

Bernard Juillerat

**“AN ODOR OF MAN”
MELANESIAN EVOLUTIONISM,
ANTHROPOLOGICAL MYTHOLOGY
AND MATRIARCHY**

“The gynecocratic era is
the poetry of history!”

J. J. Bachofen

“For who knows where a
single true discourse can
lead, from the viewpoint of the
established order, that
is of the idealized
discourse of the
established disorder?”

Paul Ricoeur

The evolutionist theories of Bachofen on the priority of matriarchy¹ are today no more than one of the most unusual pieces

Translated by R. Scott Walker

¹ The reference editions are J.J. Bachofen, *Das Mutterrecht, Eine Untersuchung*

“An Odor of Man”

of the historical museum of anthropology. The wealth and diversity of historical and literary sources therein are juxtaposed with the construction of a conjectural chronology organizing the relationship between the sexes in a progressive mode and in accordance with an immanent finality. But it is also necessary to distinguish, on the one hand, Bachofen’s historicism as an expression of the evolutionist tendencies of that time, based on natural sciences and the results of Darwin’s work, and, on the other, interest in the inter-sexual relationship within the social institution. For the invention of successive stages in order to propose a social history of sexuality is based as much on evolutionism as on constitutive psychic representations of the individual. By projecting these representations into a pseudo-historical period and by ordering them, at each level, in terms of the two parameters of domination / subjection and collectivity / individuality, Bachofen assigned semantics to history and an evolutionary sense to transformations in marriage and the family. And by conferring historical validity on the myths of Antiquity, he set forth an implicit denial both of the work of the imagination (not to say sub-conscious, which would be an anachronism for this pre-Freudian period) as well as of ideological ruses in the political field. Bachovian evolutionism thus developed a new myth out of the ancient myths, false witnesses of the past but authentic representatives of the ahistorical present of the psyche, endowing with scientific color the image of humanity progressing from dominance of the mother and collectivism to the triumph of the father and individualism. The idea of “matriarchy” (*Mutterrecht*) in Bachofen is indeed to be taken in the sense of “maternal dominance” (as the German expression better suggests), and not that of political power of women.

But in their latent content, myths have no age. And this present contribution will seek to compare the Bachovian dream with a

über die Gynaekokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur, Stuttgart, Kraus & Hoffmann, 1861; *Du règne de la mère au patriarcat, Pages choisies de Das Mutterrecht*, Introduction by A. Turel, Paris, F. Alcan, 1938 (re-edition by Editions de l’Aire, Lausanne, 1980); *Myth, Religion and Mother Right. Selected Writings of J.J. Bachofen*, Preface by F. Boas and an Introduction by J. Campbell, Princeton University Press (Bollingen Series LXXXIV), 1967.

Melanesian myth from New Guinea. Each seeks to establish the contemporary world from a vanquished feminine power; both develop retrospectively and in a teleological perspective a progression that leads straight to masculine power, making humanity pass through intermediate stages of experimentation and readjustments. The patrician society of Protestant Basel in the mid-Nineteenth century, to which Bachofen belonged, the evolutionist orientation of that same period in the west, references to Antiquity, and the system of representations of a contemporary society of New Guinea seem to meet at this point of intersection between a progressive vision of human history and a dialectic of desire in which the ontogenetic phases of autonomization of the subject are dissolved and are reproduced in the phylogenetic dimension.

AN ODOR OF MAN

Yafar society² numbers 200 persons and constitutes one of the some fifteen “tribes” of the Amanab language established in the north central Border Mountains of the western Sepik. Residing in a few hamlets, they live from a diversified subsistence economy, based principally on itinerant horticulture-arboriculture and hunting. The domestic group, most often corresponding to the nuclear family, is the basic productive unit; exchange is little developed apart from among relatives, and it is little differentiated within the group. The absence of a House of Men and of initiation rituals results in the fact that family life constitutes the social core and that the relationship between the sexes seems relatively equal. Women, almost solely, extract and work the pith of the sago palm, while men reserve themselves for the hunt; both men and women work together in horticulture. The society finds its unity in its territory, its name and its subdivision into two symbolically sexed halves. This dualist structure orders symbolic functions (secret religious obligations, ritual roles), whereas the patricians, grouped in four semi-halves, make up the exchange units for matrimonial alliances, and provide a theoretical grid for the system of tenure of

² B. Juillerat, *Les enfants du sang. Société, reproduction et imaginaire en Nouvelle-Guinée*, Paris, Maison des sciences de l’homme, 1986.

"An Odor of Man"

the land. Marriage is of the "semi-complex" type (*omaha*) and functions preferentially by an exchange of "sisters". Ritual expresses a desire to master natural fertility and human health; individual magic and public hunting rituals occupy a dominant position, the latter taking the form of exchanges with the spirits of the dead. The most sacred ritual is the Yangis ceremony, a quasi-theatrical staging of the reproduction of the two sexed totems of the halves (the sago palm and the coconut palm).³

Several myths (analyzed in a work in preparation) present coded variations of the Oedipus theme, of symbolic incest, of the difficult separation from the mother, of the emancipation of the son and the socialization of the hero. The story recounted below is the epilogue, most often presented as an isolated myth, of the "biography" of the hero Pepi, who is seen from his birth as affirming his sexual identity, successively withdrawing from dependence on his elder sister (a substitute for his mother who died while giving him birth) and from his "wives" with whom he has but conflictual relations and that he leaves without descendents, but not without having used his brothers-in-law to obtain the attributes indispensable for his autonomy (bow and arrows, penis sheath, magic plants). This account, summarized here, relates the events forming the coronation of his destiny, namely the discovery of the secret of women, their collective murder and the institution of masculine domination as the new social order.⁴

³ On this totemic ritual and the problem of its interpretation see A. Gell, *Metamorphosis of the Cassowaries: Umeda Society, Language and Ritual*, London, The Athlone Press, 1975 (the Ida ritual of the Umeda); B. Juillerat, A. Gell, D. Jorgensen, "Order or Disorder in Melanesian Religion?", *Man*, 15(4), 1980; B. Juillerat, *op. cit.*, 1986, and B. Juillerat (ed.), *The Mother's Brother is the Breast: Ritual and Meaning in the West Sepik. Ida Revisited*, to be published; R. Wagner, "Ritual as Communication: Order, Meaning and Secrecy in Melanesian Initiation Rites", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 13, 1984.

⁴ Similar myths have been noted elsewhere in Melanesia as well as in Australia (A. Gell, *op. cit.*; M. Godelier, *La production des Grands Hommes*, Paris, Fayard, 1982; G. Herdt, *Guardians of the Flutes. Idioms of Masculinity*, N.Y., McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1981; L.R. Hiatt, "Secret Pseudo-Procreation Rites among the Australian Aborigines", in Hiatt & Jayardene (eds), *Anthropology in Oceania: Essays Presented to Ian Hogbin*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1971; I. Hogbin, *The Island of Menstruating Men: Religion in Wogeo, New Guinea*, San Francisco, Chandler, 1970; D. Tuzin, *The Voice of the Tambaran: Truth and Illusion in Iahita Religion*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980; etc.); and in Indian America (J. Bamberger, "The Myth of Matriarchy: Why Men Rule in Primitive Society", in

At that time the women, or *garboango*, lived by themselves in the village, whereas the men, or *suwomp*, remained in the forest. The women celebrated the Yangis ritual alone; the men sometimes were present for the public representation, but they did not know that it was the women themselves who were dancing, their bodies disguised under paint and masks.

One day a young man, Pepi, spied on the *garboango* in their ritual enclosure as they were making the masks and preparing the paints. After the ritual he surprised a young girl, Oogango, washing the paint from her body in the river.⁵ He seduced her, and they mated. She had her younger sister come, and she also mated with him. They hid him in their house in the village. During this time the other women were singing the sacred chants at the foot of the houses. They noticed that the two sisters had a strong “odor of man”. They burst into their house and discovered Pepi. Then all the women mated with him.

While the women were off hunting, Pepi left to collect dead wood with Oogango. In the forest they made themselves a bed and mated once again. The hero then performed a magic ceremony using sexual secretions and in this way summoned all the other *suwomp*. The women returned from the hunt, cooked the game in the sacred enclosure, adorned themselves and played on wooden horns. Pepi went to close the gate of the enclosure. The men then burst in and mated with all the women. The eldest man had a large penis, the eldest woman a large vagina. They mated, and her vagina burst (an image of successful conception: the seed bursts open upon germination). The men established themselves in the village and soon killed all the women, except the little girls. They

Roslado & Lamphere (eds), *Woman, Culture and Society*, Stanford University Press, 1974; A. Chapman, *Drama and Power in a Hunting Society, the Selk'nam of Tierra del Fuego*, Cambridge University Press, 1982; C. Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologiques II, Du miel aux cendres*, Paris, Plon, 1966 [3rd part, chap. 1]; R.F. Murphy, “Social Structure and Sex Antagonism”, *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, 15(1), 1959; Murphy & Murphy, *Women in the Forest*, N.Y., Columbia University Press, 1974; G. Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Amazonian Cosmos: The Sexual and Religious Symbolism of the Tukano Indians*, The University of Chicago Press, 1971).

⁵ This same situation is described in the corresponding myth of the Fuegian Yanama. The Sun-Man “hid himself in the bushes and saw the girls “who were washing the paint that symbolized the spirits when they appeared” [disguised for the men]” (Gusinde, cited by J. Bamberger, *op. cit.*, 269). See also F. Héritier, “Le sang du guerrier et le sang des femmes: Notes anthropologiques sur le rapport des sexes”, in *Africaines: Sexes et Signes. Cahiers du GRIF*, n. 29, 1984-5:11.

"An Odor of Man"

took the masks, the horns and the paints. (The narrator generally adds that this is the reason that today men control the Yangis ritual and that women do not know what it is about).

This tale relates a major upheaval in the history of humanity, the great movement of inversion that overturned the relationship prevalent until then between men and women. The annihilation of the feminine cult is equal to a crisis, or even a revolution, that serves as bridge between the last phase of the pre-social phase of the *suwomp* and the *garboango* and the appearance of contemporary society. Sole agent of this cataclysm, Pepi has barely emerged from a long struggle toward socialization; Yafar exegesis describes him spying on the women still arrayed with the decorations used for his "initiation" by an opossum that he had adopted as a son. Thus promoted to manhood by a sublimated variation on the hunt, endowed with the full powers that the recent acquisition of the attributes of cynegetic magic had conferred on him, Pepi can break into the world of women and there perform the fundamental acts that are: sexual "spying" as a confiscation of feminine knowledge of childbearing, sexuality as institution of a hierarchical relationship, collective murder as blocking the transmission of feminine knowledge and the theft of ritual objects as transfer to men of control over reproduction.

The theme of the young man or simply of men spying on women is a recurrent one in numerous Melanesian and Amerindian myths. For example, among the Sulka of New Britain,⁶ a young boy delegated by the men discovers the presence of his mother, dancing under one of the masks. In the myth of the High Land Sambia, the *gandei* (naked Amazons, guarded by a phallic tree and impregnated by its fruits) live deep in a canyon where men attempt to descend by climbing down vines in order to cut down the tree; but the women beat them back with clubs.⁷ There is a striking parallelism between the sacred confines of the Yafar *garboango* (become a place kept secret from men during Yangis), the Sulka mask and the Sambia canyon, with each of these places hiding from the eyes of

⁶ M. Ballini: *L'identité sexuelle et ses représentations chez les Sulka de Nouvelle-Bretagne*. Thèse de 3e cycle, Paris X-Nanterre, 1983: 149.

⁷ G. Herdt, *op cit.*

men the feminine procreative power as a mother's forbidden realm. Among the Gimi the young brother of a mythical woman steals from her the phallic flute she hides.⁸ For Indian America, we can cite the myth of the Selk'nam of Tierra del Fuego, which shows men, who are small, hiding themselves in order to spy on the women in their ritual house.⁹ This fantasy of a masculine plot against women is here invented by masculine ideology itself; its expression in myth is in this sense totally ambiguous because it implicitly equals a recognition of the "superiority" of women in procreation. The mythical confiscation of feminine knowledge is today legitimated by the masculine claim of feminine ignorance with regard to the cult and maintained by a two-fold complicity; that of the men themselves who transmit this illusion, and that of the women who feign ignorance, previously through fear of reprisals (sorcery, murder), today in order to preserve the fragile *status quo* that makes it possible for the cult and social relations between the sexes to continue without open conflicts.¹⁰

The myth likewise specifies that women go hunting and then cook their game within the ritual enclosure (which never happens today now that hunting is an exclusively masculine activity). We can see in this an image of conception as the "cooking" of two vital substances. Rituals accompanying the first sexual relations of a legitimate couple associate the desired child with the game that the man will go hunting the next day.¹¹ Apart from the beats organized to flush out a wild pig previously sighted, hunting among the Yafar is primarily an individual operation. It does not require that complex organization in which certain authors (particularly in reference to the bison hunt among Plains Indians) have attempted to see the origin of masculine supremacy.¹² The Yafar myth, however, does not indicate that women once were sufficiently

⁸ G. Gillison, "Image of Nature in Gimi Thought", in McCormack & Strathern (eds), *Nature, Culture and Gender*, Cambridge University Press, 1980, 156.

⁹ A. Chapman, *op cit.*, 68-9.

¹⁰ On the notion of "consent" of women before masculine power, see M. Godelier, *op. cit.*, but also the critique of N. Mathieu in Mathieu (ed), *L'arraisonnement des femmes*, EHESS, Cahiers de l'Homme, 1985.

¹¹ B. Juillerat, *op. cit.*

¹² S. Moscovici, *La société contre nature*, Paris, Union Générale d'Éditions 10/18, 1972; G. Mendel, *La chasse structurale*, Paris, Payot, 1977.

“An Odor of Man”

organized to hunt, but implicitly that they were endowed with a phallic power (the mediation between hunter and game is accomplished by the arrow). The right to hunt is thus made a sexual characteristic in the fantasy; and with that the question can be asked if the masculine monopoly on hunting noted in almost every known society is not (also) related somehow to this analogy. Thus it would be inasmuch as they are deprived of the phallic attribute that women are excluded from hunting, which is different from the theory proposed by Marxist anthropology which states that women cannot hunt because of their successive pregnancies and the lack of mobility imposed on them by their having responsibility for young children.¹³

MELANESIAN EVOLUTIONISM

But the brutal incident described in the myth takes place in an evolutionary chronology that goes beyond the present episode. The era of the *suwomp* and *garboango* is presented there as a period of “latency” serving as transition between the preceding era, called the “husbands and wives era”, and the contemporary era. Sexual drive is not completely abolished in this latent period, however, since there are sometimes descriptions of men and women fornicating with holes in the ground or with branches of trees. The latency takes the form of total segregation of the sexual communities; sexual and social relations between men and women are totally invalidated. Reproduction is then completely confined under the sign of a phallic maternity; the paternal role is the object of a sort of passing mythical amnesia that allows leaving to the *garboango* alone the reproduction process in its entirety, that is in its sexual duality. From this come the androgynous connotations of Yangis ritual objects: masks (“wombs” of fiber cloth pierced by a vertical pole), paints (the colors represent the feminine and masculine fertility substances), clitoral sheaths (today’s ritual penis sheaths made of an oblong black gourd that is attached to a belt of

¹³ See the critical approach of A. Testart, *Essai sur les fondements de la division sexuelle du travail chez les chasseurs-cueilleurs*, Paris, EHESS, Cahiers de l’Homme, 1986.

bone) and wooden horns. Even though not hidden from the eyes of women and children (as is the case in a certain number of societies in New Guinea and elsewhere), these horns, five in number, provide an uninterrupted musical background for the Yangis ceremony and are musically and symbolically complementary; the first two are male and female, and the next three each express a moment in the growth of the male principle in gestation. To have possession of the horns, as G. Gillison has remarked for a Highlands society, thus means that the women are self-sufficient, holding the masculine prisoner in themselves, undifferentiated.¹⁴ However, Yangis recreates the birth of two totemic sons as “original men” (*ifegê*), founders of the two halves, that is of society represented in the unity that its duality guarantees.

The long prior stage of “couples” is, on the other hand, illustrated by accounts in which men and women, parents and children, elder and younger siblings at times work together at gathering and hunting and at times mutually abuse one another, kill each other by trickery, die and are reborn in the form of natural entities. The revelation of the secret knowledge makes possible an exegetical analysis that, on a first level, refers to the vegetal metaphor that lends itself especially well to expressing ambivalence or sexual disorder, namely androgyny, sexuality not being observable empirically. The mythical characters then become the agents of the natural cycle: germination, growth, flowering, fructification, ripening, decay. The anthropomorphism of vegetal life introduces the differentiation of the sexes where it is not evident. Its sexualization thus takes the form of a division of tasks in which the male element is the agent of vertical growth of the trunk of palm trees while the female element ensures flowering and fructification. The crucial moment in the cycle is the one in which the maternal seed allows the germ to emancipate itself as offspring. This latter phenomenon allows the observer to introduce into the cycle the image of reproduction as such by intercepting it at this critical instant and by thus inscribing it within the framework of

¹⁴ G. Gillison, *op. cit.*; see also Herdt, *op. cit.* and G. Herdt (ed), *Rituals of Manhood, Male Initiation in Papua New Guinea*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982.

"An Odor of Man"

filiation. The "sexuality" of plants is presented to Yafar knowledge through the image of childbearing, of the closed feminine realm producing the masculine, first by keeping it prisoner (gestation), in order to allow it then to become autonomous. The woman is thus not only differentiated by her power to bear children,¹⁵ but more particularly by her capacity to produce sons.¹⁶ But if the vegetal world makes it possible to express the link to the mother easily, the same is not true for the relationship to the father. This bond is not empirically identifiable, which makes the father appear in the manifest content of myths, given as true father or as his substitute. Often it is this father and jealous husband who hides the game that he has killed or the coconuts he has planted in a secret underground place, exclusive guardian of feminine fertility to the detriment of his sons. But the central figure in this mythology is the son, as subject thrown into question by the Oedipal dilemma, who attempts to cut himself loose from the umbilical link and to replace the father. The account that we have examined here is the only one that presents the son, Pepi, as definitively and totally victorious; all the others describe him in a completely ambivalent manner, torn between his regressive impulses and his effort at self-socialization, prisoner of a double bind that can only be resolved by the voluntary withdrawal of the aging father. This is the period of "husbands and wives", a time of power still difficultly shared, both in the sexual register and in that of filiation to the two parents. Such a situation could only result in distancing, in the divorce of the "couples", which is, precisely, the age of the *suwomp* and the *garboango*.

But how is the transition made between the age of "husbands and wives" and that of disunited communities? What was the "historic" pretext that served as transition between the two phases, that of poorly handled sexuality and that of latency? It cannot be found in a continuous chronology, for Yafar mythology did not produce such continuity. Nevertheless, one myth stands out from

¹⁵ F. Héritier, *op. cit.*; C. Kirsch, "Relation entre les différenciations biologique et sociale des sexes", *Revue Canadienne de Sociologie et d'Anthropologie*, 13(4), 1976.

¹⁶ G. Herdt, *op. cit.*, 1981, 168.

the Yafar corpus, which is not explicitly situated at this moment of human evolution but which evokes a situation that is approximately symmetrical and opposite to that of the account relating the return of Pepi to the community of women.

Instead of working to grow sago palms, the women fornicated each day with Wabamenaag, the growth spirit of the wild bread tree. Returning from the hunt, the men received only poor sago jelly from their wives. They sent a young man to spy on the women, and their treachery was discovered. After they were beaten, the shameful women turned into bats and birds of Paradise, taking their daughters with them. The men and the male children found themselves abandoned. They lamented and finally were transformed in turn into *Ptilinopus* pigeons.

In both cases the social transformation is the result of an abuse by the women, but whereas the episode above begins with equal cooperation between the sexes (women working the sago palms, the men hunting) and their interdependence, ending finally with their segregation and their de-identification (the metamorphoses), the Pepi myth works in the opposite manner. In the first example, the women are the cause of the breakdown of symmetrical complementarity of the sexes; in the second Pepi abrogates this breakdown by substituting a hierarchical relationship for the symmetrical relationship. The women waste their fertility (the sago jelly is the symbol of the embryo; "poor" jelly is one that has not jelled, a failed gestation) by yielding to a non-productive "wild" sexuality. And this confirms *a contrario* that Yafar thought identifies human progress with liberation from the control of nature.¹⁷ Excesses in the phallic order (the spirit Wabamenaag) bring on the same excesses in the order of human pleasure (here feminine), whereas sociality requires controlling impulses, sub-

¹⁷ The Nature/Culture comparison so often made by analyses of cultural representations of sexuality has recently been questioned (C.P. MacCormack, "Nature, Culture and Gender: A Critique", in McCormack & Strathern (eds), *op. cit.*). It is certain that this dichotomy has unfortunately masked the extraordinary subtlety of representation systems. The Yafar example, however, shows here that nature only serves as metaphor for the idea of regression, of return to the maternal bond.

"An Odor of Man"

jecting them to the "principle of reality".¹⁸ The metamorphosis into flying animals is the true expression of frustration in light of failure of such a task.

Let us continue with our journey back into mythical times. Among primordial vegetable species, two must be mentioned that today form the totemic pair of the halves and are the naturalized incarnation of the divine parental couple who created the cosmos. The mother coconut is the origin for game, and the sago is thought to be the vegetal avatar of the ancestral father. The former is associated with the village (where the coconut tree is planted exclusively), the latter with the forest where the sago grows wild; this duality recalls the one that separates the *suwomp* and the *garboango*. The halves are named "feminine" and "masculine" respectively and have these types for totems, that is, about half of the population claims to be from the original father and the other half from the original mother totemically. But before these palm trees existed, the world began, by the encounter in the primordial cosmic void of a divine couple with human form, creator of the heavens (paternal) and of the earth (maternal). Their sexual outpourings produced the first earth, and of their repeated embraces arose the fire that solidified it. In today's society two hereditary religious functions, both masculine and transmitted respectively in two patrilineal branches of the corresponding halves, incarnate this irreducible cosmic duality: the "Father of Heaven" and the "Father of Earth" are the commanding figures in the Yangis ceremony.

As we can see, then, this history of desire (to use the expression of Paul Ricoeur) begins with sexual duality posed in terms of complementarity, develops it by introducing into it the disorder that creates a confusion of roles and the non-delimitation of power, and makes it result in the establishment of a hierarchy for the relationship between the sexes through attribution to the male alone of cultural control over this natural part of man that is his capacity to reproduce himself. The different evolutionary stages of Yafar mythology can be summarized as follows:

¹⁸ S. Freud, "Au-delà du principe de plaisir" (1920), in *Essais de psychanalyse*, Paris, Payot, 1984.

1. **Divine anthropomorphic couple:** the universe is reduced to a divine couple. Creation of heaven and earth.
2. **Period of “husbands and wives”:** fundamental role of the coconut palm and the sago palm, the two totems of each half, incarnation of the divine couple. Rivalry between the sexual forces at work in the vegetal cycle. Power not monopolized. Familial conflicts.
3. (Failure of sociality. Myth of the separation of the sexual communities. Metamorphosis of humans into animals as a result of a bad feminine use of fertility).
4. **Period of the *suwomp* and *garboango*:** the two sexual communities live separately. The women celebrate the Yangis ceremony unbeknownst to men and have full control over the reproduction process. No sexuality: latency and gynecocracy (reproductive self-sufficiency).
5. **Pepi myth:** re-establishment of sexuality, murder of the women, confiscation of the Yangis cult by men. End of the gynecocratic period and institution of the dominantly masculine social order.

“Man’s impulsive apparatus is one of the ‘natural’ conditions that are part of the infrastructures of the social process”. This statement by Erich Fromm¹⁹ allows us to close the first part of this analysis by emphasizing that at an initial level Yafar mythology is the reflection of social ideology, and that at a second level it seems also to find its inspiration in the permanence of a maternal imago²⁰ in the individual and its projection into the culture where society itself is proclaimed subject. The subject is defined by its filiation to a mother and to a father, but also in relation to a sexual link that unites and differentiates its parents. The subject is thus here reduced to its Oedipal position. This is why the formation of a human society requires stages that recall ontogenetic development.

¹⁹ E. Fromm, *La crise de la psychanalyse: Essai sur Freud, Marx et la psychologie sociale*, Paris, Denoël, 1970.

²⁰ The purpose of this article is not to seek to find a reason for the permanence of such an imago in Yafar culture; serious ethno-psychoanalytic research would be required into the conditions of socialization of the child. Anticipating a question the reader might raise, we can indicate that weaning occurs in the third or fourth year; until that time the child lives almost constantly with its mother who carries it with her to the places where she works.

“An Odor of Man”

But before the emergence of the hero-son, before the generational conflict, the first part of the Pepi myth dramatizes the conflict of sexual principles for control of reproduction in its unicity, that is for the uni-filiative claim of a not yet produced descendance. A power must be instituted to settle this rivalry between the sexes. The confusion of roles, like the total separation of the sexes, prevents a coherent representation of reproduction, and conversely the sharing of power neutralizes it and dissolves it into a non-power that generates disorder. Initially the Yafar mythology discusses this problem: the need for an organized form of exchange between the sexes being established, two formulas were tried before arriving at the only solution considered viable, namely the institution of sexual polarity placed under masculine control. The first formula, as we have seen, was that of equality of the masculine and feminine principles (power not monopolized); the second was that of total segregation under feminine hegemony. In the first case, complementarity functioned in a conflictual manner; in the second, power was assigned in an exclusive manner, but in the sense of an accumulation that compromised any exchange between the sexes, with women disposing of an auto-reproductive autarchy that made men unnecessary. This trial and error evolution made it possible to validate the reigning social system (namely patrilinearity and ritual control attributed to men alone) as the only truly functional formula. In a second stage the rivalry between sexes refers to mother/son filiation defined in terms of production and then physical liberation of the child, which then had to give way to its psychic emancipation in order to make possible the institution of paternal filiation as system of automatic transmission of paternity. In sociological terms, paternal unification advantageously replaces the conflictual situation of bilinearity or of ambilinearity.

The Yafar example somewhat buttresses Fromm's efforts to unite psychoanalysis and historical materialism, and perhaps makes it possible to understand better how the former “can show that these apparently ‘ideal’ motives are in reality nothing other than the rationalized expression of impulsive, libidinal needs”, and reciprocally how “the human psyche is never more than the psyche

modified by the social process”.²¹

Let us now move on to our second illustration, furnished to us by a representative of a truly “patriarchal” society—Bachofen.

THE BACHOVIAN MYTHOLOGY

First we can recall that this Basel jurist, specialist in the mythologies of Antiquity, postulated that myths, veritable monuments of history, were residual collective memories transmitted down to us. In this way he developed a chronology that began with primitive sexual promiscuity and concluded with the purest paternal law. The following stages can be distinguished:

1. “Hetairism”, placed under the sign of Aphrodite, in which women “prostitutes” were totally at the mercy of men. Marriage was unknown, and fathers were not recognized. Only maternity dominated, represented by the image of the fertility of the swamps. Bachofen located this type of society, in the absence of any documents, among the hunters-gatherers and, based on erroneous documents, among “pre-agricultural” breeders.
2. The revolt of the chaste warrior Amazons allowed the establishment of the “Demetric” gynecocracy based on the monogamous couple, characteristic of agricultural peoples (“The predominant role of the woman in the work of hoeing was the cause of matriarchy”). The telluric metaphor is here replaced by the image of the ear of grain.
3. But the abuse of “Amazonism” favored the return to a Dionysian type masculine power, which easily subjected women by its sensuality and its persistent dependence with regard to the maternal world.
4. With Apollonism paternal right was refined into intellectualism and distanced itself from the (biological) “materialism” that was supposed by the pre-eminence of the maternal link.

Each phase was engendered by the preceding one, and its authenticity was validated by the following one. The transition from one period to another was sometimes accomplished through

²¹ Fromm, *ibid.*, 164 and 167.

BACHOFEN	YAFAR	FAMILIAL SYSTEM ETHICAL REPRESENTATION	ECOLOGICAL REPRESENTATION	TYPE OF ASSOCIATED SOCIETY
—	Divine anthropo- morphic couple	Sexual complementarity	Original nothingness	—
Hetairism	—	Promiscuity and masculine domination	Tellurism, bog vegetation	Hunters-gatherers nomad breeders
Amazonism	—	Revolution of the women, chastity of the Amazons	—	—
Demetric gynecocracy	—	Order and harmony in the mono- gamous matriarchal couple	Agriculture (corn ears), moon	Farmers
—	"Husbands-wives": naturalized couples	Rivalry of sexes in the couple for control of reproduction (power not monopolized)	Original grained trees	—
—	<i>Suwomp-garboango</i> total sexual segregation, gynecocracy	Abolished sexuality. Power and secrecy of women over reproduction	Totemic palms: sago and coconut palms	—
Reign of Dionysus	—	Return of phallic order: voluptu- ousness, drunkenness. Submission of women; Patriarchal society	Vine, sun	Patriarchal societies (Africa, etc.)
—	Pepi's intervention	Return of the phallic order: voluptu- ousness. Reestablishment of sexual- ity, start of masculine domination	Sprouting seed, growth	—
—	Return of the men	Orgies, temporary promiscuity	—	—
—	Murder of the women, ritual theft	Establishment of social order and masculine secrecy	—	—
Reign of Apollo	—	Defined patriarchal society. Abolition of maternal link	—	Western patriarchal societies

an act of violence according to a process of reaction to abuse. Thus the “feminine imperialism” of Amazonism was due to the scorn for women prevalent during hetairism, but the violence of the Amazons led in turn to the return to masculine domination and the seeds of patriarchy. Despite this apparently irreversible linearity, but in accordance with the Hegelian rule of successive contrasts, Bachofen upheld the thesis of a possible return to the original hetairism, a manifestation of which he thought he detected in the fall of the ancient world.

The similarity of the Yafar and Bachovian representations is striking. They seem to be two possible variants (among others) of the reconstruction of an imaginary history of the antagonism of the sexes, or rather of its retrospective “deconstruction” from the existing masculine hegemony. The Basel historian would have certainly recognized in the Yafar mythology an additional proof of his thesis; although he would have attributed to pure imagination the representation of the primordial divine couple, he would probably have assigned the subsequent periods to a place in history. The rivalry generating conflicts in the age of “husbands and wives” would have perhaps been identified with an intermediate stage between the original hetairism and the conjugal gynocracy that followed, and the *garboango* would have been seen as similar to the chaste and powerful Amazons. Likewise Pepi appears as a young Dionysus, the “god of women”, but in an incarnation in which he would still be the “radiant son”²² barely, but definitively, freed from the link to the mother. Just as the excess of Amazonism, according to Bachofen, is at the origin of the success of Dionysus, whose seductive activities find a favorable terrain in the “restrictions of matriarchy” and in “the supernatural level of chastity in which woman cannot maintain herself”,²³ so too does Pepi exude his “odor” in a feminine community that is strong but weaned of the pleasures of sensuality.

For their part the Yafar would agree with the Swiss jurist when he says, “the progress that consists in dethroning the maternal principle to the advantage of the paternal principle is the most important transition in the history of the relationship between the

²² Bachofen, *op. cit.*, 67 and 85.

²³ Bachofen, *op. cit.*, 66.

“An Odor of Man”

sexes”.²⁴ But the place of violence is here reversed in the two evolutionist views. For Bachofen, the revolt of the women established the gynecocracy and the exogamy that replaced sexual promiscuity, whereas the Yafar mythology links Pepi’s Dionysian seduction and the murder of the women to a single process instituting the new social order (paternal law). As for the theme of promiscuity, original and dominantly masculine in the Bachovian view, it is reduced in the Yafar myth to a brief moment of shared erotic pleasure introduced by Pepi but leading at once to the annihilation of feminine power. The myth is, in a sense, a precipitate, in a different order, of three of the evolutionary phases described in *Das Mutterrecht*. “Demetric gynecocracy” is absent in the Yafar representations, but it seems to be replaced by the period of couples (“husbands and wives”) naturalized in the original vegetal species, particularly the coconut palm. Bachofen would perhaps see there but a variant of his “Demetrism”, the palm tree domesticated for sexual reproduction the equivalent of wheat, each leading to a pre-agricultural²⁵ or pre-arboricultural era, to a maternalized vision of the world made up of an expanse of flooded savanna, of a “soft earth” according to the Yafar expression. Nevertheless, where the ear of grain symbolized for Bachofen the harmonious complementarity of the sexes in the matriarchal couple, the coconut palm is, for Yafar mythology, the object of a struggle in which the sexes rival one another cruelly within the family where power does not clearly belong to anyone²⁶ and where the Oedipus principle is the pivot of all conflicts. And finally, a last parallelism to note, the notion of return to the original feminine dominance—under whatever form—denoting for Bachofen the decadence of civilizations, is found in the fear of Yafar men of seeing their hegemony escape them to the advantage

²⁴ Bachofen, *op. cit.*, 78.

²⁵ In his ecological references, Bachofen passes directly from the “swamps” to grain agriculture (proper to the Mediterranean basin). Equipped with more extensive ethnographic information, the German-speaking anthropologist later, in the flush of the diffusionist and still evolutionist school of Father Schmidt, contrasted the growing of tubers (*Knollenanbau*) with the cultivation of grain (*Körneranbau*).

²⁶ J. Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l’horreur. Essai sur l’abjection*, Paris, Seuil, 1980, 85.

of women. For one and the other, the return to maternal dominance is seen as the result of socio-cultural decline.

How should we interpret the fact that a Melanesian society and a nineteenth century Western legal authority agree to such an extent in their “historical” representations of the relationship between the sexes? For if there are apparent differences (the order of the sequences, an idealized ethical vision of woman absent from the Yafar conception, and ambivalent evaluation of the gynecocratic period in Bachofen compared with its discredit in Melanesia), the similarities are even more evident: violence and a movement of reversal marking the transition from one stage to another, a period marked by the bad management of the relationship between the sexes preceding the gynecocratic era, a group of women with phallic attributes temporarily breaking with the community of men, the introduction of masculine hegemony by the erotic mediation of a divinized character, and generally the antecedence of matriarchy as necessary (inasmuch as based on biological function) so that masculine-paternal law can finally succeed in being established. The most important point in common is that the archaic phase consisted in an omnipotence of the *maternal function*. The very title of Bachofen’s work, in fact, carefully emphasizes the mother and not only the woman, thereby correcting the thrust of his previous lectures;²⁷ parallel to this, Yafar mythology continuously defines woman according to the double maternal function, procreative and nursing.²⁸

The first link between Bachofen and the Yafar is obviously in the mythologies of Mediterranean Antiquity that nourish the Bachovian thesis; but if Greco-Roman cultures serve as mediator between the Basel historian and the Yafar, Bachofen here serves as intermediary between ancient and Yafar mythologies. The proximity of the two mythical stores is evident and no doubt explains the subjective dimension that certain evolutionists have invested in their theory. For if the current of ideas of an era is in part

²⁷ *Vom Weibelrecht*, 1856.

²⁸ J. Kristeva (*op. cit.*, 87), among other authors, confirms this primacy by speaking of the maternal as basis for the feminine. F. Hérítier, on the other hand, emphasizes that “it is not sex but fertility that creates the real difference between masculine and feminine” (*op. cit.*, 18).

“An Odor of Man”

independent of the individuals who represent it, subjective elements are nevertheless projected into it, and sometimes are even defended. With regard to Bachofen (born in 1815), Adrien Turel²⁹ seeks to explain his orientation by the social and political upheavals of his time, including the challenge to the urban patrician society to which he belonged represented by the rural Basel revolt in 1830. It seems to us, to the contrary, that events as determinant as the July Revolution, the fall of the Second Empire or Garibaldi's entry into Rome (which Bachofen witnessed) did not succeed in distracting from his evolutionist and maternal reveries this conservative protected by his milieu and his fortune. To define him better, it would be necessary, as his proponents suggest, to know what he took consciously from Hegel, what he knew of the ideas of Henri Maine who upheld, in his *Ancient Law*, published the same year as *Das Mutterrecht*, the opposite thesis of the priority of patriarchy; also to what extent Bachofen's theory, even though developed in lectures prior to *The Origin of the Species* (1859), was influenced by the antecedents of Darwinism, and how, more generally, his theory can be situated in relation to Victorian evolutionism.³⁰

The Bachofen idea of a progressive evolutionary flow proceeding by an alternation of opposites sometimes seems taken straight from Hegelian dialectics:

“There could hardly be true changes in the respective situation of the two sexes without such changes being accompanied by bloody events. Violent upheavals are the rule. ... It is by seeking to

²⁹ “Introduction” in Bachofen, *op. cit.*, 1938 (1980).

³⁰ It is also clear that Bachofen was hardly interested in the writings of Marx; but we know, on the other hand, that Engels used Bachofen's theories and those of Morgan (who also postulated the priority of matriarchy in his *Ancient Society*, 1871). Bachofen did not know the work *Primitive Marriage* (1856), by his Scotch colleague McLennan, until 1859; but Frazer (*The Golden Bough*, 1890) sought proof for the priority of matriarchy in contemporary “primitive” societies. The fundamental idea of the diffusionist method, which was to be developed from Frobenius, and particularly in the Vienna School, is already present in Bachofen (Cf. F. Boas and J. Campbell in Bachofen, *op. cit.*, 1967; M. Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969; K.R. Wernhardt, “L'école d'ethnologie de Vienne et la situation actuelle de l'ethnohistoire”, *L'Ethnographie*, n. sp. 90-91, 1983).

reinforce itself to an extreme that each principle provokes the victorious reaction of the opposite principle. In this way abuse itself becomes a lever of progress.”³¹

A few pages later, however, Bachofen says almost the opposite:

“... the history of our species knows neither abrupt change nor sudden progress. Everywhere we find successive transitions, a series of progressive degrees in which each stage, while retaining certain elements from the preceding one, also anticipates, in other respects, the stage that will follow it.”³²

However, it does not seem absolutely certain to us that Bachofen drew on Hegel; he needed only to read the mythologies attentively, and that of the Yafar today confirms that the human spirit sometimes seeks, and not only in the West, to reconstruct its past according to the principle of trial and error. The author of *Phenomenology of the Mind* thought that man, in his quest for the Absolute, should find his balance and his happiness in the reconciliation of opposites. But is Bachofen’s Apollonism, the final term of his evolutionary chronology, truly a middle term? Is it not rather the idealized triumph of one of the poles in the dialectic of the sexes, expressed no doubt in a more intellectualized and peaceful manner than in the Yafar myth, but ultimately fundamentally related to the victory of the *suwomp* over the *garboango*, through which the “solution” imposed on the irreconcilable nature of the relationship between the sexes is indeed the definitive establishment of one of the extremes.

As for his social milieu, Bachofen seems to have experienced it in a contradictory manner. His familial evolution, marked by his life-long attachment to his mother (he did not marry until nine years after her death and then to a woman of the local bourgeoisie, thirty years younger than he), contrasts with the patriarchal society, protestant and wealthy, to which he belonged. It is perhaps in this distinction that we must seek an explanation for the contradictions of opinion that Fromm notes:³³ an elitist opposed to democracy

³¹ *Op. cit.*, 1980, 52.

³² *Op. cit.*, 63.

³³ Fromm, *op. cit.*, 127.

“An Odor of Man”

and to the political liberation of women, Bachofen assigned a privileged position to woman only in a romantic and distant past. His viewpoint as a historian of mythologies betrays his own inner conflict. On the one hand:

“The gynocratic era is the poetry of history! It is such by its sublime nature, by the heroic majesty and the beauty it imprints on woman; by the impetus it gives to the bravura and the generosity of men; by the importance it attaches to the love of women; and finally by the chastity it requires of the adolescent.”³⁴

On the other:

“All these significant criteria of the paternal principle constrain us to conclude that its predominance implies detachment of the mind from the gross evidences of nature, and its victorious propagation a raising of humanity beyond the laws of material life.”³⁵ (...)

“Dionysus had elevated the father over the mother. Apollo, however, liberated him from any bond with woman. His paternity without mother became purely spiritual, such as we find in the symbol of adoption. Such paternity will thus be immortal, it will no longer fear the night of death to which Dionysus, the phallic god, will remain subject.”³⁶

Bachovian ideology finally won out over repressed images, Apollo over Aphrodite. This long detour through the past, this complex development of the “historical” hazards in the relationship between sexes in order finally to side with the father, the State, money and morality: is this not the expression of a perfect success for the defensive system that men have set up, not only to protect their class interests but also perhaps to protect themselves against a return of what has been rejected?

It is in this order of reality that Bachofen and the evolutionism of his time rejoin Melanesian mythology. By constructing for themselves an historical fiction out of psychic materials, the Yafar, a society without classes, culturally express something of a filiative

³⁴ Bachofen, *op. cit.*, 1980, 42.

³⁵ *Op. cit.*, 78.

³⁶ *Op. cit.*, 86-87.

representation of the parental couple (symbolized, as has been seen, by the totemic pair) and perhaps avoid the definitive reversal, the denial leading to the absolute unspoken. The mythical evolution of the two sexual orders recalls ontogenetic development; the anguish of a return to the mother, expressed by the fear of a regression of the collective self to the time of the *garboango*, is contrasted with the defensive and reassuring process created to counter it by consolidating the image of the father through affirmation of masculine power.³⁷ The danger of returning to a form of gynocracy sometimes seems felt by Yafar exegetes as a permanent “natural” danger against which men must defend themselves with continued vigilance, from which comes the role of secrecy that surrounds cult, and indeed is one of the very reasons for the existence of cult. The reincarnated totemic sons of the Yangis ritual as well as the hero of the myth examined here seem to be personifications of a conjuration of this danger.

Both Bachovian mythology and Yafar evolutionism have as common goal to propose a settlement for sexual powers that makes it possible, in the final analysis, to legitimate existing masculine supremacy. But in doing this, these ideologies reveal something of their origins as well as of their role. The alternative distribution in time of powers is a manner of not recognizing the present and synchronous contradiction of these entities, thus the insoluble nature of their rivalry. The masculine ideology at work is both validated and contradicted by the myth that thus restores its ambivalence.

As Ernest Gellner has written,³⁸ ideologies “declare the truth by working from the false. They monopolize validation” by referring to “some prior world”. Dominant but at the same time full of hope, they “propose monopolistic solutions in contexts in which they do not, or not totally, monopolize power”.

³⁷ For a brief analysis of the relationship between the imaginary and ideology in Yafar culture, see B. Juillerat, “Male Ideology and Cultural Fantasy in Yafar Society”, in Lutkehaus *et al.* (eds), *Sepik Heritage: Tradition and Change in Papua New Guinea*, Carolina Academic Press, in publication.

³⁸ “Notes Toward a Theory of Ideology”, *L’Homme*, XVIII (3-4), 1978.

“An Odor of Man”

BACHOFEN AND “ANTHROPOLOGICAL” FEMINISM

Relegated to the rank of fossil theory in the strata of the history of anthropological ideas, Bachofen’s thesis has regained its virginity among contemporary proponents of radical feminism in anthropology.³⁹ Already the Vienna School, then especially Briffault⁴⁰ had taken up the thesis of the priority of matriarchy; the latter author assigned historical value to legends attributing to women initial control over religious rituals, which was then taken from them by men. The very claim of priority for feminine power is the evolutionist manner by which this “anthropological” feminism seeks to combat contemporary masculine dominance, or at least to make men responsible for a plot both ancient and modern, the foundation of today’s social order. Formally we are not far from the Yafar and Bachovian mythologies, but what is new is the birth—or the consolidation—of a veritable militant feminine ideology. Feminism is the opposite of a claim of women as mothers or of a nostalgia, for the mother that might overturn the dominant (masculine) ideology; it is the result of a defensive elaboration of a counter-ideology which, to our knowledge, has no equivalent in societies usually studied by ethnologists. Consequently, it is at the least surprising that the same historical conjecture could have served to legitimate the prevalence of one and the other sex, and that it was Bachofen—nostalgic for maternal dominance but ultimately an implicit defender of paternal right—who was called in for help by certain feminist authors whose “anthropology” barely conceals real (and legitimate) demands, that a return to a Bachovian matriarchy would, nevertheless, be hard put to satisfy. One has the impression here of being once again in direct contact with a representation of ontogenetic development, where the priority of the link to the mother is endowed with a socio-historical dimension by the feminist thesis, whereas masculine ideology

³⁹ See for example E.G. Davis (*The First Sex*, New York, G.P. Putnam, 1971) or, less caricatured, F. D’Eaubonne (*Les femmes avant le patriarcat*, Paris, Payot, 1977), who, tempering Bachofen’s thesis, upholds the hypothesis of intermediate stages between matriarchy and patriarchy still discernible today (Trobriand Islands); or else E. Reed (*Féminisme et anthropologie*, Paris, Payot, 1979).

⁴⁰ *The Mothers: A Study of the Origin of Sentiments and Institutions*, New York, Macmillan, 1927; (reprinted 1969).

would be nourished implicitly by the continuity of an effort toward defensive autonomization apart from the mother. It seems evident that this feminism took a wrong path not only on the scientific level but also from the point of view of its own ideology. It is necessary, however, to stress that defenders of a veritable anthropology of woman and of femininity, represented primarily by women anthropologists (whose work over the last twenty years has made it possible to formulate certain fundamental problems differently), have clearly set themselves off from such an orientation and have often reacted vigorously.⁴¹

* * *

After Bachofen, Freud, likewise tempted by phylogenetic reconstruction, imagined in *Totem and Taboo* his myth of the primitive horde, of the murder of the father and of the birth of totemism. For him such objectivation in history had its source in the psychic imagery of his patients and in the ethnography of someone like Frazer, but it was realized by the effect of a feedback that went from his own scientific rationality to fantasy. We can thus distinguish in the Yafar, Bachovian and Freudian structures three modalities, diversely mediatized, of the same general problem. Here we are referring only to *Totem and Taboo* of course, the only one of Freud's works that is truly outmoded, in which the theme of the primitive horde—still used by psychoanalysis as the non-historical (mythical) expression of the maternal complex or of an “atom of pre-cultural relationship”⁴²—is dealt with only in the very last pages. Only René Girard,⁴³ in order to buttress his thesis on sacrifice, seeks to restore its full historical veracity to this “event” (which Freud himself would have no doubt refuted at the end of his life), and to rescue “Freud the ethnologist” while

⁴¹ See, for example, the critical approach in P. Webster, “Matriarchy: A Vision of Power”, in R.R. Reiter (ed), *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, N.Y., London, Monthly Review Press, 1975; C. Kirsch, *op. cit.*; B. Arcand, “Essai sur l'origine de l'inégalité entre les sexes”, *Anthropologie et Sociétés* I (3), 1977; and J. Bamberger, *op. cit.*, who comments on the influence of Bachofen on “anthropological” feminism.

⁴² R.A. Paul, “Did the Primal Crime Take Place?”, *Ethos*, 4, 1976.

⁴³ *La violence et le sacré*, Paris, Grasset, 1972.

"An Odor of Man"

condemning the other.

We have seen that for the Yafar as well as for Bachofen, there is a twofold motif to the myth. The first element is psycho-sociological in nature, the second ideological. Both work to the detriment of woman, the first because the masculine must be constituted against the feminine from which it issues, and the second because every ideology is produced by the dominant social category. One defines sexual differentiation in terms of filiation, the other sets the sexes in confrontation generically on the socio-historical stage. But in both registers the male is already presented as condition, and there is the impression of begging the question. The myth expresses the individual destiny of a uniquely masculine subject, the ideology legitimates an already established social order. The only manner to break out of this circle is, on the one hand, to give primacy to the filiative differentiation of the sexes in childbearing (irreducible non-reciprocity) over the simple rivalry of the sexes, and on the other to resituate the problem of masculine dominance in light of the Oedipal dialectic and its resolution. The autonomization of the masculine subject serves as language for expressing the imaginary liberation of society from the "rule of the mother". It does not at all seem absurd to propose a parallelism between, on the one hand, the schematic reduction to three phases of ontogenetic development (Oedipal period, latency period, Oedipal resolution) and, on the other, the succession of three evolutionary stages, namely the age of "husbands and wives", the era of separate communities (social latency) and the prevalence of the masculine order. The individual and the social, the libidinal and the political are superimposed in the same diachronic structure. Here can be recognized the double orientation of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics (referring simultaneously to Freud and to Hegel), namely an "analytical and regressive movement toward the subconscious" on the one hand, and a "synthetic and progressive movement toward the mind" on the other.⁴⁴ Both the Yafar and Bachofen do seem to have employed this double process since they implicitly had recourse to an "archaeology of the subject" in order to develop a "becoming-adult of man".⁴⁵ In this sense the myth

⁴⁴ P. Ricoeur, *Le conflit des interprétations. Essais d'herméneutique*. Paris, Seuil, 1969, 321.

⁴⁵ *Op. cit.*, 118.

here is also what André Green has called a “collective transitional object”,⁴⁶ linking individual psychic production and the parameters of collective life. The ontogenetic experience that continues to speak in the adult individual finds itself translated into cultural terms in which society as a whole becomes the subject in question.

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⁴⁶ A. Green, “Le mythe: un objet transitionnel collectif. Abord critique et perspectives psychanalytiques”, *Le Temps de la Réflexion*, 1, 1980.