as translator [traduzione materiale dell’artista<sup>51</sup>] of these representations in which we recognise the gods, as well as in Calasso’s belonging to the post-Borgesean *Weltanschauung* of the ‘colpo di pollice’. The emphasis on art as translation sanctions Calasso’s emancipation from Nietzsche and Freud, ‘i grandi Aufklärer, i terribili rischiaratori [...] fanatici cercatori di origini e genealogie,<sup>52</sup> and places *Le nozze* in that poststructuralist universe in which it is

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<sup>46</sup> Id., *Kasch*, p. 285.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 312.

<sup>48</sup> id., *Le nozze*, p. 19.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>51</sup> Colli, *Dopo Nietzsche*, p. 114.

<sup>52</sup> Calasso, *Kasch*, p. 31.

impossible to speak simply or directly of the *pāter* and the origin: ‘une origine dont la structure s'épelle ainsi – signifiant de signifiant – s'emporte et s'efface elle-même dans sa propre production.’<sup>53</sup>

Reflecting on Theseus, Calasso comments: ‘Con gli eroi, la vita degli uomini compie il primo passo di là dal necessario: nell’azzardo, nella sfida, nell’astuzia, nell’inganno, nell’arte.’<sup>54</sup> ‘Azzardo’, ‘astuzia’, ‘inganno’, are all mercurial abilities, thus, even if we want to ignore the direct analogies underlined between Theseus and Hermes, we have to recognize that the Greek heroes are cast by Calasso under the sign of that frieze in the sky, kept hidden throughout most of *Le nozze*, and that their mercurial ability is also explicitly indicated as artistic.

## II. The wanderers

I will now review Calasso’s presentation of Cadmus and Odysseus, two heroes in whose tales of wandering we can recognise the ‘exchange value’ at work, as they are both employed to ‘represent’ Hermes, to reveal his presence/absence through a metaphorical leap.

Tutti i caratteri che, nei secoli, vennero assegnati al mercante, allo straniero, all’ebreo, al commediante, furono prima coniatati da Odisseo all’interno di se stesso.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Derrida, ‘La fin du livre et le commencement de l’écriture’, in *De la grammatologie*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, pp. 15-41, p. 16.

<sup>54</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 87.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 407.

The text places Odysseus within the archetype of the wandering Jew, and the verb ‘coniare,’ with his monetary connotations, reminds us of that Mercurial universe of ‘exchange,’ travel, and trade within which his artistic ability has to be read.

It is possible to recognize the archetype of the wandering Jew in both characters. Historical and cultural studies would both confirm this. From a historical perspective, the legendary figure of Cadmus is accepted as Phoenician, with studies suggesting that Odysseus may have been from this culture too.<sup>56</sup> From a wider cultural perspective, Odysseus and the wandering Jew have been recognized as part of the same archetype, for example, in Fisch’s *A remembered future. Study in literary mythology*,<sup>57</sup> which reflects on the merging of these archetypal figures in Joyce’s Ulysses.

The special relationship between the archetypal Jew and the art of writing is a *topos*, known to Nietzsche, if, as Derrida notes: ‘Attraverso l’elogio della simulazione [...] *La gaia scienza* colloca fra gli artisti, i quali sono sempre esperti in simulazione, gli ebrei e le donne,’<sup>58</sup> and also to Derrida, who in *L’écriture et la différence* employs precisely this archetype to drive to the conclusion that: ‘L’écriture est donc originairement hermétique et seconde.’<sup>59</sup>

In Calasso, simulation is not only the distinctive mark of Dionysus, the woman, and the Jew, but also of Cadmus, when he saves Zeus from Typhon, and of Odysseus: ‘quando l’eroe stesso riuscirà a spezzare la cornice del suo ruolo, senza abbandonarlo,

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<sup>56</sup> This view was held amongst other by Victor Bérard and appears endorsed by Hans F. K. Günther. See Hans F. K. Günther’s *Lebensgeschichte des hellenischen Volkes*, translated by Vivian Bird. ‘Bérard was of the opinion that the *Odyssey* was indeed written by a Greek, but that its hero, Odysseus, was a Phoenician. Thus the mental and physical nature of this hero has again and again called forth conjecture about a pre-Hellenic origin, of which the latest is asserted by Wolfgang Aly. Aly holds Odysseus to be a saga figure from the pre-Hellenic world of the Cretans.’ Hans F. K. Günther, ‘Like a Greek god’, <http://www.white-history.com/earlson/greekgod.htm>, visited 14/03/2008.

<sup>57</sup> Fascinatingly, Fisch believes that the archetypal figures of the wanderer and the Jew merge in Coleridge’s ‘Ancient Mariner’. See Harold Fisch, *A remembered future. Study in literary mythology*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1984, p. 67.

<sup>58</sup> Derrida, *Sproni*, p. 67.

<sup>59</sup> Id., ‘Edmund Jabès et la question du livre’, p. 103.

quando imparerà a essere anche traditore, mentitore, seduttore, viaggiatore, naufrago, narratore, allora sarà Odisseo.’<sup>60</sup>

Apart from ability with simulation, both Cadmus and Odysseus display a tendency for naming. Zeus’s defeat of Typhon can only happen because the hero who can name is on his side, as it becomes clear at the end of the book, when Cadmus performs a powerful act of naming. In the last scene, the wanderer names Boeotia and Thebae, the land and city of literature, and then repeats, doubles, this naming by scattering the alphabet on the land. The book opens with another scene, which is the prelude to Cadmus’s sister Europa giving her name to a continent, thus the book opens and closes with acts of naming.

In between, in the *entre/antre*, the cave-crown of mythology, we meet Odysseus, the hero, whose wandering, as I will discuss in more detail from page 280, ‘fu anche una ricapitolazione e appello nominale di quegli esseri e di quei luoghi che molti già confondevano nel ricordo, ricacciandoli nel favoloso.’<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, Calasso’s careful re-writing of the *Odyssey* foregrounds in its hero simultaneously the last character and the first narrator of that age of the heroes in which ‘si mostrarono i Nomi.’<sup>62</sup>

This representation of Hermetic characters bent on naming, and on repeating names, may possibly be influenced by Bruce Chatwin, with whom Calasso was in close contact during the writing of *Le nozze*. The tales of Cadmus and Odysseus certainly capture that identification between naming and wandering, which fascinated Chatwin in *The Songlines*, the book he wrote, in regular communication with Calasso, whilst the latter was working on *Le nozze*. This same identification, a lingering between the folds of the word ‘nomos’ is in Derrida: ‘Partagé en soi – (La langue grecque nous dirait sans

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<sup>60</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 362.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 390.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 397.

doute beaucoup sur l'étrange rapport de la loi, de l'errance et de la non-identité à soi, sur la racine commune – *nemein* – du partage, de la nomie et du nomadisme).<sup>63</sup>

Thus our author may have concealed between the lines of *Le nozze* an attempt at studying 'ensemble, génétiquement et structurellement, l'histoire de la route et l'histoire de l'écriture,'<sup>64</sup> suggested by Derrida to the reader in 'Freud et la scène de l'écriture'. This may also have been Chatwin's endeavour in *The Songlines*.

Whether this was Calasso's intent or not, the relevance of naming within the tales of the wanderers clearly indicates a fascination with this activity. The naming of the (Hermetic) traveller is always a provisional act, an analogy which is undecidably also a 'substitution,' an act of linguistic 'exchange' with the 'presence' of the land, which preserves it, mercurially transmits it, replaces it, translates it, defers it, with the artistry of the namer. In this sense it is the epitome of the power of 'absolute literature' - which after all is announced by the fleeting, moving figure of a nymph -, as well as of the disseminating power of language.

The topic of wandering allows the emergence in the text of another theme dear to poststructuralism. It emblematises the constant movement of meaning within a single text and within its tradition/translation, thus can be read as emblematic of 'le travail itinérant de la trace, produisant et non parcourant sa route, de la trace qui trace, de la trace qui se fraye elle-même son chemin.'<sup>65</sup>

The wanderer, as a figure of 'exchange' becomes a figure of the 'limite', of the 'soglia'. Talleyrand, speaking 'sulla soglia di questo libro' had been Odysseus's precursor in Calasso's work in progress: 'Parlo sulla soglia di questo libro perché sono stato l'ultimo

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<sup>63</sup> Derrida, 'Edmund Jabès et la question du livre', p. 105.

<sup>64</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Freud et la scène de l'écriture' in *L'écriture et la différence*, Paris, pp. 289-336, p. 317.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* p. 317.

che ha conosciuto le cerimonie. Parlo anche, come sempre, per ingannare. Non a me è dedicato questo libro, né ad alcun altro. Questo libro è dedicato al dedicare.<sup>66</sup>

## II.i Polytropos

Calasso avoids mentioning that the *Odyssey* had made of Hermes, through his maternal grandfather Autolycus, offspring of this god,<sup>67</sup> the divine ancestor of Odysseus. A strategy of concealment appears thus to be at play again in relation to Hermes. He does instead relate a ‘variation’ of the tale of the generation of Pan, present in De Santillana’s *Hamlet’s Mill*,<sup>68</sup> and in Nonnus<sup>69</sup>, which makes of Pan the son of Hermes and Penelope. Studies have not proven conclusively whether this ‘variation’ does refer to the Penelope we know as Odysseus’s wife, or to another nymph with the same name, but Calasso plays with this possibility, and with the opportunity it offers for making the reader ‘play’ with an indirect, occult relation between Odysseus and his divine alter ego, under the sign of betrayal and illegitimacy. The narration of this tale may also be a Hermetic deceptive strategy, bent on deflecting the reader’s attention from the memory of Odysseus’s Hermetic genealogy.

The *Odyssey* does affect *Le nozze*, in which one can also recognize a tale of wandering. Even though in *Le nozze* we can recognize a guide to the ancient Mediterranean<sup>70</sup>: almost like the second century Greek writer Pausanias’, Calasso’s *poikilia* (‘variety, plural style’) results in a blend of textual, formal, and thematic elements from Pausanias and Homer. Whilst the Greek travel writer depicts sights and

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<sup>66</sup> Calasso, *Kasch*, p. 13

<sup>67</sup> Omero, *Odissea*, XI, vv. 84-6; XIX, vv. 395-566

<sup>68</sup> De Santillana, *Il mulino di Amleto*, p. 336.

<sup>69</sup> Nonno, *Dionisiache*, XIV, v. 93 and XXIV, v. 86-87

<sup>70</sup> Lefkowitz had noted this aspect of *Le nozze*: Mary Lefkowitz, ‘A Zeus for the 90’s’, *The New York Times Book Review*, March 14, 1993, p. 12.

monuments that he actually visited, Calasso, like the author of the *Odyssey*, links the ruins of Greece with relics of ancient stories, so different from us that only imagination, and interpretation, can bring them back to life. In this sense Odysseus becomes Calasso's authorial alter ego:

Dopo Odisseo, comincia la vita senza eroi, dove le storie non accadono esemplarmente, ma si ripetono e si raccontano. Ciò che accade è la mera storia.

Anche per questa sua prossimità al confine, per questo suo porsi là dove il cerchio si chiude, Odisseo è l'eroe che più spesso racconta storie.<sup>71</sup>

The self-referential elements of the *Odyssey* have widely been recognized, and it may therefore sound unsurprising that Calasso, like Joyce and Borgés, also chooses Odysseus as an authorial alter ego in this sense. However, the self-reflectiveness of the portrayal of Odysseus, 'l'eroe che racconta storie,' is immediately placed under the realm of repetition. His tales, if we apply Derrida's terminology, are secondary, Hermetic.

Appartiene all'essenza di Odisseo essere l'ultimo degli eroi, colui che chiude il ciclo. In quanto ultimo, Odisseo è adiacente alla vita che seguirà, senza mai più chiudersi in un ciclo. Il suo piede calpesta la linea di confine. Non l'*Iliade*, immane masso abbandonato nella pianura, ma la sinuosa *Odissea* ci trasmette come lascito il multiforme romanzo: "affare di un singolo, non di un popolo", come Telemaco definisce la sua ricerca del padre. Ma, ultimo fra gli eroi a ritornare, Odisseo è anche colui che prolunga sino all'estremo il contatto – e quale intimità di contatto – con le potenze primordiali, che si erano mostrate nelle prime fasi del ciclo. Il suo errare fu anche una ricapitolazione ed appello nominale di quegli esseri e di quei luoghi che molti già confondevano nel ricordo, ricacciandoli nel

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<sup>71</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 389.



favoloso. Con Odisseo, sono invece per un'ultima volta presenti e possenti, intatti, e salutano in lui l'ultimo viaggiatore che ha potuto vederli con i propri occhi e testimoniare.

Mentre Odisseo faticosamente veleggiava verso la sua isola, l'aedo Femio già cantava, nelle sale del palazzo di Itaca, le gesta dei guerrieri con i quali Odisseo aveva combattuto sotto Troia. Quasi tutto era già parola. Una sola lacuna permaneva: le gesta di Odisseo stesso, fibula del ciclo. Odisseo, maestro della parola, fu l'ultimo a far pensare che non tutto è parola, finché mancava la sua preda luccicante di storie. Dopo il suo ritorno a Itaca, dopo l'*Odissea*, la frequentazione degli esseri e dei luoghi primordiali potrà avvenire soltanto attraverso la letteratura.<sup>72</sup>

This beautiful page from *Le nozze*, part of which I had anticipated at page 277, develops the self-referential traits of Odysseus. As well as sanctioning him as the first novelist, it makes him the subject of the song that Phemius is waiting to sing. This tale-within-the tale makes him the wanderer amongst the places and heroes of the past, and a figure of 'contatto,' a mediator between different realms, past and present, reality and fiction. In all this we recognise the shadow of Hermes, the messenger god, who brings into contact the gods and humans, as well as the living and the dead, and thus, indirectly, we also recognise in Odysseus-'letterato assoluto' the figure of Hermes. The reference to 'his preda luccicante di storie' also echoes another Hermetic image; that of the god of thieves; Autolycus, Odysseus's grand-father, was called 'the Great Thief' by Homer.

Further analogies between the god and the hero confirm the Hermetic association and its links with writing:

Solo fra i capi Achei, Odisseo tiene gli occhi bassi. Ma non per timore. Mentre abbassa gli occhi, Odisseo concentra la mente, la isola dal resto, come i suoi compagni non sono usi fare, ordisce una trama, dà forma a una *mechané*. È l'opposto dell'uomo continuamente stretto tra le forze, tra le macchine, tra le *mechanai* della natura e degli dei. A

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., pp. 390-391.

quell'invidibile groviglio Odisseo aggiunge nuove *mechanai*, ma questa volta da lui elaborate.[...] La frontalità dell'eroe non lo attira. Odisseo muove un passo indietro verso la mente tortuosa di Crono per prendere lo slancio e gettarsi al di là dell'eroe.<sup>73</sup>

Odysseus's own cleverness, explicitly placed in the realm of Chronos, is actually another Hermetic quality. Hermes is traditionally recognized as the 'clever god,' a fact that Calasso will end up admitting in the tale of Kore, where Hermes is allowed to play, even though without receiving much space, his role of 'perfetto tra i messaggeri'<sup>74</sup> between the world of the living and the world of the dead. The mission of persuading Hades to hand Kore back, as anticipated at page 269, is assigned by the gods to Hermes, 'il più intelligente tra di loro – segno che tremavano.'<sup>75</sup>

The epithet *polytropos* ("of many shifts, turning many ways, of many devices, ingenious, or much wandering") reveals the deep resonances between the Odysseic and Hermetic intelligence. This epithet is applied to the hero in the first line of the *Odyssey*, and to Hermes in the pseudo-Homeric *Hymn to Hermes* (v.13). Simonini explains *polytropia* in these terms: 'I veri saggi hanno *polloi tropoi*, sono abili a narrare in molti modi.'<sup>76</sup> *Polytropia* is thus a narrative ability shared by Hermes and Odysseus. Odysseus's *polytropia*, rendered by Calasso as 'mente tortuosa', is directly and indirectly linked to his ability to simulate, a Hermetic ability, which Odysseus had used to delay his participation in the Trojan expedition, by feigning madness, until Palamedes had forced him 'a cozzare contro il limite della simulazione.'<sup>77</sup>

The re-writing of the tale of Palamedes, the hero who unmasked Odysseus's madness, is all cast under the sign of Hermes. Odysseus's simulation is discovered by

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 391.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 249.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 249.

<sup>76</sup> Simonini, 'Introduzione', pp. 19-20.

<sup>77</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 393.

the hero who had been the inventor of dice,<sup>78</sup> a game associated with Hermes in Calasso's lines on the oracle of Delphi discussed earlier, and of some letters of the alphabet.<sup>79</sup>

The revenge perpetrated by Odysseus against the Hermetic Palamedes is all played in the name of their (occult) god. Odysseus gives a Trojan prisoner 'una falsa lettera di Priamo', that 'parla di oro e di un accordo' then kills the prisoner, making sure the letter is found on him, and hides gold under Palamedes' bed. Palamedes is stoned to death, and his last words are that "prendeva il lutto per la verità, che era morta prima di lui."<sup>80</sup>

In this brief story, Calasso plants a number of clues inviting his reader to the Hermetic path. Forgery (the false letter), simulation, achieved through the means of writing – copy of a copy, and thus part of the game of simulation according to Plato and an example of 'exchange', sanctioned by an 'accordo', of gold for betrayal.

The consecration of Odysseus's *polytropia* in this story can be read in parallel with the fulfilment of Hermes' epithet of *Logios* in the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes*, where the god, Odysseus's *polytropic* great-grandfather, makes a successful false speech from the cradle to defend himself from the (true) charge of cattle theft. 'Odysseo', writes Calasso 'portò per la prima volta a trionfare il mediato sull'immediato, il differimento sulla presenza, la mente ricurva sullo slancio rettilineo.'<sup>81</sup> He does so by employing (alphabetic) writing, and as Derrida says 'l'écriture alphabétique est déjà en elle-même une forme de duplication, puisqu'elle représente non le signifié, mais les éléments phonétiques qui le signifient.'<sup>82</sup> His Odysseus thus can be read through the characters of

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 393.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 392.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., pp. 394-395.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., *Le nozze*, p. 407.

<sup>82</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Le langage à l'infini', *Dits et écrits, I, 1954-1975*, pp. 278-289, p. 280.

simulation, and secondarity, whose ‘mysteric substitute’ is writing. It can also be read through Derrida’s notions of ‘repetition’ and ‘supplementarity.’

Le vrai et le non-vrai sont des espèces de la répétition. Et il n’y a de répétition possible que dans la *graphique de la complémentarité*, ajoutant, au début d’une unité pleine, une autre unité qui vient la suppléer, étant à la fois assez la même et assez autre pour remplacer en ajoutant.<sup>83</sup>

Odysseus’s ‘ability to leave’ his speech and his text in the tale of Palamedes is mirrored in Calasso’s description of the hero as capable of ‘uscire dal fuoco,’<sup>84</sup> which throughout *Le nozze* (“‘Nostesamein” vuol dire uscire da un braciere ardente. “Nostos”: nessuno sa ritornare come Odisseo’<sup>85</sup>) reveals further poststructuralist undertones. Like Edmond Jabès’ ‘guardian of the house « — Qui es-tu ? — Le gardien de la maison. — ... Es-tu dans le livre ? — Ma place est au seuil. »<sup>86</sup>], which drives Derrida to the conclusion that ‘L’écrivain est un passeur et sa destinée a toujours une signification liminaire,’<sup>87</sup> *Le nozze*’s Odysseus embodies the writer as ferry-man. Thanks to the forging of the letter, which destroys Palamedes, his Odysseus becomes the absolute author par excellence, the one who can let his literary product go ‘free’ and affect reality. ‘Être poète, c’est savoir laisser la parole. La laisser parler toute seule, ce qu’elle ne peut faire que dans l’écrit.’<sup>88</sup>

This is, we can argue, the lesson that Odysseus mastered, and gives him the final victory against Palamedes, his mercurial opponent. In all its darkness and negativity,

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<sup>83</sup> Derrida, ‘La pharmacie de Platon, p. 210.

<sup>84</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 125.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>86</sup> See Edmond Jabès, *Le livre des questions*, Gallimard, Paris, 1963, p. 15. This text is also quoted by Derrida, see Derrida, ‘Edmond Jabès et la question du livre’ p. 113.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

Odysseus's victory is a victory of his *variante* as Homer's lover, a victory of the deceiving crown of literature, of that 'essenza menzognera della letteratura', 'serpeggiata per anni in tante opere,'<sup>89</sup> mentioned in a *risvolto* to Manganelli.

## II.ii Cadmus

Mentre la chioma di Europa diventava un piccolo punto che si confondeva con la distesa del mare, il vecchio re Agenore convocò i suoi figli Cilice, Fineo, Cefeo, Taso e Cadmo. Ingiunse loro di ritrovare la sorella. Non dovevano mai più riapparire a Sidone se non tenendo la mano di Europa. Già con il padre avevano vagato a lungo, fra Egitto, Assiria, Fenicia. Ora dovevano disperdersi di nuovo, e da soli. Cominciò così, per Cadmo, un lungo errare. Anche i suoi fratelli si misero in viaggio, ma presto si distrassero dal motivo che li aveva spinti. Cadmo pensava al toro "che nessun mortale sa trovare".<sup>90</sup>

Through the re-writing of Cadmus's wanderings and his foundation of Thebae, the Florentine writer employs the figure of the bull to establish a number of links between Cadmus and the gods Zeus and Dionysus. Cadmus is Dionysus's maternal grandfather and, through his re-writing of Nonnus and Euripides, Calasso clearly foregrounds these relationships. However, according to Nonnus,<sup>91</sup> Cadmus is also a cousin of Hermes, and leaves either Egypt or Phoenicia, to look for his sister kidnapped by the bull. Thus, like the other wanderer, Odysseus, he is a relation of the god of travel and communication. Calasso avoids mentioning this even though he does show that Cadmus saved Zeus from Typhon thanks to a mercurial act of simulation, and with the help of a mercurial lyre.

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<sup>89</sup> See Calasso's 'risvolto' on Manganelli's, *La letteratura come menzogna* republished in *Cento lettere*. Calasso, *Cento lettere*, pp. 168-169

<sup>90</sup> Id., *Le nozze*, p. 422.

<sup>91</sup> Nonno, *Dionisiache*, IV, v. 87.

At the end of his search, in another scene re-written from Nonnus,<sup>92</sup> Calasso tells us that Cadmus has to give up on finding Europa, and that the Pythia directs him, instead of looking for his sister and the bull who kidnapped her, to found a city, ‘[...] là dove la giovenca, per divina ispirazione, crollerà a terra, stendendo le sue zampe appesantite dalla fatica.’<sup>93</sup> Cadmus – the man who saved the *folgore* – goes on to found Thebes, a city planned like an astral map, through which Zeus enjoyed walking because ‘gli ricordava il cielo’ and where ‘tutto doveva modellarsi sulla geometria dei cieli’, organized like a geocentric system around the bed of his wife Harmony:

Ora Cadmo doveva fondare la sua città. Al centro sarebbe stato il letto di Armonia. E intorno tutto doveva modellarsi sulla geometria dei cieli. Il ferro incideva il terreno, il calcolo fissava i punti. Si ammucchiavano pietre di vario colore, come le segnature dei pianeti, dal Citerone, dall’Elicona, dal Teumesso. Alle sette fasce dei cieli corrispondevano sette porte, ciascuna dedicata ad un dio.<sup>94</sup>

These lines strongly rely on Nonnus, the only author, according to Gigli Piccardi,<sup>95</sup> who mentions the correspondence between the planets known in antiquity and the seven doors of Thebe. Calasso may also be subtly influenced by the theory of the ‘seven sefirot, which make up the secret week of creation’, expounded by Scholem.<sup>96</sup>

From Nonnus, Calasso also mutates the information that, as well as the cult of Dionysus, Cadmus brought to Greece from Egypt alphabetical writing.<sup>97</sup> Thus, we can

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., IV, v. 289 and ff

<sup>93</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 429.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 430.

<sup>95</sup> Nonno, *Dionisiache*, Vol. I, note to v. 365, p. 386.

<sup>96</sup> ‘Se le prime tre *sefirot* sono così profondamente nascoste che a loro non viene associato nessuno dei giorni originari della creazione, le restanti sette “*sefirot* della costruzione del mondo” formano la settimana segreta della creazione: qui ciascuna delle parole creatrici di cui parlano le fonti talmudiche, ciascuna delle potenze primordiali, si attua in un “giorno originario”. Che però non coincide necessariamente con il corrispondente giorno della creazione.’ Scholem, *I segreti della creazione*, p. 49.

<sup>97</sup> Nonno, *Dionisiache*, III, v. 264 and ff.

say that instead of the bull-god who kidnapped Europa, Cadmus discovers its mysteric substitute, the alphabet, which allows for stories to be put in writing, and for literature to be born. Writing has been metaphorised as a bull in Egyptian mythology, as remembered by Derrida when he calls the god of writing ‘le taureau parmi les étoiles.’<sup>98</sup> We could thus read Cadmus’s tale of the foundation of Thebae as the first example of substitution. [‘In Oriente, da giochi complessi fondati sull’astronomia si sviluppò una specie di stenografia che divenne poi l’alfabeto.’<sup>99</sup>] Like metaphor, Calasso’s alphabet appears to occupy a middle ground, to mediate between the ‘original’ signs of the stars and the sign of human narration, which repeats the movement of the stars.

It also makes of Thebes a hidden Kasch, the *letterato assoluto*’s equivalent to Augustine’s city of god, a city of writing. But, as is appropriate to the emblem of ‘absolute literature’ in the age of the metaphysics of presence, the city of writing actually celebrates the unrecoverability of meaning. If the alphabet can be seen as the attempt to cast reality, through poetic language, in one fixed form, as De Santillana reminds us constellations are in constant movement, and images/symbols move together with their meaning. Taking up this view, and Adorno’s theorem of the constellation, put the absolute reader on the path of an experiential approach to literature, in the Hermetic acceptance that meaning can only be experienced by going along with its mobility, with its wandering through a chain of exchanges, residues, and differences.

Like the mercurial figure of Thoth in ‘La pharmacie de Platon’, who ‘repeats everything in the addition of the supplement, and who ‘has neither a proper place nor a proper name’ we recognise in Cadmus and Odysseus, in their constant moving, their

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<sup>98</sup> Derrida, ‘La pharmacie de Platon’, p.114.

<sup>99</sup> De Santillana, *Il mulino di Amleto*, p. 27.

elusiveness, and their masking, as well as their relationship with the alphabet, ‘l’indétermination flottante qui permet la substitution et le jeu.’<sup>100</sup>

### III. Writing and the trickster

Ce dieu du calcul, de l’arithmétique et de la science rationnelle commande aussi aux sciences occultes, à l’astrologie, à l’alchimie. C’est le dieux des formules magiques qui apaisent la mer, des récits secrets, des textes cachés: archétype d’Hermès, dieu du cryptogramme non moins que de la graphie.<sup>101</sup>

Thoth, le dieu de l’écriture<sup>102</sup>

It is time now to introduce a Derridean text, which in my view had a direct, rather than osmotic, impact on Calasso. Even though ‘un’equazione Cadmo/Hermes/Thot’ may have existed in Nonnus,<sup>103</sup> the echoes between Calasso’s Hermetic stories of Cadmus and Odysseus – and the presence/absence of Hermes himself in the book – have to be read, in my view, through ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’, the essay which opens *Dissémination*, a text amongst whose themes we can recognize that of presentation and re-presentation.

Derrida’s essay focuses on the Platonic texts presenting the god Thoth, a messenger god, and a god of language<sup>104</sup> and writing – precisely the scribe of his

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<sup>100</sup> Derrida, ‘La pharmacie de Platon’, p.115.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>103</sup> Gigli Piccardi, note to Nonno, *Le Dionisiache*, IV,v. 264 and ff., p. 355. Gigli Piccardi also notes that the attribution to Cadmo of the invention of astronomy is another trait in common with Thot, see Gigli Piccardi, note to Nonno, *Le Dionisiache*, p. 357.

<sup>104</sup> Derrida, ‘La pharmacie de Platon’, pp. 109-110.



brother Osiris, the sun-king.<sup>105</sup> The figure of the ‘scriba celeste’ had also fascinated De Santillana, however it is in Calasso’s treatment of his Hermetic figures that we can detect, in my view, the shadow of Derrida:

Lo scriba celeste, il custode degli archivi e dei documenti, era Mercurio, che «inventò numerose arti, come l’aritmetica, il calcolo, la geometria, l’astronomia, il gioco della dama e dei dadi; ma la sua grande scoperta fu l’uso delle lettere», come dice Platone (Fedro, 274). Quando si ha a che fare con specialisti del mito arcaico del calibro di Platone e di Plutarco, non si può certo non ricordare il «re egizio Thamus» (Fedro, 274d-275b), che a Thot-Hermes, tutto fiero di aver appena inventato la scrittura, dichiara senza mezzi termini che la nuova arte è acquisto assai discutibile.<sup>106</sup>

Derrida appears to agree fully with De Santillana’s reading of *Phaedrus*, and also focuses on the relationship between Thoth and Thamus in the same dialogue, as well as on the differential relationship between Thoth and the creative god Horus. Derrida also reports on Thoth’s gift (‘présent’) of the alphabet to King Thamus,<sup>107</sup> an act, which may be echoed by *Le nozze*’s final scene, where Cadmus presents the alphabet to the Olympian Zeus by scattering it on the Boeotian land.

Whilst Calasso makes no explicit reference to Thoth, his re-writing of Cadmus and Odysseus foreground their relationship with writing. If Derrida makes of Thot-Hermes a ‘dépositaire et secrétaire’ of language, and thus as a god who ‘ne fait donc que représenter,’<sup>108</sup> and he relates that, in the *Philebus*, Thoth is evoked as the author of *différence*,<sup>109</sup> Calasso’s Hermetic heroes plays with *différence* and representation in an analogous way. The emphasis on simulation marks, as we have seen, the figure of

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., pp. 113.

<sup>106</sup> De Santillana, *Il mulino di Amleto*, p. 331.

<sup>107</sup> Derrida, ‘La pharmacie de Platon’, pp. 93-94.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

Odysseus in the tales of Palamedes and also that of Cadmus – through the tale of Typhon, and through the foregrounding of the theatricality of Thebae, ‘spiazzo per la danza’, and city of ‘absolute literature’.

Furthermore, the mobility of meaning that we have seen marking Cadmus and Odysseus is, as previously mentioned, also one of the themes of Derrida’s reading. Through his relationship with the sun, Derrida introduces Thoth as ‘supplément’, the ‘jamais présent’, as the ‘indetermination flottante’, allowing ‘substitution et jeu.’<sup>110</sup> His relationship with the father, thus with the metaphysics of presence and with *logos*, is all in the name of simulation and repetition. We can read on this basis Cadmus’s relationship with Zeus in *Le nozze*. As Derrida notes of Thoth, Cadmus had been in a position to supplant the father, and whilst he saved Zeus in Typhon’s cave, he does later replace him/supplant him through writing. ‘Suppléant, capable de doubler le roi, le père, le soleil, la parole, ne s’en distinguant que comme son représentant, son masque, sa répétition, Thoth pouvait aussi naturellement le supplanter totalement et s’appropriier tous ses attributs.’<sup>111</sup>

His foundation of Thebes, the city reproducing the map of the sky, and thus the site of the father, appears like a game of representation, an act of ‘writing on the land’, thus, if we refer back to the Platonic terminology, a doubling of the father. This is confirmed by the name given to the land itself, Beozia, the land of the bull, thus of the double of the father. Cadmus’s scattering on Cretan soils of the letters of the alphabet goes even further, and appears to mark Cadmus as bent on disseminating the father through the power of textuality.

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 115-116.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

Il [Thoth] est donc l'autre du père, le père, et le mouvement subversif du remplacement. Le dieu de l'écriture est donc à la fois son père, son fils, et lui. Il ne se laisse pas assigner une place fixe dans le jeu des différences. Rusé, insaisissable, masqué, comploteur, farceur, comme Hermès, ce n'est ni un roi ni un valet ; une sorte de *joker* plutôt, un signifiant disponible, une carte neutre, donnat du jeu au jeu.<sup>112</sup>

As far as Odysseus is concerned, one simply needs to compare Calasso's comments on Odysseus in the Palamedes story earlier with Derrida's statements above to recognize that the god of 'substitution' and 'deceit' has been surreptitiously, 'furtively' planted in *Le nozze* under the name of the trickster Odysseus.

Derrida's text goes beyond re-presenting the figure of the god presiding over writing, and tackles writing as well, through the metaphorical cluster of the theme of *pharmakon/pharmakeia/pharmakeus* in the Platonic texts. Thus, I propose to read Calasso's Hermes and his secondary figurations in the text, as the god of writing, from the point of view of his relationship with the word *pharmakon*, a metaphorical word that in Derrida's text can be applied indifferently to the god of writing and his gift. Derrida isolates in the word *pharmakon* the same 'undecidability' between opposite meanings of the Germanic 'gift'. *Pharmakon* would mean remedy as well as poison:

Quand un mot s'inscrit comme la citation d'un autre sens de ce même mot, quand l'avant-scène textuelle du mot *pharmakon*, tout en signifiant *remède*, cite, ré-cite et donne à lire ce qui *dans le même mot* signifie, en un autre lieu et à une autre profondeur de la scène, *poison* (par exemple, car *pharmakon* veut dire encore d'autres choses), le choix d'un seul de ces mots français par le traducteur a pour premier effet de neutraliser le jeu citationnel, l'"anagramme", et à la limite tout simplement la textualité du texte traduit.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., pp. 121-122.

If we now go back to the tale of Palamedes, we can recognize that through this story Calasso has foregrounded the alphabet as *pharmakon*, as the remedy and poison invented by Palamedes, eventually destroying the hero. The game of simulation between Palamedes and Odysseus is re-written in the text as never-ending. Even in Palamedes's last action – covering his face in the name of truth – one can detect an instance of presence of the *pharmakon*, a veil, which simultaneously conveys and conceals truth, or rather transmits it through simulation. Speaking about the withdrawal of the face of the *pāter* – identified with 'presence' in philosophical sense – Derrida observes that this withdrawal, just like Palamedes's, 'both opens and limits the exercise of dialectics'. In Palamedes's 'lutto per la verità', if we follow Derrida's reading of the theme of the face of the father to the end, we can recognize the 'irremediable' welding of dialectics 'à ses "inférieurs", les arts mimétiques, le jeu, la grammaire, l'écriture, etc. La disparition de la face est le mouvement de la différence, qui ouvre violemment l'écriture, ou, si l'on veut, qui s'ouvre à l'écriture et que s'ouvre l'écriture.'<sup>114</sup>

The withdrawal of the face of the father can also be recognised between the lines of Cadmus's dissemination of the alphabet in the closing of the book. This scattering of the seeds of writing takes place after Zeus has withdrawn from the world, and from the table of Cadmus. It is at this point that Cadmus makes his 'undecidable' offering, a gift which enables mediation between different realms, simultaneously, to the mortals, who will be able to reconnect with the gods only in books, and to the god(s), who will be forever celebrated through human writing.

Cadmo aveva portato alla Grecia "doni provvisti di mente": vocali e consonanti aggiate in segni minuscoli, "modello inciso di un silenzio che non tace": l'alfabeto. Con l'alfabeto, i Greci si sarebbero educati a vivere gli dèi nel silenzio della mente, non più nella presenza

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 208.

piena e normale, come ancora a lui era toccato, il giorno delle sue nozze. [...]Ma nessuno ormai avrebbe potuto cancellare quelle piccole lettere, quelle zampe di mosca che Cadmo il fenicio aveva sparpagliato sulla terra greca, dove i venti lo avevano spinto alla ricerca di Europa rapita da un toro emerso dal mare.<sup>115</sup>

Palamedes's story may conceal a clue to a further veiling, that of the god of writing himself. Odysseus's fury against Palamedes is due to the fact that 'Palamede aveva obbligato Odisseo a cozzare contro il limite della simulazione'.<sup>116</sup> This is what a writer, even the absolute writer, cannot allow. Like for Odysseus, for the author the simulation cannot have an end. The safest way to guarantee the survival of simulation and writing may be the veiling of the god of writing himself, his transformation of the writing of this god, through an art he was also presiding over, into a 'cryptography.'

#### **IV. Samothrace and the veil**

Being the herald (messenger of the gods), it was his duty to guide the souls of the dead down to the underworld, which is known as a psychopomp. He was also closely connected with bringing dreams to mortals.<sup>117</sup>

The traits of *pharmakon* can often be recognised in veils and in Calasso one can detect, just as much as in Derrida, the Platonic fascination with 'histological' metaphors. The

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<sup>115</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*. p. 436.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 393

<sup>117</sup> Leadbetter, 'Hermes', <http://www.pantheon.org/areas/mythology/europe/greek/articles.html>.

connection of the two Hermetic heroes with Samothrace reinforces this theme and foregrounds it as a further lead to identify and decode Calasso's Hermes. Cadmus meets Harmony, his future wife, in Samothrace, the island where his daughter Ino will become Leucothea, the white goddess, to whose mysteries Odysseus will be initiated. One of the few moments of visibility of Hermes in the text, as mentioned at page 269, is precisely in Samothrace, where he convinces the queen to let Cadmus marry Harmony.<sup>118</sup>

The veil of the initiation to the cult of Leucothea – which may well be indistinguishable with the belt given by Aphrodite to Harmony as a wedding gift, metaphor for the snake of mythology as well as the Milky Way – is the other link between the two Hermetic heroes. In the Cadmic tale the veil spells the survival of Ino as Leucothea, while in the Odyssey's episode it marks the survival of the wanderer from a sea storm. We can almost recognise in the veil of Leucothea the object of the 'exchange' handed over between Odysseus and Cadmus, as it is precisely when discussing Samothrace and its veil that the text moves from treating the figure of Odysseus to that of Cadmus. The veil thus meets and embodies the Hermetic character of translation, a metaphorical bridge between different generations of heroes,<sup>119</sup> in the name of textuality.

This reinforces the recognition in the *pharmakon*-veil of the belt of Aphrodite, and text-tissue of mythology – which Calasso calls a 'stoffa', of the limen, the passage into 'otherness'. The 'exchange value' places Hermes and the Hermetic – as it had placed Theseus and Dionysus – in a position of special closeness to the Nymph, embodiment of exchange, as we have seen in the discussion of 'Les déesses'.

The vocabulary of fleetingness and mobility, which marks Hermes and the hermetic hero in Calasso is echoed, Warburgian undertones and all, in Derrida's discussion of

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<sup>118</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 427.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 409.

Hermetic theft in *L'écriture et la différence*, where, discussing the work of Artaud, Derrida notes that 'Le langage courant a effacé du mot « furtif » la référence au vol, au subtil subterfuge dont on fait glisser la signification – c'est le vol du vol, le furtif qui se dérobe lui-même dans un geste nécessaire – vers l'invisible et silencieux frôlement du fugitif, du fugace et du fuyant.'<sup>120</sup> This text, whether it acted as a direct inspiration to Calasso or not, helps us recognise in his vocabulary the presence of poststructuralist themes and movements indistinguishable from Warburgian ones.

The result of these influences has implications for the portrayal of Hermes, god of writing, who is also the god of theft, and the fugitive god, and is turned by Calasso into a furtive, fugitive presence in his own text. This was the fate inscribed in the Hermetic relationship with writing, the way in which the *pharmakon* manifests itself in its god.

The vocabulary of fleetingness also underlines a special connection between the Hermetic hero and the nymph-‘other,’ who mirror each other as embodiments of mobility and ‘exchange,’ and confirms, as well as putting into a different perspective, the reading suggested through the authorial characters of Apollo and Dionysus: that the writer’s journey into ‘otherness’ relies on the nymph, be it Leucothea, be it Harmony, Europa or Ariadne, or Helen of Troy. The role ‘played’ by Hermes in the life of Helen of Troy is what gives away this god, as the most important in the economy of ‘absolute literature’.

Because of her ‘unicità’, the text puts Helen of Troy into direct play with the god of ‘exchange’: having limited the references to Hermes’ so much, Calasso cannot resist revealing that Hermes facilitated the birth of Helen: ‘Poi dal ventre di Nemesi si mostrò un uovo candido. Hermes lo prese, lo portò a Sparta, e lo depose nel ventre di Leda.’<sup>121</sup>

In this act of translation of Helen’s egg – interestingly, in Egyptian mythology the egg

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<sup>120</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘La parole soufflée’, *L'écriture et la différence*, Seuil, Paris, 1967, pp. 253-292, p. 264.

represents a hidden sun, a sun also present in the etymology of the name Helen – Hermes appears as the movement, the differential game, which allows the survival and manifestation of that ‘other,’ which literature seeks in order to achieve absoluteness, the mental water of the nymph.

In Calasso’s text, the veil of Samothrace, the belt of Aphrodite, the divine and artistic ‘otherness’, would not touch the hero-writer without being deferred/differed, or without being stolen. Hermes is that communicator, that translator, that thief. He needs thus to be hidden. His ‘furtive’ role is not to appear, but to make the ‘stoffa’ of text appear, and work its magic of never-ending signification.

## V. ‘Hermetic’ practice

Hermes’s furtive movement is meta-narrative, it reaches beyond Calasso’s *stoffa*, his mythological inscription, and becomes Calasso’s own movement of translation and ‘difference,’ from the limen of the book, as the author of *Le nozze*. Calasso’s homage to Nonnus, his placement of his familiarity with this author under the mercurial sign of ‘furto’, invites the reader to an exegesis, which stretches to the image of the god of thieves on the cover of the book, and to the figures of images of tricksters within the text. Talking about Cretan ritual, Calasso remarks that Crete was the only place where the mystery was out in the open, celebrated in daylight and in the square. Calasso expands through on this comment – with its ring of Poe and Borgés –, by putting Hermes on the cover of the book where he is hardly mentioned, but where all other gods are discussed through Hermes’s gift of language, and translated, therefore apprehended,

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<sup>121</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 149.



through a Hermetic movement. This Hermetic movement of ‘exchange’ is the ‘difference’ of deconstruction, which celebrates (the self-referential god of) writing through a simultaneous presence (on the cover) and absence (in the book), and places the writer on the limen, in that space of *indécidabilité* where he trades/communicates with the reader – a Derridean game played through the god that Derrida also describes as the god of games.

Calasso’s thematic and formal choices allow us to recognize in *Le nozze* a tale-within-the-tale structure, through which the author plays ‘god’ to his readership, to simultaneously signal/conceal, in poststructuralist fashion, within and beyond the text, the role of the author in the age of textuality.

Sealing his book, through the cover, with the signature of Hermes, and playing with the Hermetic secondarity of writing throughout the text/veil crown of *Le nozze*, in the simulation of Hermes which is made to run through Cadmus and Odysseus, are both self-referential actions. They re-affirm, through a long itinerary of influences – which range from Nietzsche to Warburg through to the poststructuralist thinkers that are covered in his text by the same silence, which covers Hermes, the writer as a Talleyrand of style, as the author of different ‘varianti’, of translated stories and meanings.

What remains to be determined, in the light of these findings on Hermes, is the role played by the nymph, by the mental waters that appear so often like the source of ‘absolute literature’, in the metatextual and textual economies of the text, and the implications of her closeness to the god of that movement, which differs/defers/translates the nymphs, who differs/defers/translates the gods, and whether free literature should be placed in the realm of the nymph, in the realm of the movement(s) I have identified, or in the realm of the god. Even though this is the most

original area of Calasso's thinking on literature, I expect the response to also reveal rich poststructuralist influences.

## Chapter X

### The goddess of writing

#### [Abstract]

In this final chapter, I will review the astral beings identifiable with the nymph(s), and direct my attention to the elements of *Le nozze* which allow us to recognize them as the ‘mental waters’ – to use the terminology of ‘La follia’ and *La letteratura* –, sources of ‘absolute literature’, in the metatextual and textual economies of *Le nozze*.

I will propose a reading of the nymph as textuality, to demonstrate that, despite this nymphidic element being the most original area of Calasso’s thinking on literature, even the re-writing (return) of the nymph reveals in *Le nozze* poststructuralist elements.

This reading will foreground the symptoms of ‘undecidability’ surfacing in the representation of the nymph’s relationship with Apollo, Dionysus and Hermes, as well as attempt the identification of the nymph through the self-referential elements of this text.

My reading will rely on the support of Derridean texts such as ‘Éperons’ and ‘La pharmacie de Platon’, which will enable me to recognize in the nymph, and in metaphorical images connected to her such as the *corona* and the *velo*, a poststructuralist goddess, the moment and channel for the undoing of traditional images of mastery in Calasso’s text, and for putting ‘under erasure’ the Western names of being and truth, under the feminine sign of free literature. I will propose the name of Helen as the embodiment of this furtive and ‘undecidable’ undoing of authorial patriarchy, as well as of the freedom of the textual ‘crown’ of literature.

## I. *Che cos'è la ninfa? A reading problem*

I problemi dell'arte, dello stile, della verità non sono dissociabili dal problema della donna.<sup>1</sup>

«La ninfolessia è una scienza esatta» [...] Non sarà che quella frase sopra citata sia stata buttata lì dall'autore fra tante altre, come per decorazione? No, mi rincresce, signori della giuria, ma i veri scrittori non operano così.<sup>2</sup>

The figure of the nymph has haunted Calasso's production since *L'impuro folle*, where president Schreber describes 'ancelle,'<sup>3</sup> who 'gli svolazzavano intorno,'<sup>4</sup> and 'di nulla sapevano se non della voluttà fluttuante – e tentavano solo di conservare, giusto per poco, la loro labile presenza, soffiando frasi precostruite.'<sup>5</sup> It was, from those beginnings, a Warburgian nymph. When Schreber, during a stay in Greece, meets Teiresias,<sup>6</sup> turned restaurant manager and honey-grower in the vicinity of Olympia, he discovers that the soothsayer has a daughter, Manto, a girl 'dai capelli serpentini.'<sup>7</sup> As well as, diachronically, by Warburg, Calasso's re-presentation of the nymph is influenced, synchronically, by her relationships with the male deities of her time, particularly Zeus and his three male children through which, as we have seen, Calasso undertakes his re-writing of Greek mythology. In the name of Manto, in her connection to divination ['mantica'], surfaces the shadow of the Apollinean Pythia, confirmed by the 'capelli serpentini'. As 'Melissa' was an epithet of the Pythia as bee, which connects her to Hermes through the Thriai, and Teiresias is depicted as a honey-grower, the

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida, *Sproni*, p. 69.

<sup>2</sup> Calasso, 'La sindrome Lolita' pp. 47-48.

<sup>3</sup> id., *L'impuro folle*, p. 95.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.96.

<sup>6</sup> Represented as a figure half-man half-woman who haunts early twentieth century literature, Eliot's *The Waste Land* in primis.

<sup>7</sup> Calasso, *L'impuro folle*, p. 108.

Hermetic connection is also possible to maintain. Furthermore, the serpentine hair of the nymph may be a statement of her relation to Dionysus, the god with the ‘massima familiarità’ with women, as well as an obvious Warburgian echo.<sup>8</sup>

The stratification of the allusions to the children of Zeus and their symbols in the depiction of Calasso’s proto-nymph Manto may be a symptom that, from those early days, Calasso treated the nymph like an experiential journey. *Le nozze* can be read as an interrogation on the woman as artist – inspired by the Nietzschean pages discussed by Derrida in *Sproni* –, driven by a recognition that problems of *arte* and *stile* (the Talleyrandean problems of contemporary writers/writing) and of truth on the eve of the metaphysics of presence, can only be dealt with through ‘experiencing’ the nymph, presented simultaneously as text and writer.

The difficulty I am faced with, in reviewing Calasso’s nymphs, is that these figures are not simply Calasso’s revisitation of the ancient representations of these deities, which is already made complex by cultural stratification within *classicità*, but also by the readings of the nymphs given by Warburg, Nietzsche, Otto and Colli. Ignoring these influences would reduce our appreciation of the complexity of their figures – the view of literature they enshrine, and their simultaneous belonging to modernity, post-modernity, and an always already irrevocable antiquity. My intent is therefore to undertake an experiential reading of Calasso’s various *déesse*s, acknowledging the contemporary influences, which contribute to their make-up, as well as their Greek roots. This will enable me to highlight their poststructuralist character of conscious mis-reading and re-writing, as well as identifying in his nymphs’ Warburgian elusiveness an

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<sup>8</sup> Warburg finds in Botticelli the Nymph, which he had found in Poliziano, who had found her in the Homeric Hymn to Venus: with serpentine hair moved by the wind, and light, fleeting clothes. Calasso, ‘La follia’, pp. 39-40.

extreme echo, a symbolic embodiment of Derrida's *undecidabilité*.

## II. The source of mythology

At the beginning of Western literature is the tale of literary initiation, which opens Hesiod's *Theogony*. Here, the first Greek author is initiated to poetry by three Muses at a source, at the feet of mount Helicon.<sup>9</sup> This initial image of 'nymphidic' literature, destined to become a literary *topos*, is remembered by Calasso in 'La follia', where he reflects on the fact that these Hesiodic Muses are not nine in number, as tradition would demand, but three, the number of the Thriai (see page 308). I will therefore start my investigation from the implications of Calasso's consistent identification of the nymph with a source, explicit in 'La follia', and review this source as the source of mythology and literature.

### II.i Nymph as memory – Mnemosyne

When the tale of Europa's great-grandmother Io<sup>10</sup> is first mentioned in *Le nozze*, Calasso reminds us that this nymph had a special connection with memory. Io was a priestess of the Heraion in Argos, and 'a lungo i Greci contarono gli anni riferendosi alla successione di queste sacerdotesse.'<sup>11</sup> So the nymph for Calasso both has memory, and is memory.

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<sup>9</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony, Works and Days*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1999, v. 5-34.

<sup>10</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

This deep connection between nymphs and memory powerfully mingles with the theme of naming in *Le nozze*'s re-writing of the tale of Odysseus.

I Deucalionidi, gli Inachidi, gli Asopidi, gli Atlantidi, i Pelasgidi. [...] L'età di Odisseo, l'età ibrida degli eroi, era tutta nell'intersecarsi di quei nomi, di quelle nascite e di quelle imprese. Se avesse potuto ascoltare, per un tempo senza fine, una a una, tutte quelle voci di donne [the women of the underworld], avrebbe saputo ciò che nessun uomo sapeva: la storia, la storia di un'età che con lui si stava estinguendo.<sup>12</sup>

History is transmitted to Odysseus through the genealogical memories of 'voci di donne' in the underworld. These voices simultaneously echo and trade into existence the mercurial channels of 'exchange:'

Dopo l'età degli eroi, i Greci misurarono il tempo sulla successione delle sacerdotesse nel santuario di Hera presso Argo. Durante l'età degli eroi lo scorrere del tempo era scandito dalla successione degli stupri divini.[...] Nei ceppi dove gli stupri divini sono frequenti, frequente è anche il contatto, lo scambio e l'incrocio con terre remote e favolose. Lì si aprono i passaggi del mare, i regni sorgono e crollano, migrano le dinastie.[...] *È hoie*: "O come colei...": era questa la formula ricorrente nel catalogo delle donne, che per secoli fu attribuito ad Esiodo, prima di perdersi.[...] Così si aprivano, ogni volta, gli anelli delle generazioni. Non già una successione di sovrani, ma l'inanellarsi di tante vicende di fanciulle, il loro succedersi monotono e stupefacente, furono l'unica forma in cui il passato eroico, da un capo all'altro, accettò di trasmettersi per i Greci.<sup>13</sup>

At the cosmic junctures, where 'exchange' takes place, and heroic families, together with their 'storia', are born, stands the figure of a 'fanciulla', simultaneously within and

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 396.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 396-397.

without the story. The use of the word ‘*storia*’ allows a game of ‘undecidability’ between ‘story,’ and ‘history,’ making the nymph the bridge, the *omphalos*, through which heroes come into existence and survive, if not as history, at least as literature. In the ‘*inanellarsi*’ of ‘*vicende di fanciulle*,’ history and story appear as one ‘crown,’ the only ‘forma’ in which the Greek past accepted to be transmitted, as a nymph, and, under the sign of Hermes, as the movement – whether spatial or temporal or both – of a nymph.

This clear recognition of the nymph as history/story may betray the influence of Warburg’s and Otto’s work on Mnemosyne, and Colli’s studies on her Orphic cult,<sup>14</sup> which all focus on the Nymph as ‘memory’.

Otto presents the Nymphs, and particularly in Mnemosyne, as goddess(es) of memory, a move repeated, as we have just seen, in Calasso’s reflections on the pseudo-Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women*.

Colli’s research on Orphism also isolates the image of a proto-nymph, Mnemosyne, ‘*augusta dea orfica, che attinge dal pozzo della visione misterica, e additando il passato riconduce attraverso la poesia [...] alla grande iniziazione da cui discendono le immagini degli dei.*’<sup>15</sup>

I will review these preliminary conclusions on the relationship between nymph and memory in the light of Calasso’s treatment of the theme of the nymph as *noeron udaton*, as the mental waters, source/matter of myth.

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<sup>14</sup> His text does not mention it.

<sup>15</sup> Colli, *La sapienza greca*, vol. II, p. 39.



## II.ii The nymph vs. Apollo – The eye/source and ‘otherness’

L’arte di Talleyrand appartiene alla metamorfosi, quindi alla mostruosità.<sup>16</sup>

Per i Greci, la possessione fu innanzitutto una forma primaria di conoscenza, nata molto prima dei filosofi che la nominavano.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout *Le nozze*, Calasso insists on a magic connection between nymph and water. Exemplary is his re-writing of the Aeschylean tale of the Danaides. After attracting his readership’s attention to the fact that, like Io, they would be normally represented ‘con una canna in mano,’<sup>18</sup> Calasso stresses their belonging to a ‘paesaggio primordiale di canne e di paludi,’<sup>19</sup> and that they bring ‘nel luogo più riarso dl Peloponneso’, ‘il dono dell’umidità.’<sup>20</sup> The connection between nymph and water returns in the tale of Iphimedia. Recounting how the nymph, in love with Poseidon, was entering the sea to pour water over her breast, Calasso gives us a very insightful comment: ‘Il gesto di Ifimedia ha qualcosa di beato e incessante, è il moto della materia femminile verso l’altro, verso qualsiasi altro. Moto inappagabile, appagato soltanto nel suo inesausto ripetersi.’<sup>21</sup> Is this ‘moto femminile’ a movement of repetition of the content of mythology, an echo of the role of the nymph as memory and her embodiment under the name of Mnemosyne; or are the *noeron udaton* alluding to language itself? In order to answer this question, I will review ‘La follia’, Calasso’s most explicit presentation of the theme of the nymph.

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<sup>16</sup> Calasso, *Kasch*, p. 405.

<sup>17</sup> Id., ‘La follia’, p. 27.

<sup>18</sup> Id., *Le nozze*, p. 83.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

Dedicated to Warburg, this essay defines the nymph through the Delphic myth of Python, and, in what I can only see as a poststructuralist move, through Python's difference from Apollo, and the textual difference between the traditional version of the tale of the slaying of Python and an alternative, subversive one.

Re-writing the 'Homeric hymn to Apollo', Calasso in 'La follia' recounts Apollo's simultaneous defeat of the nymph Telphusia, the first being to whom Apollo spoke in Delphi<sup>22</sup>, and of Python, presented, following the pre-classical 'Hymn' rather than classical and imperial tradition, as a dragoness-nymph instead of a dragon. This femininity of Python, the monster at the source, referred to as 'la Ninfa che sgorga nell'invisibile',<sup>23</sup> already surfaced in *L'impuro folle*. To further stress the nymphic nature of Python, Calasso notes that the doubling of the nymphs in the 'Hymn' is marked by the repetition of the same words in the god's address to Telphusia and to Python, and by his finding a source on the site of his meeting with both nymphs/monsters.

Relying on Norman Douglas' *Old Calabria*, and Joseph Fontenrose's 'Python', Calasso further suggests that the eye of the dragoness Python is actually a source, and that Apollo has slain Python in order to acquire the power of *possessione* coming from the eye of this source-monster. If, as we have seen, *Le nozze* presents the theme of Apollo god 'isolato e sovrano', but who has also learnt to assimilate the monster, *La follia che viene dalle Ninfe* goes one step further. It discloses to the absolute reader that the monster's 'otherness' is one with his/her femininity.

Whilst not a feminist gesture in the trail, for example, of Kristeva and Cixous, in my view his choice of making the nymph the most visible opponent of 'il figlio più forte del padre' cannot be discounted as a casual gesture of homage to an obscure 'variation' of a

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<sup>22</sup> Id., 'La follia', p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

classical myth, but as a conscious foregrounding of that *other*, whose thinking is central to a number of postmodern practitioners, and particularly stretches the thought of Derrida, through Levinas, in some of his most remarkable moves.

Calasso employs Plutarch's *Life of Aristides*,<sup>24</sup> Aristotle's *Ethic to Eudemos*, and Plato's *Phaedrus*,<sup>25</sup> to introduce the concept of *nympholeptos*, 'taken by the nymph,'<sup>26</sup> which he clarifies by comparison with *theoleptos*, to mark the equivalence, thus the equality, between male and female deities: 'come se il sistema delle Ninfe e il sistema degli dei fossero in qualche modo equivalenti, per lo meno in rapporto alla qualità degli effetti che producono.'<sup>27</sup> But the discussion of possession appears to push Calasso's nymphidic 'other' beyond equality, in a position of furtive mastery.<sup>28</sup>

Calasso states to his reader that the nymph-monster-'other' has to surrender to Apollo a 'source sacrée'<sup>29</sup> of *noeron udaton*, a liquid of *possessione*, a word which he explains as 'conoscenza metamorfica,' concentrating itself in one place, which is simultaneously a spring, a serpent, and a nymph:<sup>30</sup> 'Ciascuna di queste invasioni era il segnale di una metamorfosi. E ogni metamorfosi era un'acquisizione di conoscenza. [...] Ma una conoscenza che è un *páthos*, come Aristotele definì l'esperienza dei misteri.'<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 22-24.

<sup>25</sup> Where Socrates appears as *nympholeptos*, when the dialoguee opens, on the banks of the Ilissus, next to a sanctuary to the Nymphs. Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>26</sup> This concept is discussed by W. F. Otto in strikingly similar terms, and through exactly the same section of *Phaedrus*, in his *Die Musen und der göttliche Ursprung des Singens und Sagens*: 'Come delle Ninfe, così anche delle Muse si dice che afferrino i mortali, con la differenza che, mentre coloro che sono afferrati dalle Ninfe (*nymphóleptoi*) corrono il pericolo di perdere la ragione, la follia che viene dalle Muse (*apò Mousōn katokochē te kai manía*, Plat, Phaidr. 245a) comporta l'elevazione e l'illuminazione dello spirito, nelle quali diviene possibile il miracolo del canto e della poesia. Colui che è afferrato dalle Muse (*Mousóleptos*) è il vero poeta, contrapposto al banale versificatore (Plut. De virt. Mor.12).' See Walter Friederich Otto, *Le Muse e l'origine divina della parola e del canto*, Fazi, Rome, 2005, p. 37. I am quoting the Italian translation as this text was not translated in English.

<sup>27</sup> Calasso, 'La follia', p. 25.

<sup>28</sup> Calasso may be influenced here also by the work of Robert Graves, who views the Olympian religion as super-imposed on an earlier matriarchal one. See Graves, *The Greek myths*, p. 156 and ff.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

The importance of this invasion by *possessione*, as Calasso repeatedly notes in *Le nozze*, is its being the only channel left for a metamorphic knowledge, in the age of the children of Zeus, when metamorphosis stops being a ‘normal state’. A brief reference to Python in *Le nozze* allows us to name this mysterious metamorphic knowledge, as literary knowledge, ‘storical’ rather than ‘historical’ memory and its representation: Apollo wants the power of Python-Daphne because this is the power of ‘representation.’ If Apollo’s hostility to the nymph has been clarified in *Le nozze* as an attempt to gain the representative power of Python, his opposition to the Thriai, in ‘La follia’, confirms that the fight between Apollo and the nymph is over literature and writing. Calasso alludes to the ‘Homeric Hymn to Hermes’, where Apollo’s mastery of archery (whose metaphorical analogies with writing have already been discussed) is revealed as a teaching by the Thriai.<sup>32</sup>

But is the nymph/’other’ really handing the power of ‘representation’ over the patriarchal master-author-reader? The tales of the Thriai and Python imply a different possibility. In these tales, the nymphs appear as the dispensers of written *morphē*, in what appears like a reversal of traditional relations of mastery. Furthermore, a reading of Apollo’s defeats of Python and the Thriai reveals a gap between Apollo’s reading of his own mastery and that of his female subjects, in both ‘La follia’, and *Le nozze*. ‘La follia’ states that Apollo will replace the Thriai with the Muse. However, rather than the classical nine Muses, Calasso foregrounds the Hesiodic version, where the Muses are only three (see p. 320), and present themselves as ‘enunciatrici sia della verità sia della menzogna, esattamente come le Thriai.’<sup>33</sup> Thus the replacement of Thriai with Muse may never have taken place, and simply be a misreading on Apollo’s part, or at least be

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 15. Robert Graves’s white goddess, which could be conceived as a Triad, may also lie behind Calasso’s fascination with the idea of a triad of nymphs. See Graves, *The Greek myths*, p. 14.

sitting in the realm of ‘undecidability’.

Similarly, Apollo’s mastery over the Pythia, the priestess with whom Apollo has replaced Python, and who acts as the Loxias’ intermediary with the mortals, appears questionable/‘undecidable’ in *Le nozze*. As well as explaining that the god ‘rules’ over ‘possession’ (as discussed at page 214),<sup>34</sup> Calasso reminds us that ‘sotto il coperchio di bronzo del tripode dove ora siede la Pizia bollirono un giorno gli arti smembrati di Dioniso Zagreus. E [...] Dioniso, secondo alcuni, fu il primo a vaticinare dal tripode. E [...] un serpente si attorcigliò intorno alle zampe del tripode.’<sup>35</sup> The tripod and the divination are placed within the space of Apollo’s ‘undecidability’ with Dionysus, but also – as we have recognised that Python himself is undistinguishable with Dionysus – reveal that Apollo’s victory may be just fiction, as even Apollo and his nymphic feminine *other* may be intertwined in a game of ‘undecidability’. The Pythia’s role of translator of the predictions of the god evokes further ambiguities. As mediator between the god and the humans, is she less or more powerful than the god she re-presents? The text appears not to answer this question.

Thus, the analysis of the figures of the Muses and the Pythia confirms that in Calasso the nymph, clearly identified as the water/source of the content of myth, ‘potenza’ and ‘possessione’, ‘che precede e sostiene la parola’, also stretches beyond the ‘signified,’ ‘la materia della letteratura’, to affect in some way the realm of the ‘signifier.’

Porfirio nell’*Antro delle Ninfe* cita un inno a Apollo, dove si parla delle «noerōn udaton», delle «acque mentali» che le ninfe presentarono in dono ad Apollo. Conquistate, le Ninfe offrivano se stesse. Ninfa è la fremente, oscillante, scintillante, *materia mentale* di cui sono

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<sup>34</sup> ‘Apollo non possiede le Ninfe, non possiede la possessione, ma la governa’. Id., *Le nozze*, p. 157.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 173-174.

fatti i simulacri, gli *eidola*. Ed è la materia stessa della letteratura. Ogni volta che si profila la Ninfa, vibra quella materia divina che si plasma nelle epifanie e si insedia nella mente, potenza che precede e sostiene la parola. Dal momento in cui quella potenza si manifesta, la forma la segue e si adatta, si articola secondo quel flusso.<sup>36</sup>

Just like the ‘inanellarsi’ of the ‘vicende di fanciulle’ allowed us to recognise the nymph as memory (Mnemosyne), the reading of the nymph as ‘materia mentale’, as a combination of the philosophical opposites mind and matter, allows us to recognise her aspect of representational ‘forma’. The tales of Daphne and Python, and all of Apollo’s wars with the nymph, reveal her as historical as well as ‘storical’ memory, as a snake-like matter. This snake-like matter simultaneously, undecidably, is/becomes that crown of mythology, which underlies both structurally and thematically the whole of *Le nozze*. The ‘déesse’ is refined into a ‘nymph-crown,’ source and means of ‘absolute literature’.

### **III. Hermes and the nymph – A crown in the pharmacy**

‘La follia’ makes another remarkable revelation regarding this monster/source. Apollo’s assimilation of Python, like Athena’s assimilation of Medusa (‘Atena portava sul petto, nell’egida, lo sguardo della sua vittima, la Gorgone’),<sup>37</sup> results, as just indicated, in the incorporation not simply of the monster, but of the eye of the monster.

Calasso suggests that Apollo may assimilate the nymph/monster to gain access to her eye/source. The gift of *noeron udaton*, and their ‘moto femminile’ towards the ‘other,’

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<sup>36</sup> Id., *La letteratura*, p. 37.

<sup>37</sup> Id., ‘La follia’, p. 17.

is starting to reveal its complexity. Calasso may also be drawing attention, through the emphasis on the eye as source, to a pictorial, almost Warburgian quality of the nymphs and their ‘mental waters’, as first and foremost images, *morphē*, thus possibly textuality. In my view, however, Calasso goes further. If, in his writing, the source-eye has to be seen as language, as previously hypothesized, it may be language in a Wittgensteinian, or Derridean, vein, language as a way to interpret the world (as ‘always already’ deferred from our experience and imagination).

This may partly explain why the vocabulary of his re-write of the ‘Homeric Hymn to Apollo’ appears to fluctuate constantly between an Apollinean and a Hermetic background.

But it is not Hermes as god of translation, which Calasso chooses to foreground. In a scene, where we can recognise the undistinguishable shadows of Hermes and his Thriai, Calasso narrates that Telphusia had plotted to have Apollo killed, she had lied and tried to send him to Python, so that the dragoness could kill him, but Apollo wins against Python and, realizing Telphusia’s trick, steals her name: ‘Apollo Telfusio’. This pre-announces his stealing the knowledge of the nymphs: ‘In tutti i rapporti fra Apollo e le Ninfe – rapporti tortuosi, di attrazione, persecuzione e fuga [...] rimarrà questo sottinteso: che Apollo è stato il primo invasore e usurpatore di un sapere che non gli apparteneva, un sapere liquido, fluido, al quale il dio imporrà il suo metro.’<sup>38</sup>

Apollo, Calasso shows us, steals – that most Hermetic act – from the Nymph. He steals an ancient knowledge, in an act which echoes his own previous stealing of the power of the Hermetic Thriai. [‘Verso Telfusa come verso le Thriai, Apollo seguì lo stesso impulso: deprezzare, umiliare degli esseri femminili portatori di un sapere a lui

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 13-14.

precedente.<sup>39]</sup> The nymphs thus force on Apollo a Hermetic behaviour, into attempting to master them through stealing and translation.

They also display Hermetic characteristics and behaviours, as is made obvious in the case of the Thriai. The prophecies uttered by the Thriai partake in the character of language as Hermetic *pharmakon*: they speak the truth if fed on honey, falsehood if hungry,<sup>40</sup> thus we can maintain not simply that their gift is a gift of literary form, but that this form shares elements of that post-Nietzschean interpretation of the theme of textuality, which have been elaborated by Derrida.

Through the intermediation of the nymph, the ‘absolute reader’ can establish a metaphorical relationship between the ‘crown-nymph’ at one end and the ‘eye of the nymph’ at the other. Thus we can include the round eye of the source in that same macro- metaphor of the ‘crown,’ which underlines thematically and structurally *Le nozze*.

The ‘nymph-crown’ par excellence is Ariadne, in whose re-presentation Calasso echoes<sup>41</sup> Epimenide’s *Storie cretesi* [B 25 DK]<sup>42</sup>, and Colli’s translation of this text in *La sapienza greca*.<sup>43</sup> A re-reading of Calasso’s tale of Ariadne, allows us to identify the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>41</sup> I reproduce here a section that appears like a re-writing of Colli and Epimenide: ‘La storia di Arianna è intrecciata tutta in una corona. «Arriva *mon cousin*» pensò la giovane principessa di Cnosso quando le dissero che Dioniso era sbarcato nell’isola. [...] La strinse al polso e la condusse in una delle tante grotte di Creta, E lì il buio era stato ferito da una corona abbagliante. Oro come fuoco e gemme indiane. Dioniso offrì la corona ad Arianna in dono per quelle loro prime nozze. [...]

Quando Arianna fissò lo sguardo sulla bellezza di Teseo, non era già più una fanciulla che gioca con le sorelle nel palazzo di Cnosso. Era sposa di un dio, anche se nessuno sapeva delle nozze. Unico testimone era stata quella corona lucente. [...] Teseo si inoltrò nei corridoi oscuri del labirinto guidato dalla luce della corona fulgente. [...] A Nasso, quando riapparve, Dioniso brandiva una corona raggiante. Arianna la guardava e pensava alle altre corone che erano state per lei l’origine di tutti gli inganni. Ora sapeva che quella corona era sempre stata la stessa. Ora la storia era davvero finita, e prigioniera di quella corona raggiante Arianna sarebbe rimasta solitaria nel cielo: Corona Borealis.’ Calasso, *Le nozze*, pp. 33-34. See pages 250 and ff. 261 to integrate this section.

<sup>42</sup> Where ‘Dioniso per sedurre Arianna le promise in dono una meravigliosa ghirlanda forgiata da Efesto [...] che successivamente venne trasferita in cielo tra le costellazioni, see Giulio Guidorizzi, note to in Igino, *I miti*, Adelphi, Milan, 2000, p. 273.

<sup>43</sup> Colli, *La sapienza greca*, vol. II, pp. 45-75.



linguistic allusions and markers scattered throughout the text, that enable a reading of the text itself as thematising self-reflectively literary language and textuality.

The author makes her acknowledge the game of substitution between all the crowns that affected her life, and her remaining prisoner of a crown, in her metamorphosis as the *Corona borealis*. The crown of language thus is the invisible net behind that frieze in the sky, in which Ariadne-nymph recognizes her ultimate prison. Karl Kraus,<sup>44</sup> whose obsession with language, as Calasso noted, had erotic undertones, and for whom, precisely, ‘Arianna è il linguaggio,’<sup>45</sup> may be an influence here. But the differences between Epimenides’s rendition and Calasso allow us to recognize again familiarity with a Derridean reading of the Hermetic character of language.

Exemplary is the prominence in Calasso’s narration of the episode in which Ariadne helps Theseus get out of the Labyrinth by giving him Dionysus’s crown,<sup>46</sup> a ‘crown-deceit.’<sup>47</sup> In this ‘crown-deceit’ we can recognize Derrida’s *pharmakon*, a word that simultaneously lies and speaks the truth, just as Calasso’s nymph is a memory of ‘history’ as well as ‘story.’ The act of weaving (‘sumplokē’), which produces both garlands and ‘stoffe’ (tissues as well as texts), is placed by the French philosopher directly in relation with the *pharmakon*: ‘la sumplokè, le tissage, (s’)intrigue avec le *pharmakon*’,<sup>48</sup> thus with *grammē*.

But the relation between ‘crown/deceit’ and Ariadne is even more complex. Ariadne is not simply operating in a space marked by different *corone*, intertwined in a game of

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<sup>44</sup> Id., ‘Dell’opinione’, p.106

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 107

<sup>46</sup> ‘Ma anche Teseo emerge dal palazzo sottomarino del padre Posidone tenendo in mano una corona fatta di piccolo fiori di melo stillanti, che irraggiavano luce. La donò ad Arianna, come Dioniso le aveva donato la sua corona. E al tempo stesso era stata Arianna a donare la corona di Dioniso a Teseo. Da una parte Teseo ripeteva un gesto del dio, dall’altra Arianna tradiva il dio perché lo straniero potesse uccidere il Minotauro, che al dio toro apparteneva.’ Calasso, *Le nozze*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>47</sup> ‘Ma l’inganno non era già all’origine, già nel dono del dio? Arianna è ingannata nel momento in cui inganna: crede che Teseo sia opposto al dio, vede in lui l’uomo che la porterà ad Atene, sua sposa, fuori dal cerchio del toro.’ Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>48</sup> Derrida, ‘La pharmacie de Platon’, note 77, p. 207.

substitution; she also is a ‘crown,’ she is her own discourse, her own *mitoografia*, simultaneously a character in a story and inscription of that story. Calasso’s metafictional reference to a possible meaning of Ariadne/Koronis as the ‘fregio ondulato che contrassegnava la fine di un libro: sigillo del compimento’<sup>49</sup> supports this interpretation.

I reproduce below a statement, through which Calasso marks the metaphorical proximity between *corona* and *velo*, which has implications for the reading of the nymph as *morphē*, and as *graphē*. I will employ this statement, which in my view is one of the most important in *Le nozze*, to explore the metaphorical relationship between crown, deceit and veil, and highlight how Calasso confirms an affiliation of ‘absolute literature’ with the nymph, which pushes to its extreme the ‘undecidability’ of *materia mentale* and textuality, in terms similar to deconstruction, and with similar conclusions.

Il velo, o qualcosa che stringe, avvolge, cinge, un nastro, una fascia, una benda, è l’oggetto ultimo che incontriamo in Grecia. Di là dal velo, non c’è altro. Il velo è l’altro. E’ l’annuncio che l’esistente, da solo, non regge, che richiede almeno, perennemente, di essere coperto e scoperto, apparire e sparire. Ciò che si compie, l’iniziazione o le nozze o il sacrificio, esige un velo, appunto perché a compiersi è il perfetto, che sta per il tutto, e il tutto include il velo, quel sovrappiù che è la fragranza della cosa.<sup>50</sup>

To interpret these lines, I will rely strongly on ‘Éperons’, one of only two Derridean texts translated by Adelphi, which centers on the same theme of the ‘crown-deceit,’ the relationship between woman and truth, and does so precisely through the metaphor of

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<sup>49</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 74.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 410.

the veil, that ‘Verità come velo,’<sup>51</sup> which as we have seen is another name for the ‘crown’ of literature.

Derrida isolates in Nietzsche’s words on the woman<sup>52</sup> a recurring theme that ‘Non si dà verità della donna. [...] Donna è un nome di questa non-verità della verità.’<sup>53</sup> In his view, thus, Nietzsche isolates a metaphor of woman as truth, but a truth that cannot be captured: ‘La donna (la verità) non si lascia prendere.’<sup>54</sup>

Even though Derrida says this metaphor only applies to the third of the three types of treatment of woman he identifies in Nietzsche, the woman ‘riconosciuta e affermata quale potenza affermativa, dissimulatrice, artistica, dionisiaca’, ‘non [...] affermata dall’uomo’, but who ‘si afferma da se stessa, in se stessa, e nell’uomo,’<sup>55</sup> this woman emblematises truth as veil, thus as the ‘undecidability’ of textuality, and makes of Nietzsche’s truth a Warburgian nymph, a fugitive who ‘non si lascia prendere’:

Questo scarto della verità che si sottrae da sola e da sé, che si libera e si alza tra virgolette (volo di gru, macchinazione di adescatrice, con grida, scippo e unghie), tutto ciò che, nella scrittura di Nietzsche, imporrà di virgolettare la «verità» – e, con rigorosa consequenzialità, tutto il resto –, ciò che dunque *inscriverà* la verità – e, con rigorosa consequenzialità, inscriverà in generale – è, non diciamo nemmeno il femminile ma: l’operazione femminile. Essa (si) scrive.

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<sup>51</sup> Derrida, *Sproni*, p. 57.

<sup>52</sup> The French philosopher notes that Heidegger in his reading of Nietzsche’s *Twilight of the gods* had avoided commenting on the sentence ‘sie wird Weib’ referred to the idea, il divenir-donna dell’idea.’ Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>55</sup> These are the three types:

‘1. La donna è condannata, degradata, disprezzata, in quanto figura o capacità di menzogna. [...] testi fallogocentrici

2. La donna è condannata, degradata, disprezzata, in quanto figura o potere di verità [...] permanendo, per astuzia e ingenuità (l’astuzia è sempre contaminata di ingenuità), nel sistema e nell’economia della verità, nello spazio fallogocentrico. [...] Fin qui la donna è due volte la castrazione: verità e non-verità.

3. Al di là di questa doppia negazione, la donna viene riconosciuta e affermata quale potenza affermativa, dissimulatrice, artistica, dionisiaca. Essa non è affermata dall’uomo ma si afferma da se stessa, in se stessa, e nell’uomo.’ Id., pp. 89-90.

Lo stile spetta a lei.

O meglio, se lo stile fosse (come il pene è, per Freud, «il prototipo normale del feticcio»)

l'uomo, la scrittura sarebbe la donna.<sup>56</sup>

The identification of woman with 'inscription' in Derrida's re-reading of Nietzsche is an interesting lead, as it appears to be echoed by Calasso's nymph, a 'mental water' that also partakes of form, becomes textuality, and, as we have seen with Daphne-Python and the Thriai, 'non si lascia prendere' from the male-patriarchal-authorial god. The figure of Ariadne, who is haunted by *corone* preceding or accompanying a male authorial-stylistic figure, but who is also 'always already' a *corona* inscribed in the sky, and her own reader, can be better understood in this Derridean reading of the German philosopher. The same goes for the Pythia, who utters hexameters, a stylistic choice dictated by Apollo, but who has a degree of control, through dictation, on the form of her responses. Calasso, who in his own production never mentions Derrida, interestingly indicates that he did attend the conference on Nietzsche in Cérisy where the Franco-Algerian thinker first gave 'Éperons' as a paper.<sup>57</sup> *Éperons* was later published by Adelphi (1972).

This Nietzschean-Derridean woman-veil, woman-inscription, has very recognisable Hermetic and Dionysian characteristics, grouped under the sign of simulation. The woman as Odysseus, as the simulator in the same space as the wandering Jew, is clearly recognisable in the Derridean statement – on Nietzsche's woman – below:

Ma siccome, per quanto la riguarda, essa non crede alla verità, anche se ripone il proprio interesse in questa verità che non la interessa, la donna è ancora il modello: stavolta, il buon modello, o piuttosto il cattivo modello in quanto buon modello: gioca con la

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., pp. 55-56.

<sup>57</sup> Gnoli, 'Quel pensiero nella terra di nessuno', <http://lgxserver.uniba.it/lei/rassegna/000801b.htm>.

dissimulazione, il vezzo, la menzogna, l'arte, la filosofia artiste; è un potere affermativo, ponendosi dal punto di vista dell'uomo, a mentire credendo ancora nella verità, a riflettere specularmente lo sciocco dogmatismo che essa provoca.<sup>58</sup>

A representation of the Hermetic nymph in *Le nozze* is Calypso, the 'Occultatrice',<sup>59</sup> whose passion was 'il celare, avvolgere qualcosa in un velo, come quelli che talvolta le cingevano la testa,'<sup>60</sup> living 'in un punto di giuntura cosmica,'<sup>61</sup> with whom Odysseus spends his life on Ogygia – 'un luogo per conoscere, non per vivere'<sup>62</sup> –, repeating the narration of the Trojan war:

Con uno stecco, disegnava sulla sabbia gli accampamenti e le posizioni. Ogni volta cambiava il racconto – o il modo do raccontare. Calipso gli stava accanto, silenziosa, concentrata. Poi un'onda più forte cancellava quei segni sulla sabbia.<sup>63</sup>

Derrida reminds the reader of a Nietzschean statement where the 'donna dionisiaca' can be recognised, through statements that the woman is 'innanzitutto e prima di ogni altra cosa 'commediante', and that 'La donna è così artista.'<sup>64</sup> It is in the light of these statements that we have to read Calasso's lines on the end of the age of heroes, in which Helen appears to play a self-reflexive authorial role. During a conversation with Hector, Helen is made to utter a memorable statement on the future of the heroes in song: 'Zeus ci ha predisposto un destino funesto perché in futuro ci tocchi di essere cantati dagli aedi.'<sup>65</sup> In the age of the *nostoi*, when she gives to Telemaco and his companions a drug,

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<sup>58</sup> Derrida, *Sproni*, p. 55.

<sup>59</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 411.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 411.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 411.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 412.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 412.

<sup>64</sup> Derrida, *Sproni*, p. 68.

<sup>65</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 400.

so that they can abandon themselves to ‘discourses’, Calasso presents Helen as a new Mnemosyne, the source of the memories of the age of the Trojan war, when he defines the heroic age as the moment of the manifestation of ‘i Nomi, più duraturi della razza dove erano sorti,’<sup>66</sup> and makes of Helen the generator and custodian of heroes’ names and stories. He also carefully makes Zeus decide to do away with the race of the heroes at the very moment in which Helen gives birth,<sup>67</sup> thus simultaneously assigning to her the role of Mnemosyne, and the role of (pro-)creator. The statement below confirms that Helen is clearly represented as a *commediante*:

Nella sua vita, Elena non fece altro che mostrarsi e tradire. Poco sappiamo dei suoi sentimenti, e tutto è soggetto a dubbio, perchè aveva un tale dono per l’imitazione (anche questo un dono di Afrodite) che la chiamavano Eco. Così avrebbe potuto facilmente simulare ogni verità [...] La sua cura andava solo all’apparenza, quindi anche al canto.<sup>68</sup>

Characterised by a sudden appearance and disappearance, and by betrayal, Helen appears immediately as a Hermetic nymph. Her Hermetic secondariness appears further sanctioned by Calasso’s remarks on her imitative ability, which makes of her a Dionysian *commediante*, but also a trickster. Having ‘il dono dell’imitazione’,<sup>69</sup> Helen can perform ‘il gesto più pericoloso dell’ordine del mondo’,<sup>70</sup> the one that causes Plato to expel the poets, and, according to Calasso, Zeus to kill the heroes.<sup>71</sup> The crime of the heroes in the author’s view is imitating the gods, by attempting to master Python-

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., pp. 397-398.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 398.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p.399.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 399.

Daphne, the nymph-*rappresentazione*, the snake of mythology.<sup>72</sup> Yet Helen-trickster appears capable of a movement of elusiveness precluded to the heroes, a movement which allows her to get away with the Platonic mortal sin of literary and textual imitation. This is the Hermetic movement of ‘exchange,’ through which Helen’s unicity has, paradoxically and undecidably, to be read, according to a wealth of clues planted in Calasso’s text.

### III.ii The nymph and ‘exchange’

Il problema del senso o della verità dell’essere non è *capace* del problema del proprio, dello scambio indecidibile del più in meno, del dare-prendere, del dare-serbare, del dare-nuocere, del *colpo di dono*. Non ne è capace in quanto vi si trova inscritto.<sup>73</sup>

The previous chapter on Hermes has helped us put into context Calasso’s handling of the theme of substitution. The importance of this theme’s relation with the nymphic in *Le nozze* requires comparison with the amplification that it receives in Derrida, who states that the ‘problema dello scambio’ inscribes the ‘problema del senso’. I will discuss the theme of ‘exchange’ through one diegetic and one mimetic example from *Le nozze*.

The mimetic example is in the narration of stories of nymphs all placed in a garland of undecidabilities, which appears like a direct echo of the nymph as *merce* of ‘Les déesses’. It involves Ariadne and a triad of names of sky nymphs – all present in de

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<sup>72</sup> Calasso observes: ‘La colpa degli eroi, forse, non era tanto nel calpestare la terra, ma nel loro distaccarsi da essa. Gli eroi furono i primi che squadrarono la terra di fronte a sé come un oggetto. E come un oggetto la colpirono. Il loro modello era Apollo che scocca le frecce sulle squame di Pitone, chiazze come la montagna di Delfi è chiazata di arbusti. Chi colpisce il serpente colpisce la terra su cui striscia e l’acqua che ne sgorga.’ Ibid., p. 399.

<sup>73</sup> Derrida, *Sproni*, p. 103.

Santillana's work, all marked by 'exchange' and 'undecidability'. Erigone,<sup>74</sup> who embodies 'undecidability' through the powerful symbol of the swing, as 'l'altalena nel cielo' from *Rgveda*,<sup>75</sup> has other astral connections, all of them recognised by Calasso as intimations of substitutive difference. Alongside being – as in de Santillana – a mythological reminiscence of the equinoctial precession, Erigone, an orphan seduced by Dionysus,<sup>76</sup> is portrayed as the mortal woman who ascends to the sky as the constellation of Virgo,<sup>77</sup> thus the nymph par excellence, and as the Egyptian moon goddess Iside: 'Erigone è una Iside che la legge mistica dell'inversione scaglia all'estremo opposto della sovrana celeste'<sup>78</sup>, thus a paradoxical substitute of the most powerful of goddesses.

This complex portrayal of the nymph-swing Erigone is expanded through a further chain of 'exchange,' which makes her undistinguishable also from Ariadne. Telling the reader that, on her death, Ariadne's curls become 'la Chioma di Berenice', the constellation 'detta anche [...] "ricciolo di Arianna",'<sup>79</sup> Calasso toys with the idea that Erigone is, according to some, just a different version of the name Ariadne.<sup>80</sup> The regime of 'exchange' between Ariadne/Erigone thus involves both the order of naming, with a constant fluctuation between the two versions, and of their referent: the equinoctial precession, 'la chioma di Berenice', the constellation Virgo, the moon. The symbology of the swing makes of the nymph Erigone-Ariadne the clearest inscription of movement as 'exchange' at the core of *Le nozze*. This opens a perspective of *mîse en*

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<sup>74</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>75</sup> 'Ogni volta che il sole si avvicina ai solstizi, rischia di impazzire; il mondo trema, perchè la corsa dell'astro potrebbe procedere per inerzia, invece di invertire la rotta. E lì appunto si disegna quell'arco di cerchio che è l'altalena d'oro nel cielo. Giunto all'estremo dell'oscillazione, il sole torna indietro, come la fanciulla ateniese che un Satiro spinge sull'altalena.' Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., pp. 52-3 and 56-57.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 53 and pp. 56-57.



*abyme* between the nymph, always *différance*, always a substitute in a chain of substitutes, and writing, which is in itself an ‘exchange,’ a game with ‘difference’, an instance of signifier in a chain of nymphidic signifiers.

The diegetic example is in the fine discussion of the implications of the attempted substitution of Briseis with Chryseis, in which literality, and thus writing, is given centre stage: ‘Quando i greci dovevano appellarsi ad un’ autorità ultima, non citavano testi sacri ma Omero. Sull’Iliade si fondava la Grecia. E l’Iliade si fondava su un gioco di parole, sullo scambio di una lettera.’<sup>81</sup>

The initial letters of the names of the two nymphs would be the word-game, on which the *Iliad*, foundation of literature as well as ancient Greek religion, are built. Calasso continues:

E non “a causa della fanciulla” ripete infantilmente Achille, si scatena la disputa, ma a causa della sostituzione, come se l’eroe presagisse che in quell’atto si stringeva il cappio che nessun eroe, e nessuna delle generazioni seguenti agli eroi, avrebbe sciolto.

È lo scambio che si addensa con tutte le sue potenze sull’apertura dell’Iliade: la donna, anzi le due donne dalle belle guance, quasi indistinguibili, come monete dello stesso conio; le parole di Agamennone e di Achille che si scontrano come forza contro forza (*antibioisi epeéessin*); l’”immenso”, lo “splendente riscatto”, la “sacra ecatombe” offerta dagli achei al sacerdote. Ogni volta, in coppia si presentano le potenze dello scambio: le donne, le parole, le offerte.<sup>82</sup>

The diegetic example foregrounds more explicitly the textuality of the nymph through an abysmal instance of ‘exchange-within-the-exchange,’ the exchange of the letters within the exchange of the nymphs, parallel to the exchange of the ‘merci’. Otto’s

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., pp. 110-111.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., pp. 110-111.

discussion on the shared etymology of Mnemosyne, the proto-nymph source of memory and poetry, and the Latin ‘Moneta’, whose name passed on to ‘money’, may be known to Calasso and may have partially inspired his theory of ‘exchange.’ This theory, and its accompanying gesture, the inscription of the theme of the movement of ‘exchange,’ diegetically and mimetically, inter and intra-textually, within *Le nozze*, however also echoes some of Derrida’s reflections on the inscription of ontological questions into questions of substitution, which is indicated as a sexual (therefore possibly nymphic) operation :

In quanto operazione sessuale – e noi non conosciamo la sessualità *prima* di lei – la appropriazione è, in quanto indecidibile, più potente dell’interrogativo *ti esti*, del problema del velo della verità o del senso dell’essere. [...] il processo di appropriazione organizza la totalità del processo di linguaggio o di scambio simbolico in generale, ivi compresi, perciò, tutti gli *enunciati* ontologici. La storia (della) verità (è) un processo di appropriazione.<sup>83</sup>

The theme of inscription, captured by the ‘exchange’ of a letter or a name, returns also in the tale of Europa, who, through her link to Io, becomes for Zeus the copy of a copy of a copy, three times removed from Hera-reality – thus in the same situation as writing for Plato. Both as ‘merce di scambio’, and as ‘copy of a copy’, Europa confirms the connection between *donna* and *letteratura*, in the sense of textuality, of the literality of the alphabet. The reading of the nymph as alphabetic textuality is supported thematically through the symmetrical tale of her brother Cadmus, the man that brought the alphabet to Greece, after leaving Phoenicia to find his sister. But writing, water of ‘exchange,’ overflows and coagulates into a simulacrum.

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<sup>83</sup> Derrida, *Sproni*, p. 103.

L'abisso della verità come non-verità, della appropriazione come appropriazione/a-propriazione, della dichiarazione come dissimulazione parodica: ci si può chiedere se tutto questo è ciò che Nietzsche chiama la forma dello stile e il non-luogo della donna. [...] Il dono – predicato essenziale della donna –[...] ha il valore o il costo (*coût*) del veleno. Il costo del *pharmakon*.<sup>84</sup>

#### IV. Simulacrum

Si tratta, forse, di quello che Nietzsche chiamava lo stile, il simulacro, la donna.<sup>85</sup>

‘Ma la diva è una stella, e usurpa un luogo unico, inscalfibile, nel cielo.’<sup>86</sup>

It is time to go back to Helen. Around her figure, in agreement with classical tradition and playing against each other two well-known ‘variations’ of her tale, Calasso develops the theme of the simulacrum. In ‘La follia che viene dalle Ninfe’ Calasso reminds us of the Stesichorean version of the flight of Helen – the one claiming, in opposition to Homer, that Helen had never actually made it to Troy, and the heroes had fought for an hollow image. He proceeds to discuss a moment of *Phaedrus* in which Socrates admitted to sinning against mythology, a sin that the author identifies in a misinterpretation of the nature of simulacrum:

Se quel peccato è il misconoscimento della lingua dei simulacri [...] destinatarie della palinodia non potranno che essere le Ninfe, in quanto sono le figure mitiche più affini ai

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>86</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 154.

simulacri e tendono addirittura a confondersi con essi, come *eidōla* del mondo che irrompono fra gli *eidōla* della mente. Perciò, alla fine del *Phedro*, Socrate non dimentica di rivolgere una preghiera alle Ninfe.<sup>87</sup>

Like Helen, the nymphs are simulacra, and a simple Aristotelian syllogism reveals that Helen is a nymph, possibly the nymph par excellence. An absolute reading of the nymphidic in *Le nozze* has therefore to deal with the implications of the representation of Helen-simulacrum. This figure will prove that Calasso does not limit himself to establishing a metaphorical relationship between free literature and simulacrum, but also places it in a poststructuralist realm of signifiers. Of Helen, Calasso makes a paradigm of *unicità*:

Elena è la sola donna in Omero che ha chiaramente epiteti distintivi, applicati soltanto a lei”, ossevò Milman Parry.[...] L’Iliade è la storia di una doppia disputa: per Elena, l’unica, che nessuno oserebbe sostituire, e per Briseide “dalle belle guance”, che Agamennone vorrebbe sostituire con Criseide “dalla belle guance”. Fra l’unicità inattaccabile e l’inattaccabile sostituzione si accende nella pianura di Troia una guerra che non poteva avere fine.<sup>88</sup>

Yet Helen and Briseis, the nymph symbol of substitution in this instance, are not as distant as it may seem, if the origin of ‘simulacrum’ is a ‘mental image’, ‘mental water’ presiding over the proliferation of images.

All’origine del simulacro è l’immagine mentale. Questo essere capriccioso e impalpabile replica il mondo e al tempo stesso lo assoggetta alla furia combinatoria, frustandone le forme in una proliferazione inesausta.[...] A un capo dell’immagine mentale è lo stupore per

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<sup>87</sup> Id., ‘La follia’, pp. 33-34.

<sup>88</sup> Id., *Le nozze*, p. 111.

la forma, per la sua esistenza autosufficiente e sovrana. All'altro capo è lo stupore dinanzi alla catena dei nessi, che riproducono nella mente la necessità della materia. Difficile è vedere quei due spicchi estremi nel ventaglio del simulacro, insostenibile è vederli simultaneamente. Figura di quella visione, per i Greci, fu Elena, la bellezza schiusa dall'uovo della necessità.<sup>89</sup>

'Exchange', thus 'difference', affects the simulacrum despite its unicity, because only in 'difference', in the 'corona-catena dei nessi', the simulacrum can be manifested. Not accidentally, thus, through her first lover Theseus, Helen is linked to Athens, the mercurial city of 'exchange,' where words and 'difference' ruled: 'All'origine di quel passaggio della Grecia a civiltà egemone non vi è un'eroe fondatore, né un re, né un guerriero, ma un'adultera di cui soltanto due qualità sono state tramandate ossessivamente: la facilità al tradimento e la bellezza.'<sup>90</sup>

Hermes even appears to have played a special role in her birth, by exchanging (another 'exchange') her divine mother Nemesis with the mortal Leda.

Helen 'l'unica', who 'nasce da spuma rappresa, da un guscio d'uovo di cigno', shared that eggshell with her brothers, the Dioscuri. 'Così Elena, l'unica, è sin dall'inizio legata alla gemellarità e alla scissione.'<sup>91</sup> She becomes 'la figura stessa del doppio. Quando si parlerà di Elena, non si saprà mai se si tratta del suo corpo o del suo simulacro.'<sup>92</sup> The doubleness is highlighted through her mother Nemesis, 'imparentata'<sup>93</sup> with Ananke, whom Zeus pursued obsessively, to conceive the nymph who is described as the 'azzardo teologico del suo regno.'<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., pp. 156-157.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., pp. 154-155.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

Ma perchè Nemese, questa guardiana della legge cosmica, che è una per eccellenza, appare all'origine sdoppiata? Forse qui siamo risaliti al luogo dove ha origine il lungo viaggio del simulacro. Elena nacque insieme ai Dioscuri gemelli. Era l'unica, raccoglieva in un corpo tutte le bellezze normalmente disperse dalla giustizia distributiva, secondo l'ordine di quel *nemein* che molti collegavano a Nemese, ma fin dal guscio dell'uovo in cui nacque l'accompagnava la duplicazione che regna nel simulacro. E non solo i fratelli, anche sua madre era sdoppiata. Ora, mentre sua madre Leda la conduceva verso l'altra madre, la vera, Elena si accorse che anche Nemese era doppia. Non solo la bellezza, ma il destino dello sdoppiamento, l'ordine del simulacro, risalivano a quella madre asiatica dal gesto misterioso, con la quale Zeus aveva voluto congiungersi per generare la sua unica figlia tra gli uomini.<sup>95</sup>

This passage seems to imply that the main 'difference' between *scambio* and *simulacro* is that in one case 'difference' goes on between different nymphs-*variante*, whereas in the case of Helen-simulacro it is embodied within the same nymph-text. In the case of 'exchange,' thus, Calasso foregrounds Derridean *indécidable*, whilst in the case of *simulacro* he foregrounds the fact that each element in a chain of 'undecidables' is itself an 'unité' de simulacre.'<sup>96</sup>

This is confirmed through one of the most beautiful pages of *Le nozze*, where Calasso clarifies the relationship of Helen with 'exchange,' through the re-write of the scene in which Menelaus in Troy decides to spare her life:

Secondo Stesicoro ed Euripide, Elena fu *un* simulacro. Secondo Omero, Elena era *il* simulacro. La visione omerica è molto più ardua e temibile. [...] Elena è come l'oro rispetto alle merci: anch'esso una merce, ma tale da poter rappresentare tutte le altre merci.[...] Mentre Troia ardeva, Menelao si trovò dinanzi al seno scoperto di Elena.[...] Ma come si

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>96</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1972, p. 58.

può uccidere l'oro? Elena avrebbe continuato a respirare in una nicchia della mente del suo assassino, come in quella di tutti gli altri guerrieri che avrebbero voluto seguire il richiamo della sua voce, quando erano rinchiusi nel ventre del cavallo. Elena era un riflesso nell'acqua. Come uccidere un riflesso, se non si uccide l'acqua? Ma come si può uccidere l'acqua? Menelao non pensò questo mentre lasciava cadere, ma fu questo che gli fece cadere la spada.<sup>97</sup>

Given Calasso's well-known equivalence 'commodity'-'nymph,' Helen is clearly confirmed as a nymph, thus as subject to 'exchange.' However, the metaphorical image of 'oro' denounces her as simultaneously within the game of 'exchange,' and outside it. In this passage Helen is two 'undecidable' crowns, the crown of mythology, of Mnemosine-Python, if we wish, as a collection of commodities, of 'variations' in a chain of substitutions, that put us in differential relation with the past, and the crown of her own tale, and its interpretation-representation, *l'oro*, un *riflesso nell'acqua*. *Le nozze*'s insistence on the 'undecidability' between Helen's body and simulacrum, repeated within her body, supports this reading. Helen's body, Calasso tells us, is hollow.

L'epos è superficie compatta, riflettente, dove si rincorrono le tarsie delle espressioni formulari. Omero non volle divulgare il segreto di Elena, ovvero la sua natura di simulacro, perché nella superficie del verso si sarebbe creato un vuoto. Il nome di Elena deve designare un oggetto non meno possente del torreggiante Diomede. E proprio allora il simulacro è sovrano, quando è clandestino, e scava i corpi dal'interno.

Omero scorgeva nel futuro il suo grande nemico, Platone l'evocatore delle copie.[...] Illuminandole con l'arte del ragionamento, Platone voleva dissolvere in esse l'incanto di Elena, dell'unica. Ma l'unica splende più di ogni altra proprio perché cela in sé la copia, il simulacro.[...] Per l'unica, nefasta è l'idea, che vuole soppiantarla [...] La disputa tra

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<sup>97</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 405.

Omero e Platone aveva come oggetto il corpo di Elena. Hanno vinto entrambi. Nella diva riprodotta in migliaia di esemplari si compie la maledizione platonica sulla copia. Ma la diva è una stella, e usurpa un luogo unico, inscalfibile, nel cielo.<sup>98</sup>

In this hollowess language reveals itself, and creates the space for a ‘variation’ within the same text, within the same pearl of the necklace, or flower of the garland. Through his re-writing of Helen’s fifth husband Achilles as *unico*, Calasso repeats this conclusion: ‘E se Achille, l’unico, è anche il sostituto dell’unico, ciò accenna al fatto che il regno della sostituzione ingloba in sé quello dell’unico, senza il quale però non avrebbe senso e intensità.’<sup>99</sup> The hollowness of Helen reveals in *Le nozze* the same aims as Nietzsche’s *donna* according to Derrida: ‘Perché il simulacro si mostri, è necessario scrivere nello scarto fra parecchi stili./Se stile vi è – ecco cosa ci insinua la donna (di) Nietzsche – ce ne deve essere più d’uno.’<sup>100</sup> Calasso’s Helen can easily be recognized as the simulacrum of Derridean *différance*, and of writing as ‘difference’. Her hollowness can be read as the space between the intertextual differences, the ‘scarti’ between styles, which reveal the nature of the *simulacrum*. Helen is unique because, as a simulacrum, she hollowly embodies ‘difference’. She is – if such verb is allowed – the hollow embodiment of textuality, and thus of literature.

La disparition de la vérité comme présence, le dérobement de l’origine présente de la présence est la condition de toute (manifestation de) vérité. La non-vérité est la vérité. La non-présence est la présence. La différence, disparition de la présence originaire, est à la fois la condition de possibilité et la condition d’impossibilité de la vérité’. “À la fois” veut dire que l’étant-présent (*on*) dans sa vérité dans la présence de son identité et l’identité de sa présence, *se doublé* dès qu’il apparaît, dès qu’il se présente. *Il apparaît, dans son*

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., pp. 153-154.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., pp. 159-160.

<sup>100</sup> Derrida, *Sproni*, p. 127.



*essence, comme* la possibilité da sa propre duplication. C'est-à-dire, en termes platoniciens, de sa non-vérité la plus propre, de sa pseudo-vérité réfléchie dans l'icône, le phantasme ou le simulacra. Il n'est ce qu'il est, identique et identique à soi, unique, qu'en *s'ajoutant* la possibilité d'être *répété* comme tel. Et son identité se creuse de cet ajout, se dérobe dans le supplément qui la présente.<sup>101</sup>

Helen's differential doubleness/hollowness helps us understand why she is to the other nymphs, the Briseis and Chryseis, which flow through literature like the letters of the alphabet to the form of a name:

Elena è il potere del simulacro – e il simulacro è il luogo dove l'assenza soggioga. Fra i suoi cinque sposi amò essenzialmente Paride e Achille. E, per Paride e Achille, Elena fu un simulacro prima di essere una donna. [...] Accompagnato da tesori funesti, il pastore dell'Ida, ora riconosciuto come principe, parti con vascelli colmi di tesori verso quel nome. Quanto ad Achille, era l'unico dei capi Achei che non fosse accorso a Sparta come pretendente di Elena. Andò in una guerra che sapeva a lui fatale per una donna di cui aveva soltanto udito il nome.<sup>102</sup>

Despite Calasso's repeated statement that 'In Omero il corpo ed il simulacro convivono tacitamente,'<sup>103</sup> he makes the Homeric Helen prefer the husbands who love her as textuality, that choose the *simulacro* of a name over the presence of her body.

Helen, however, is simultaneously the outcome and agent of their inscription, the writing/written and the writer. Even the other 'unique', Achilles, becomes the *unico* of the *Iliad* because Helen, taking on her nymphidic role of memory, and her textual role of *rappresentazione*, places him in the realm of discourse.

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<sup>101</sup> Derrida, 'La pharmacie de Platon', pp. 209-210.

<sup>102</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 146.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

This is because Helen does not stop at being a name, and a simulacrum. If in the figure of the Pythia the interpretation of the mastery relationship between Apollo and his priestess remains a game of ‘undecidability’, Calasso does not cast any alternative suggestions when he recounts, in one of the most unforgettable moments of *Le nozze di Cadmo e Armonia*, that according to a Byzantine source Helen had woken up Homer one night to dictate the *Iliad* to him.<sup>104</sup>

Nietzsche stresses in *The Die Geburt der Tragödie* that the human voice, such as Helen’s, belongs to the realm of ‘Dionysian,’ and that Homer was the ultimate apollinean artist. But in *Le nozze* the poet is turned into a scribe, a figuration of Hermes if we wish, while the most feminine of beings, Helen, daughter of a relative/‘variation’ of the inscription of the Milky Way/garland from both the paternal and maternal side, takes on the role of author, and brings back fugitive gods and fugitive heroes, the galaxy/anthology/garland of legends of the whole ‘stirpe degli eroi,’ which will make the Homeric universe.

Elena manifestò la stessa insolenza impudica delle dee, quando “apparve una notte ad Omero e gli ordinò di scrivere un poema sui guerrieri di Troia, volendo rendere la loro morte più invidiabile di quella degli altri; e in qualche misura per l’arte di Omero, ma soprattutto a causa di lei, quel poema divenne così attraente (*epaphroditon*) e celebre tra tutti.” Invece di piangere le sue colpe, Elena commissionò, come un sovrano, l’*Iliade* a Omero, perché la cantasse. La letteratura obbedì al suo comando, assorbendo l’incanto afroditico di Elena.<sup>105</sup>

The *variante* proposed, this time, differs purely to reinforce Helen’s scriptorial power.

According to another bizantine source, she composed a work later used by Homer as the

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., pp. 155-156.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., pp. 155-156.

basis for his poems: ‘Napoleone aveva cominciato come romanziere, Elena volle finire come narratrice di se stessa.’<sup>106</sup>

Calasso here appears to contradict his claim that ‘il regno dell’unico è ciò che da sempre sfugge alla presa del linguaggio, l’apparire stesso dell’irripetibile.’<sup>107</sup> Helen ‘l’unica’ is herself practicing language, even though, as Derrida’s reading of Nietzsche’s *donna* reminds us, precisely because of her linguistic and textual nature, language will never master her completely. The nymph ‘non si lascia prendere.’ In her own writing, and in Homer’s writing, as well as in Calasso’s writing, Helen is never mastered. She re-writes as she is re-written. Like Derrida’s God, Helen ‘deconstructs, herself’.

## **V. *L’antro delle ninfe***

### **V.i Harmony, Helen and the belt of Aphrodite – initiatic textuality**

At the end of *Le nozze*, Afrodite gives her daughter Harmony a magic necklace, ‘un serpente trafitto di stelle’, image of the snake of the Milky Way, in which ‘per avventura, cosmo e ornamento coincidevano.’<sup>108</sup> These words echo closely Derrida’s ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’, which ascribes to writing-*pharmakon* the ability to turn ‘cosmos en cosmétique’.<sup>109</sup>

Harmony’s talisman, another different ‘unit of simulacrum’ in the macrometaphor of the ‘crown,’ echoes that belt of her mother Aphrodite, in which Calasso had

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 432.

<sup>109</sup> Derrida, ‘La pharmacie de Platon’, p. 177.

recognised an image of ‘il corpo di Elena’: ‘Nel cinto di Afrodite, nella corona, nel corpo di Elena, il bello si sovrappone alla Necessità, avvolgendola nell’inganno’<sup>110</sup>. This mysterious belt of Aphrodite, colourful and possibly embroidered, Calasso rewrites – admittedly from Simias, and furtively from Nonnus and the *Iliad*.<sup>111</sup> The ‘cinto’, belonging to the goddess who invented ‘possessione’ as a game, a text/tissue comparable to ‘il corpo di Elena, is the ultimate veil.

We can read this belt, on which are possibly embroidered the great stories of Greek mythology, and this veil through the metaphorical language of Wittgenstein, who held that language disguises thoughts.<sup>112</sup> However, considering the deep linguistic and metaphorical connections between *testo* and *tessuto*, I find more attractive the suspicion that it may conceal an echo of the Heraclitean fragment translated by Colli as ‘La trama nascosta è più forte di quella manifesta’.<sup>113</sup> In this translation Colli actually renders as ‘trama’<sup>114</sup> the Greek ‘armonie’. Calasso does not refer to this translation, but between the lines we can recognize it as a fascinating influence. If *Armonie* is a *trama*, a *stoffa*, the necklace of Harmony and the belt of Aphrodite, and the body of Helen, are one. *Armonie-trama* is the mental water par excellence, textual – astral as well as linguistic – *punto di contatto* between mind and matter.

It may now become clear that the ‘mental waters’ in Calasso represent an initiation, and the channel/symbol of this initiation. He gives this revelation to the absolute reader through the Greek hero most widely acknowledged as a self-reflexive

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<sup>110</sup> Calasso, *Le nozze*, p. 136.

<sup>111</sup> Nonno, *Dionisiache*, XXXII. vv. 1-8, and Homer, *Iliad*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1999, XIV, vv. 214-221.

<sup>112</sup> For an Italian translation of Wittgenstein’s sentence 4.002, dominated by ‘textile-textual metaphorical language, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logicus-Philosophicus e quaderni*, Einaudi, Turin, 1979 (1921), 4.002, p.20. ‘Il linguaggio traveste i pensieri. E, precisamente così che dalla forma esteriore dell’abito non si può concludere alla forma del pensiero rivestito; perché la forma esteriore dell’abito è formata per ben altri scopi che quello di far riconoscere la forma del corpo.’ According to Colli ‘enigma’ was also going under the name of ‘griphos’ (‘rete’), see Colli, *Dopo Nietzsche*, p. 49.

<sup>113</sup> Eraclito 14 [A 20] quoted in Colli, *La sapienza greca*, vol. III p. 35.

<sup>114</sup> See discussion of DK I 162 in Colli, *La sapienza greca*, vol. III, p. 35.

image, the Hermetic Odysseus. Calasso tells us that it is in Samothrace, the city of Harmony, that Odysseus is initiated to the mystery of Leucotea, a daughter of the alphabet hero Cadmus. It is by holding on to the veil (*tessuto/testo?*) of Leucotea that Odysseus magically survives the worst storm of the Odyssey and ends up in the mythical land of the Phaeacians, where he takes on a Homeric role and becomes a narrator. Calasso also reveals awareness of Odysseus's familiarity with the nymphs on his return to Itaca, where he visits a cave of the nymphs, whose symbolic interior has famously become the subject of an Adelphi book that Calasso acknowledges as an influence, Porphiry's *Cave of the Nymphs*.

I do not think, however, that Odysseus's initiation and connections with the nymphs simply make of him a *nympholeptos*: they actually reinforce him, and the nymph itself, in their most strikingly poststructuralist characters, as figures journeying *between* the writer and the written. The veil, which Calasso's Odysseus holds in his hand, is *simbolo* in its etimological sense, a way, a passage. It articulates and repeats a movement, an ab-solute, free, 'difference'. The *stoffa* of the veil of the Hermetic initiation of Cadmus and Odysseus is the nymph herself, with her fleetingness and her hymeneal, differential *scambiabilità*, her incessant plurality, reflected in the plural style advocated by Nietzsche.

Instead of the Platonic cave, Odysseus experiences the nimphidic cave, the starry cave of the Milky Way, where the nymph is doubled as a power of inscription, and through the garland/veil of writing, writes herself and/as 'other,' and her readers/characters, into the 'always already' linguistic, literary, alphabetical, access to 'otherness'.

Le acque sono il plurale stesso, l'oscillare delle frange, il lieve fremito della veglia che precede la parola. Bagnandosi in esse, la mente percorre la via regale per rivelarsi a se

stessa, nella sua mobile essenza lunare. Ma non è questo il loro mistero estremo, che si schiude soltanto quando appaiono come messaggere in uno scenario esterno, nella cieca compagine della materia, con gli occhi chiusi come Albertine, emissarie di un'esistenza autosufficiente e remota, che si può fendere ma non afferrare.<sup>115</sup>

## V.ii 'Otherness' in the *antro delle ninfe*

In *I quarantanove gradini* Calasso noted that one of his favourite *finis Austriae* authors, Karl Kraus, had also drawn an analogy between woman and language, and recognised in both *donna* (nymph) and *parola* a trait (trace) of estraneità, thus of 'otherness': 'Con radicale arcaismo, Kraus vede nella donna e nella parola i due frammenti di natura che la società continuamente si scambia, e sussume nel proprio puro elemento, il denaro, senza mai riuscire, però, a cancellarne i tratti per sempre estranei.'<sup>116</sup> In the game of 'difference', between garlands/veils and within the garland/veil, something of woman/language remains *ab-solutus*, always 'other', therefore 'imprendibile' in the terms described by Derrida for Nietzsche.

The connection with 'otherness' of the nymph/woman/veil accentuates her character of fleetingness, of furtiveness, and closely relates her to Hermes, the great transmitter, and, through his implication with theft, with appropriation, a great juncture into 'otherness'.

The furtiveness of the nymph and Hermes, the first god connected to her in the myth of Thriai, is a final confirmation that the initiation to 'absolute literature' is itself marked by poststructuralist elements. If 'absolute literature' can still claim an ability to bring back the gods, it is for its ability to 'play.' To play with the power of 'difference'

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<sup>115</sup> Calasso, *Ka*, pp. 300-301.

<sup>116</sup> Id., 'Una muraglia cinese', pp. 157-158.

and simulation, with the ‘scambio di una lettera’, to play the game of textuality, the textuality of the book and the world recognised by Wittgenstein but also by Derrida.

Derrida, who was fascinated by Levinas’ statement that “Autrui ressemble à Dieu”,<sup>117</sup> had gone as far as suggesting, in one of his most visionary pages, that ‘L’Autre, le Voleur, le grand Furtif a un nom propre : c’est Dieu.’<sup>118</sup> If in Calasso God, like style for Nietzsche, has to be plural, we are still at the conspect of a very similar conclusion. Gods appear in books, thus literature is many gods, forever different, forever irrecoverable, forever ‘other.’ These gods are also furtive – because after Cadmus they do not dine with the mortals, and also because they manifest themselves through the power of their furtive, always moving, messenger, as fits deities on the eve of the metaphysics of presence, and the authorship of this age. They also manifest themselves, just as furtively and fleetingly, through the ultimate ‘other’ – which, being the (hollow) embodiment of exchange, is in itself marked by mercuriality. The nymph-text, simultaneously ‘otherness’ and access to ‘otherness’, is the simulacral site of the return of the god(s) as Cadmic letters, a return ‘always already’ in movement, ‘always already’ ‘other.’ They come back between (*entre*) skies and garlands and caves, in the theatre of writing.

Il [*pharmakon*] transforme l’ordre en parure, le cosmos en cosmétique. La mort, le masque, le fard, c’est la fête qui subvertit l’ordre de la cité, telqu’il devrait être réglé par le dialecticien et par la science de l’être. Platon, nous le verrons, ne tardera pas à identifier l’écriture et la fête. Et le jeu. Une certaine fête, un certain jeu. [...] Cette pharmacie est aussi, nous l’avons senti, un théâtre. Le théâtrale ne s’y laisse pas résumer dans une parole: il y a des forces, il y a un espace, il y a la loi, il y a la parenté, l’humain et le divin, le jeu, la

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<sup>117</sup> Derrida, ‘Violence et métaphysique’, p. 159.

<sup>118</sup> Id., ‘La parole soufflée’, p. 268.

mort, la fête. Aussi la profondeur qui se découvre à nous sera-t-elle nécessairement une autre scène, ou plutôt un autre tableau dans la pièce de l'écriture.<sup>119</sup>

Like Hermes, and his human alter ego Odysseus, the nymph-comedian reveals to the absolute reader simultaneously mythology as the return of the gods, and as the return of their 'other.' What appears at first sight like a celebration of the power of the ancient deities and their 'friezes in the sky' results undecidably in a celebration of their writers and readers, of that alphabet and that textuality, that discourse of myth, in which the gods are forever deferred. Calasso's mythology can thus be conclusively recognised as a poststructuralist undertaking, as an attempt to re-write mythology as a Derridean discourse on myth, in which the gods are allowed to return only if un-mastered, through the nymph-'other,' and as 'other.'

The most surprising conclusion that we can recognise in the folds of *Le nozze* is the irrecoverable 'otherness' of textuality itself. Text, like the veil, and all the manifestations of the macrometaphor of the crown, is ultimately nymphidic, and therefore feminine, 'other.' The nymph thus symbolises the everlasting freedom of the text – as only the furtive hero Odysseus, himself a commediante, realises. It makes of literature the worship of a religion of 'undecidability.'

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<sup>119</sup> Id., 'La pharmacie de Platon', p. 177-178.



## CONCLUSIONS

My review of Calasso's re-writing of the Greek gods and nymphs as emblems of 'absolute literature' has highlighted, in my view, the fundamental influence that poststructuralism has exerted on the text of *Le nozze*. Whilst some of this influence may be argued to be due to osmosis (after all Derrida and Calasso are attracted to the same philosophical sources), I believe the examination of the text of *Le nozze* has proven conclusively such deep and wide-ranging analogies between the thinking, the vocabulary, and the metaphors employed by Calasso and Derrida, that a direct influence has to be assumed. Through the investigation of Calasso's representation of Zeus, I have identified in Calasso the presence of Derridean themes, such as *différance* and *indécidabilité*. I have also highlighted Calasso's deconstruction of Zeus as a symbol of hierarchy, as male, as author, and as philosophical presence. My review of the great *appearances* of Zeus (the metamorphic bull, the Olympian statue, and the Dodona oak) and their underlying metaphor of the garland show in Calasso's Zeus an undoing of the opposition between author and text, with the god-author simultaneously glorified as a Borgesian 'Pierre Menard,' and as simply discourse on myth.

As emphasized through the tales of Cadmus and of the Pelasgian gods, Calasso presents Zeus as 'always already' mediated and written. His is therefore a Zeus of the age of the twilight of the gods, who are now nothing but name(s), purely his own linguistic *supporto*, even though this 'support', allows the magic of literature, our only communion with the gods. Akin to Derrida's Babel, his Zeus is 'divided, polysemic, deconstructing itself' ('Des Tours de Babel'). The emphasis on the 'writing'/'being written' of Zeus, a clear example of Derridean *indécidable*, even adumbrates the possibility that through this self-reflexive authorial image Calasso may be opening up a

game of ‘difference’ between author and text to include a third term, that of the publisher.

I have shown that Calasso’s portrayal of Apollo reveals a preoccupation with poststructuralist issues, such as ‘difference’, dissemination of meaning, the relationship between patriarchy and ‘otherness’ and their potential ‘undecidability’.

*Le nozze* portrays Apollo as an authorial epigone indistinguishable from his patriarchal master, and their clash is made to happen in inscription. At the same time as with Zeus, the book plays with the ‘undecidability’/‘difference’ with and of Dionysus, who is configured as Apollo’s ‘undecidable’ ‘other.’ Poststructuralist reflections on mastery, ‘otherness’, and writing emerge through the presentation of the Apollinean relationship with the feminine.

My exploration of *Le nozze*’s pages on Delphi and the mythical stories associated with it, shows that Calasso’s portrayal of god Apollo reveals the intent to put philosophical being ‘under erasure.’ Delphi, connected with enigma, is made by Calasso into a synonym for *scrittura*, bridging ‘entre’ the metaphysics of presence and ‘absolute literature’. That this *scrittura* is interpreted in eminently poststructuralist terms has been demonstrated through the tale of Oedipus, whose tragic mistake is revealed as the inability to read Apollo as mythographer, as *grammé*, and to recognize in writing the (Derridean) dissemination of meaning (*Il fattore della verità*).

I have established a metaphorical correspondence between the *omphalos* and the engraving of Delphi and the garland/snake of mythology, thus showing that the same macrometaphor is employed to represent and experience *letteratura* as the space of Zeus and the space of Apollo.

The exploration of this macrometaphor continues in the chapter on Calasso’s Dionysus, where I conclude that this macrometaphor can be stretched into a number of *varianti*

linked by ‘difference’: the ‘crown’ of the writing in the sky of the Milky Way, the ‘crown’ of mythology-mithography of Zeus, the ‘crown’-*omphalos* of Delphi where Apollo and Dionysus-Python merge into a *simbolo* with a *brisure* in the name of *mimesis*, the *corona* of the Cretan cave, where the ‘undecidability’ between Zeus and Dionysus is played out and the ‘crown’ of the theatre. All of the aforementioned celebrate an inscription and the ‘undecidability’ of the text in that inscription, and all can be read alongside key Derridean passages.

I have demonstrated the remarkable analogies between Calasso’s and Derrida’s vocabulary and metaphorical imagination in their treatment of the symbology of the cave, the Derridean *entre/antre* (‘La double séance’). In both writers the cave has been identified as the space in which the game of signification occurs.

Through my review of Calasso’s theatrical idea of *sostituzione* and *metafora*, also developed under the sign of Dionysus, I have identified echoes of Derrida’s views on *mimesis* and his foregrounding of the power of simulation within language. Dionysus is turned into a poststructuralist opportunity to experience ‘otherness’ through *mimesis*, and even the stylistic aspiration to a Dionysian plural style, put forward by Calasso, echoes a Nietzschean aspiration, as well as Derrida’s reflections on such Nietzschean aspiration in *Sproni*.

My exploration of Calasso’s Hermes, concealed throughout *Le nozze*, where he is represented mainly through heroic *alter egos* and inserted furtively by means of a *variante* in the game between Apollo and Dionysus, has shown its commonalities with Derrida’s Hermes [‘Plato’s Pharmacy’]. Calasso’s furtive representation of Hermes, called the ‘furtive’ god by Derrida, results in formal games foregrounding the metanarrative role of the god of writing on the limit between form and content of the text. Hermes and his alter egos are marked by the vocabulary of ‘exchange,’ which I

have shown to be the embodiment of a movement of *indécidabilité*, be it as commerce, as wandering, as simulation or as writing – all terms that in Calasso, as well as in Derrida, appear interchangeable.

I have reflected on the importance to the economy of *Le nozze* of the figures of Cadmus and Odysseus, who reveal analogies with Derrida's Hermes-Thoth, the 'author of 'difference''. Odysseus 'polytropos' has emerged as a self-reflexive authorial image and in the tale of Palamedes becomes the *letterato assoluto* par excellence as well as Derrida's poet capable of 'leaving speech'. I have shown that Palamedes's tale can be read through the cipher of simulation and secondarity, whose 'mysteric substitute' is the writing. The same applies to the tale of the other Hermetic hero Cadmus, who, having brought to Greece alphabetical writing, mysteric substitute of the bull-Zeus, accomplishes, through the foundation of Thebae, city of writing, the primary substitution.

Like Derrida's Thoth, Cadmus and Odysseus in Calasso are designed as *supplément*, and their relationship with patriarchy is based on on the mastery of the *pharmakon* of writing. Cadmus's act of 'writing on the land', a metaphorical doubling of the father, makes Cadmus the disseminator of the father through the power of textuality, once its presence-face has been withdrawn. The theme of the withdrawal of the face of the father returns in the story of Odysseus and Palamedes, all dominated by textuality as Derridean *pharmakon*. Following the histological metaphors surrounding *pharmakon* in Derrida, I have identified in the veil of the initiation of the cult of Leucothea, which connects the two Hermetic heroes, a further instance of the macrometaphor of the garland of 'absolute literature', as well as of poststructuralist textuality.

I have also concluded that the theme of the veil reveals the privileged relationship between Hermes and the nymph, and that Calasso turns Hermes into a poststructuralist movement of 'différance', allowing the survival and manifestation of that 'other,' which literature seeks in order to achieve 'absoluteness.'

Having reviewed the male god figures in *Le nozze* and demonstrated their deconstruction as patriarchal and authorial images, and their casting under the sign of *grammé*, I have analysed the nymphidic images in the text-veil garland of *Le nozze*. With the support of Derrida I have shown that Calasso's nymph is a poststructuralist goddess, channel for the furtive undoing of traditional images of mastery. The analysis of the Thriai has revealed the nymphs are masters of language as *pharmakon*. Ariadne, *ninfa-corona-inganno* par excellence and *linguaggio*, thematises the 'undecidability' of *materia mentale*, *corona* and textuality.

Starting from the tale of Ariadne-Erigone, with its mimetic inscription of the metaphor of the 'altalena' and the substitution of Briseide with Criseide, in which the alphabet is given, diegetically, centre stage, I have reviewed Calasso's treatment of 'exchange' in the light of his fascination with *simulacro* and proven it to be another *indécidable*. The 'hollow' nymph Helen, crown of mythology as a collection of *varianti* and crown of her own tale, can be recognized as the simulacrum of Derridean writing as 'difference'. Helen, Derridean-Nietzschean *donna* that 'non si lascia prendere', is never mastered. She re-writes as she is re-written and, like Derrida's God, she 'deconstructs, herself'.

The histological metaphors followed through the Hermetic trail acquire further depth in the nymphidic realm, with Harmony emerging as Heraclitean *trama*. Odysseus, whose familiarity with the nymphs I have explored, and Cadmus are the only characters who connect with that *différence* that coincides with the nymph. Odysseus faces the nymph as Helen, as power of inscription, as the garland/veil of writing, who

writes herself and/as 'other,' and her readers/characters, into the always already linguistic, literary, alphabetical, access to 'otherness'.

It can therefore be concluded that 'absolute literature' is deconstructive. Calasso has brought back the images of the gods for his text's ability to 'play' with the power of 'difference' and simulation the game of textuality. *Le nozze* as celebration of the power of the ancient deities is *undécidable* with a celebration of their writers and readers, of that alphabet and that textuality, that discourse of myth, in which the gods are forever 'differed'/'deferred'. Calasso's mythology should be recognised as an attempt to re-write mythology as a Derridean discourse on myth, in which the gods are allowed to return, but are also 'un-mastered', through the nymph-'other,' and as 'other.'

In the folds of *Le nozze*, through the macrometaphor of the crown, we can sight the irrecoverable 'otherness' of textuality itself. Text, like the veil, is ultimately nymphidic and 'other.' The nymph symbolises therefore the eternal freedom of the text and makes 'absolute literature' the return of the gods as other and a religion of *scrittura* as 'undecidability'.

## APPENDIX

### GREEK MYTHOLOGICAL NAMES IN ENGLISH AND ITALIAN

<b>English</b>	<b>Italian</b>
Achilles	Achille
Admetus	Admeto
Aesculapius	Esculapio
Aphrodite	Afrodite
Apollo	Apollo
Ariadne	Arianna
Artemis	Artemide or Artemis
Asterius or Asterion	Asterio
Athena	Atena
Autolycus	Autolico
Boreas	Borea
Briseis	Briseide
Cadmus	Cadmo
Calypso	Calipso
Chronos	Cronos
Chronos Ageraos	Tempo-senza-vecchiaia
Chryseis	Criseide
Clytemnestra	Clitemnestra
Danaides	Danaiidi
Daphne	Dafne

Delphi	Delfi
Dionysus	Dioniso
Dodona	Dodona
Epaphus	Epafo
Erigone	Erigone
Eriphile	Erifile
Europa	Europa
Gaia	Ge
Gorgon	Gorgone
Harmony	Armonia
Hecate	Ecate
Hector	Ettore
Helen	Elena
Haephestus	Efesto
Helicon	Elicona
Hera	Hera
Hermes	Hermes
Ino	Ino
Io	Io
Ischys	Ischys
Leda	Leda
Leucothea	Leucothea
Maenades	Menades
Menelaus	Menelao
Mnemosyne	Mnemosine



Odysseus	Odisseo
Oedipus	Edipo
Ogygia	Ogigia
Olympia	Olimpia
Orpheus	Orfeo
Palamedes	Palamede
Pan	Pan
Panopeus	Panopeo
Peirithous	Piritoo
Penelope	Penelope
Pentheus	Penteo
Phanes	Fanes
Phemonoe	Femonoe
Prometheus	Prometeo
Pythia	Pizia
Python	Pitone
Samothrace	Samotracia
Semele	Semele
Teiresias	Tiresia
Telphusia	Telfusa
Theseus	Teseo
Thriai or Thriae	Thriai
Thyades	Tiadi
Typhon	Tifone or Tifeo
Uranus	Urano

Zagreus

Zeus

Zagreo or Zagreus

Zeus

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

### **Introduction**

Before proceeding with the bibliography I would like to clarify the criteria followed when selecting the language for translated texts.

- I. All works by Roberto Calasso are given in Italian.
- II. Criticism on Calasso is given in original language.
- III. Italian texts are given in Italian.
- IV. For non-Italian texts translated either by Calasso or by his publishing house Adelphi, the Italian Adelphi edition is given.
- V. Post-structuralist texts are given in original French – with the exception of texts published by Adelphi.
- VI. Classics are given in English, unless published by Adelphi. However an accepted Italian translation is also included in the bibliography. This is to provide a reference useful to appreciate not just the text discussed, but its reception in contemporary Italian culture, and the implications of this reception for Calasso and *Le nozze*.
- VII. All other texts are given in English.

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