

GUSTAVE MOREAU AND GNOSTICISM

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Gustave Moreau, a French Symbolist artist who lived from 1826 to 1898, believed that art was "the language of God", a visible language that opened, in his words, "truly magical, I shall even say divine, vistas".¹ Moreau devoted his life to this divine mission of art. His search for spiritual enlightenment led him to investigate the religious expression of many lands and cultures — Egypt, Greece, India, the Judeo-Christian and Neo-Platonic traditions, the occult sciences and Gnosticism. This paper is concerned with Moreau's Gnostic beliefs, and will argue that underlying his syncretism was a constant and fundamental dualism that spanned Moreau's entire oeuvre. This dualism is most fully expressed in three large, diagrammatic paintings, the *Daughters of Thestius*, begun in 1851-1852, enlarged in 1882 and still unfinished at Moreau's death in 1898, *The Chimaeras*, painted in 1884 and also left unfinished, and the *Jupiter and Semele* of 1895.²

The *Daughters of Thestius* dates from the beginning of Moreau's professional career. I have argued elsewhere an interpretation of this painting as an alchemical allegory.³ Here I wish only to stress the dualistic basis of the work and its particularly misogynist representation of women. In this key painting of Moreau's early period, the youthful Hercules is depicted seated in a prehistoric gynaecium surrounded by the fifty daughters of Thestius whom he will fertilise in a single night. For Moreau, this was an act of sacred ritual, paralleling the divine cosmogenesis. He described this painting as a "hymn to procreation, to the creative force", identifying as the male and female poles of creation the two cippi which frame the hero in the centre of the work.

If *The Daughters of Thestius* may be considered the first of Moreau's paintings to express a fundamentally dualistic conception of the universe, it is also the first work explicitly to identify women with matter and the natural world. Moreau wrote of this painting:

The women like beautiful animals of a vegetal dullness ought
manifest in their gestures nothing whatsoever of interior
sensibility
thought is absent
animated caryatids with the gestures, poses and movements
of statues ...
they have no language.⁴

In unequivocal terms, Moreau denies these women their essential humanity — reason, interior sensibility, language — and identifies them with the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms.

In its fusion of women and matter in the context of a dualism of opposing forces, Moreau's symbolic representation of cosmic creative force parallels the fundamental dualism of Gnosticism and like the latter identifies the material universe as feminine. The *Daughters of Thestius* establishes the basis for the iconographic program for the much later work, *The Chimaeras* of 1884, in which Moreau's major statement on the nature and destiny of the soul is set within the Gnostic context of a feminine and evil world.

Moreau's interest in Gnosticism is not surprising, given the intellectual and artistic circles in which he moved. The pioneering work by scholars of comparative religion had generated significant interest in Gnosticism in France in the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1828 A.J. Matter's major study of the Gnostic movement *Histoire critique du gnosticisme* appeared and the classical scholar Louis Ménard published his translation of the texts attributed to Hermes Trismegistus in 1866. This latter work contained a long introduction setting the Hermetic texts in a Gnostic context.

Gnosis means knowledge, specifically, knowledge of God and the divine mysteries. Gnosticism preached a doctrine of salvation through knowledge and through the negative virtues of asceticism.⁵ As a religious phenomenon, it was widespread throughout the Hellenistic world in the first centuries after Christ. The term characterises a multiplicity of sects, some of which were pagan while others which adapted some aspects of Christianity were regarded as Christian heresies, for example, the Manichaean heresy. Gnosticism was a syncretic system, embracing in various forms Jewish, Christian, Egyptian, Babylonian, Persian, and Chaldean beliefs. It may be regarded as a synthesis of the Hellenistic and oriental traditions.

Although there are many variations of doctrine among the bewildering variety of Gnostic sects, certain key concepts distinguish Gnostic thought and are constant throughout the literature. The first and most important of these is a radical dualism — an alien and unknowable God is opposed to the universe created by a demiurge, a universe which emanated from God but in which he has no place.

A series of polarities are generated from this distinction between this God and the created world, the dualism between divine good and the evil of terrestrial existence, between the light of illumination (gnosis) and the darkness of ignorance, between spirit and matter. Gnosticism shares with other occult systems an apprehension of the world in terms of opposites.

At the centre of the Gnostic cosmos is the world, man's earthly abode, envisaged as a prison of the soul. The world is evil and is ruled by evil demons. This concept is not unique to Gnosticism: Plato's opposition of the world of illusion to the divine realm of ideas is similarly dualistic, as is the gospel of St. John with its powerful imagery of light and darkness. A tradition of Christian monastic thought similarly opposes the world of the senses to that of the spirit. Although Moreau's syncretism embraces elements of all these traditions, in his painting *The Chimaeras* he turned specifically to the Gnostic doctrines for both theme and narrative.

Its subject, the chimaeras, is an elaborate reworking of an earlier painting of 1867, *The Chimera*,⁶ from which starting point Moreau developed a complex, diagrammatic composition, filled with a confused mass of figures. The role of the chimaera's flight is reduced to a relatively minor motif. Moreau's commentary, too, expands the simple narrative of *The chimaera* into an elaborate account of seduction, perversity, destruction and, ultimately, salvation:

This island of fantastic dreams contains all the forms of passion, fantasy and caprice peculiar to woman.

Woman in her primary essence. The oblivious Being, mad about mystery and the unknown, enamoured of evil under the form of perverse and diabolical seduction.

Childish dreams, sensual dreams, monstrous dreams, melancholic dreams, dreams transporting spirit and soul into the wastes of space, into the mystery of darkness, all should feel

the influence of the seven deadly sins. All is to be found in this satanic precinct, in this circle of vices and guilty ardours. From the seed still apparently innocent to the monstrous and fatal flowers of the abyss.

Here are the processions of the accursed queens who are just leaving the serpent of bewitching sermons.

Here are beings in whom the soul has been abolished, waiting by the roadside for the passage of the lascivious goat mounted by lust which will be adored as it passes.

Lonely beings, brooding in their dream of envy. Their pride unappeased, in their brutish isolation. Women astride chimaeras who bear them away into space from where they fall back again bewildered by horror and dizziness. Sombre, terrible, deadly (fatal) chimaeras. Chimaeras of Space, of Waters, of Mystery, of Darkness and of Dreams.⁷

As in *The Daughters of Thestius*, Moreau again presents the women as devoid of thought and sensibility, and associates them with the vegetable and animal kingdoms — the women are "brutish" in their isolation, "monstrous and fatal flowers of the abyss". The integration of the women with the natural world is a consequence of Moreau's belief in a fundamentally dualistic universe and his identification of its female principle with matter. However Moreau has amplified this conception, creating a symbol of evil synonymous with essential nature of women. "Woman, in her primal essence, oblivious [here Moreau used the word 'inconscient' which also means unconscious, unknowing], mad on mystery and the unknown, enamoured of evil in the form of perverse and diabolical seduction..." Enclosed in this "satanic precinct", the women personify the influence of the seven deadly sins. But in thus depicting the women in a dream—like state of oblivion, Moreau departs radically from the Christian tradition in which sin must be accompanied by knowledge and will. Here there are no sinners, only beings totally, unconsciously, immersed in evil.

Moreau's commentary is validated by the images of the painting, in the hypnotic, trance-like women, their passivity reflected in the inertia of their poses. In this dream world, all action is doomed. Those who are deceived by their illusions, the women who mount and ride their chimaeras, allowing themselves to be carried up to the skies, are doomed to destruction. Bewildered and giddy, they will fall back again into oblivion and inertia.

Moreau used the word 'retomber' — to fall back again — as if to suggest an endlessly repeated cycle. Moreau's identification of the feminine with a natural world submerged in sensualism and materialism, his depiction of the somnambulant women, dreaming in an evil world, is so close to the major tenets of Gnosticism that there can be little doubt that this is its source.

In the Gnostic system, the earth, man's abode, is the lowest of the planetary spheres, the farthest removed from God and so most evil. Yet man had originally been created by God in his own image. Corrupted by the influence of the planetary spheres through which he falls in his descent to terrestrial life, man sinks into Nature, and loses consciousness of his divine origin. He is deprived of understanding, and in a widely used Gnostic metaphor, the soul slumbers in matter. Since the soul no longer knows God and has forgotten its divine origins, it is often described as ignorant and confused, and man's state on earth is known as the Oblivion.⁸

If sleep, ignorance, confusion and oblivion are the key terms in Gnostic accounts of the soul's earthly state, they are also key terms in Moreau's commentary. *The Chimaeras* conforms to the Gnostic conception of the world as both evil and illusory. Its setting is a Satanic precinct on an island of fantastic dreams where the women, unknowing or oblivious are under the influence of the seven deadly sins. The women succumb to torpor, somnambulance and trance, and to their desires, a conception parallel to the Gnostic sleep or oblivion in which the soul surrenders itself to the desires of the flesh, to its chimaeras. Gnosticism provides a context for Moreau's extraordinary dehumanisation and brutalisation of the women and their domination by evil and perversity.

The narrative of Moreau's painting also reflects Gnostic belief. In Gnostic teaching the soul has the potential to return to the divine sphere. Having descended from God, man retains as his spirit a spark of the divine substance which recalls him to his divine origins. This descent and ascension, this "journey of the soul", is the central event of Moreau's painting.

Moreau traces the descent of the soul in the processions of accursed queens who follow the progress of the lascivious goat in the centre of the painting. Here, too, wait the women who adore her as she passes. Moreau made lust the central image of evil, just as in the Gnostic texts lust was the major agent of the world's seduction. Mistrust of sexual love and of sensual pleasure in general was a widespread motif of Gnostic thought. Sensual love was seen

as the eminent form of man's enslavement by the world.⁹ In a Gnostic account accessible to Moreau, the *Poimandres* of Hermes Trismegistus,¹⁰ man, who had been formed in God's image, falls in love with his own divine reflection in nature and uniting with it, becomes one with the physical world. In the account of the soul's descent given in the *Poimandres*, love is at every stage of the descent of the soul the agent of man's destruction. Through love, man is enslaved by Nature, and with her embrace loses both power and immortality. Man is "conquered by love and sleep".¹¹

The *Poimandres* account of the descent of the soul is typically Gnostic in its feminisation of the world of nature, and in its use of the seduction of love as the principle agent of evil, and as the cause of the enslavement of man in the sleep of oblivion. The Gnostic embrace of nature is symbolised by Moreau in the central figure clasping the seven-headed chimaera, representing the seven deadly sins, and encapsulating the image of evil in all its forms.

In the Gnostic account of the soul's journey not all are not doomed to the endless cycle of terrestrial life, for even though the soul has lost its consciousness of its divine origin, it retains within itself the divine spark or spirit. Recalled to the consciousness of its lost origins by revelation or "the call from without", the soul begins its preparation for its ascent to the divine spheres. In Moreau's painting, the central figure holding a pilgrim's staff symbolises the commencement of the soul's journey. Awakened from the "slumber of matter" by a divine messenger, she holds a harp, the poet's attribute and symbol of the divine revelation of artistic creation. Other figures, small in scale and distant from the "island of fantastic dreams" make their way by mountain paths to the summits where Moreau placed the cross of Christ. These are the "bruised" and "bleeding figures" who in Moreau's commentary make "their way painfully towards the summits" until at last they "may even reach that redeeming cross standing humbly in the upper air".¹²

By placing a cross at the very apex of the steep and craggy slopes, Moreau Christianised the soul's ascent and referred to the ascetic tradition within Christianity. In the renunciation of the world implied by this journey from the realm of vice and seduction, and in the hardship and suffering of the journey itself, Moreau also takes up the Gnostic theme of redemption through the deprivation of the senses.

In Moreau's *Chimaeras*, Gnostic, Neo-Platonic and Christian beliefs are set in a framework of a cosmic dualism of good and evil, male and female, spirit and matter. The soul of man is imprisoned by materialism in a world imaged as sensual, evil and feminine. The narrative of the painting is that of the gnostic journey of the soul, its descent from and ascent to its divine origin.

Moreau's final statement on the condition of man and his salvation is contained in *Jupiter and Semele*. In this case, scholars have recognised Gnostic imagery in its polarity of light and darkness, and its theme of divine revelation.¹³ In a painting dense with symbols, Moreau used the Greek myth of Semele as the central theme of a work whose subject is universal redemption.

Semele, granted her desire to see Jupiter in his divine splendour, is consumed by the terror and beauty of the god and dies, and with her dies the "genius of earthly love". Through her death to earthly love and her impregnation with the divine spirit, Semele initiates a transformation of all earthly beings in divine illumination. In this painting woman is the instrument of ultimate redemption. Moreau's commentary reads in part:

Then under this incantation and sacred exorcism, everything transforms itself, purifies itself, idealises itself. Immortality begins, divinity spreads out in everything, and all of the unformed and malformed beings aspire to the true light — Satyrs, fauns, dryads, hamadryads, denizens of the waters and woods, all are touched, lost in joy, enthusiasm and love; breaking away from their earthly clay, they aspire (go to) the summits, climbing, climbing always

It is an ascension towards superior spheres ... all Nature is impregnated by the ideal and divinity — everything transforms itself.

It is a hymn to divinity.¹⁴

Moreau images the ascent towards the heavenly spheres as a progression from darkness to light, from the darkness and sleep of materialism to the blinding light of illumination. He recognises "fragments of Christianity" in "this death of the senses, this destruction of the material being in order to enter into immortal life". Moreau's syncretism is fully evident in this *summa theologica* of his beliefs. Within a Gnostic framework, a melange of ancient religions with Christianity makes this painting a

fitting crucible in which the diverse influences from many cultures and religions are sublimated and resolved.

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REFERENCES

- 1 See P. Mathieu, *L'Assembleur de rêves. Ecrits complets de Gustave Moreau*, (Fontfroide, 1984), p.184 and J. Kaplan, *The Art of Gustave Moreau : Theory, Style and Content*, (Michigan: UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor, 1982), p. 12.
- 2 All three works are held in the Musée Gustave Moreau in Paris.
- 3 See L. Grace Ellem, 'Alchemical Allegory in Gustave Moreau's *The Daughters of Thestius*' in *Australian Journal of Art*, Vol. VII, 1988, pp 70 - 96.
- 4 From Moreau's major commentary on this painting, quoted in *op. cit.*, p. 74.
- 5 See Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, 2nd Rev. Ed., Boston, 1963 (1952). The summary of Gnostic belief given in this paper is largely drawn from this text.
- 6 Held in the Daniel Wildenstein Collection. A variant is held in the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- 7 Moreau's major commentary on this painting, here quoted in part only, is found in Mathieu, *op.cit.*, pp. 99- 101, and in translation in P. Mathieu *Gustave Moreau : with a catalogue of the finished paintings, watercolours and drawings*, (Boston: New York Graphic Society, Mass., 1976), p. 159. This translation is based on the latter with some changes made towards a more literal rendering of the text. This commentary was written in 1897, and like the other commentaries quoted in this paper, comes near the end of Moreau's life.
- 8 See Jonas, *op.cit.*, pp. 62 - 65 and pp. 68 - 71.
- 9 *ibid.* p. 72.
- 10 Louis Ménard, *Hermès Trismegistus: Traduction complète précédée d'une étude sur l'origine des livres hermétiques*, (Paris, 1879), facsimile reprint.
- 11 See Jonas, *op. cit.*, pp. 150-151.
- 12 For Moreau's commentary see n. 7 above.
- 13 Notably Gert Schiff and Julius Kaplan. See Kaplan, *op.cit.*, pp. 86-7.
- 14 *ibid.*, pp. 84-5.