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Article abstract

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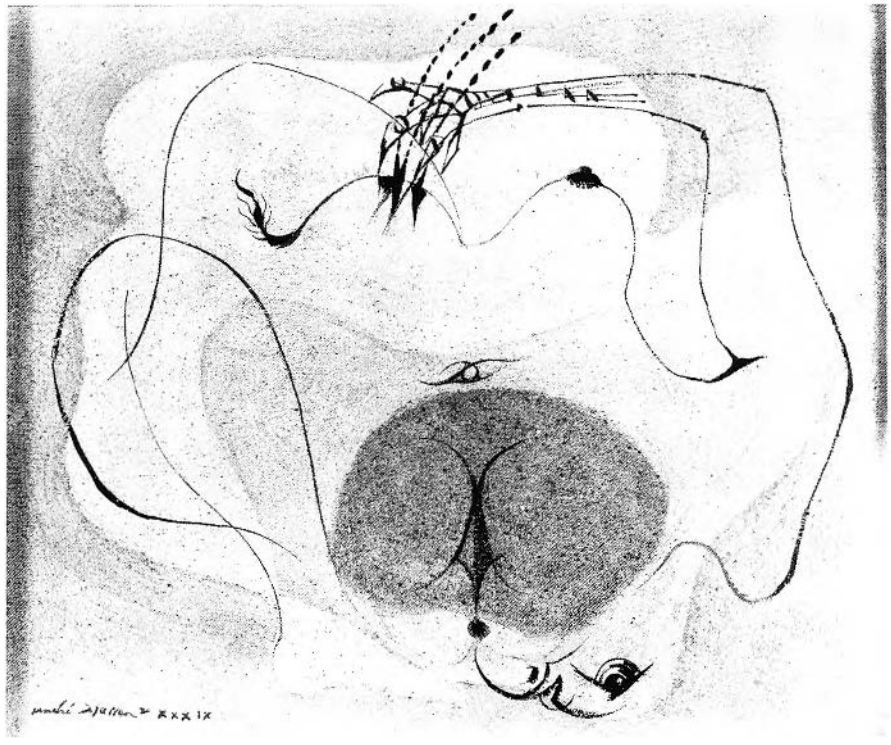

FIGURE 28. André Masson, *The Earth* (1939). Sand and oil on wood, 43.2 × 53 cm. Musée national d'art moderne, Centre national d'art et de culture Georges Pompidou, Paris (AM M318 P. © Vis-Art Copyright Inc., 1988).

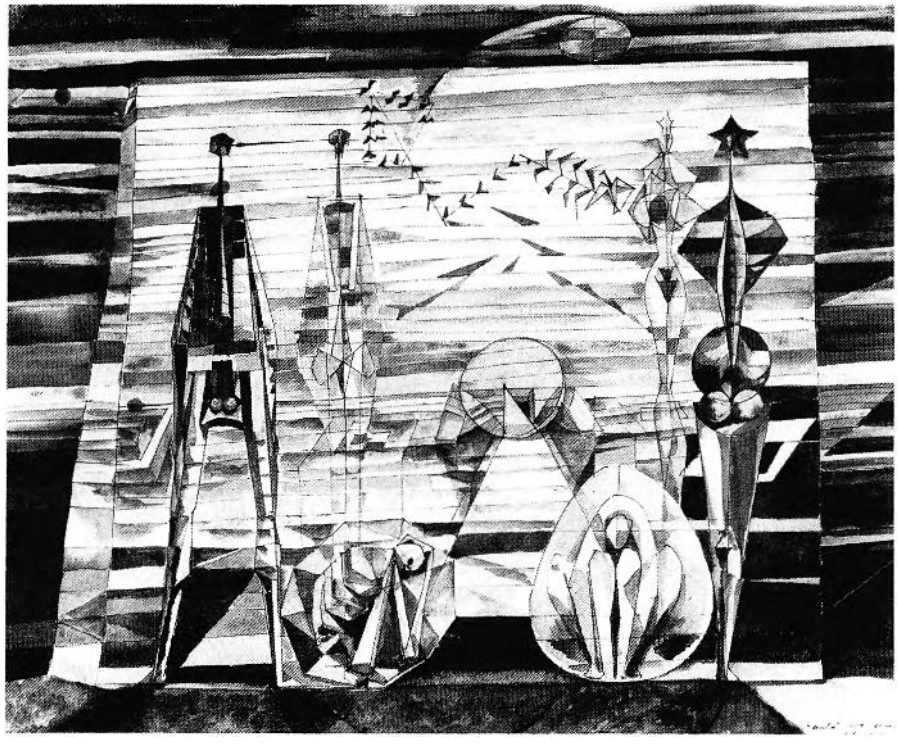

FIGURE 29. André Masson, *The Metaphysical Wall* (1940). Watercolour, 47 × 60.5 cm. The Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore (Bequest of Saidie A. May, 51.331. © Vis-Art Copyright Inc., 1988).

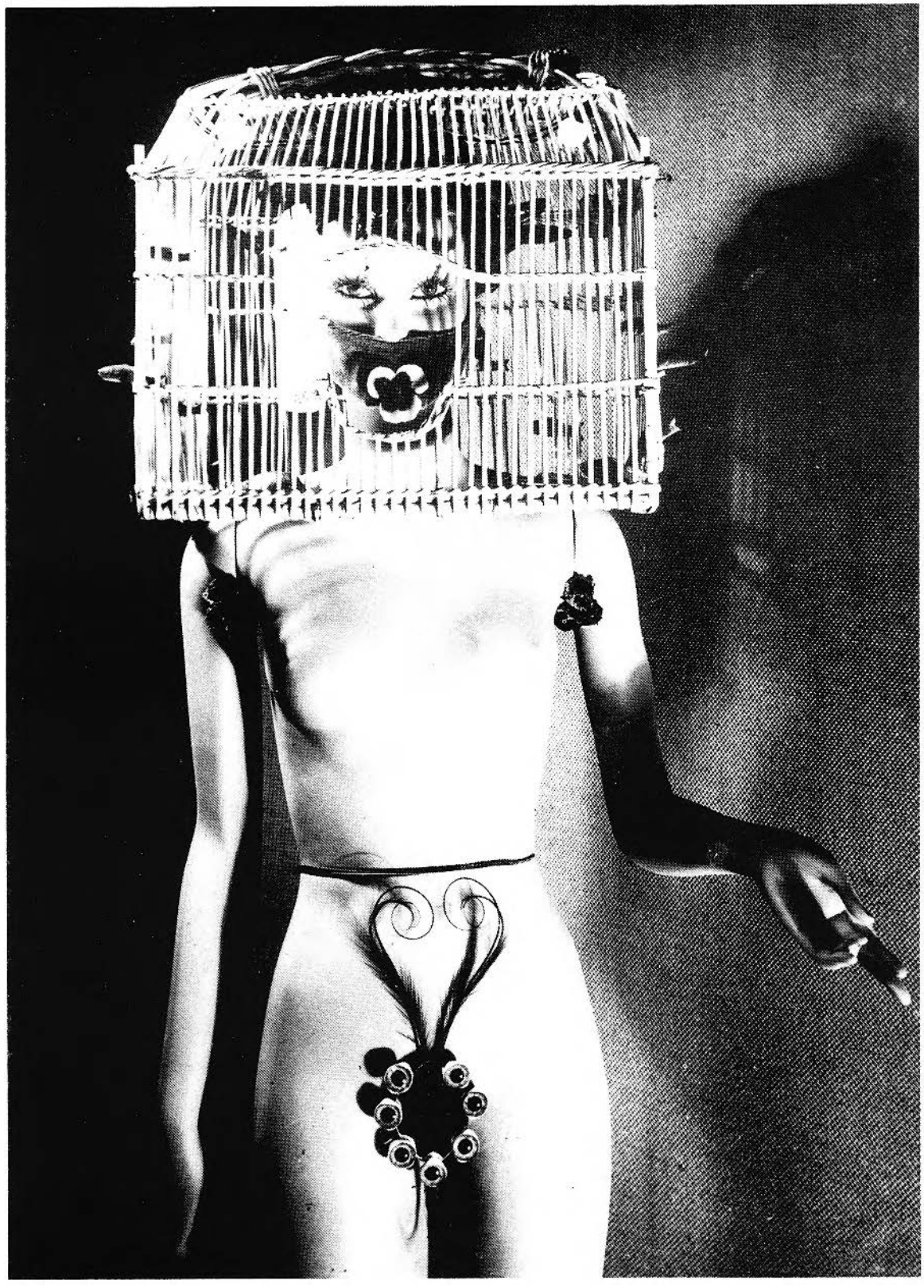

FIGURE 30. André Masson, *Le Bâillon vert à bouche de pensée* (1938). Mannekin and objects, destroyed. Exposition internationale du surréalisme, Galerie des Beaux-arts, Paris, 1938 (Photo: Galerie Louise Leiris, Paris. © Vis-Art Copyright Inc., 1988).

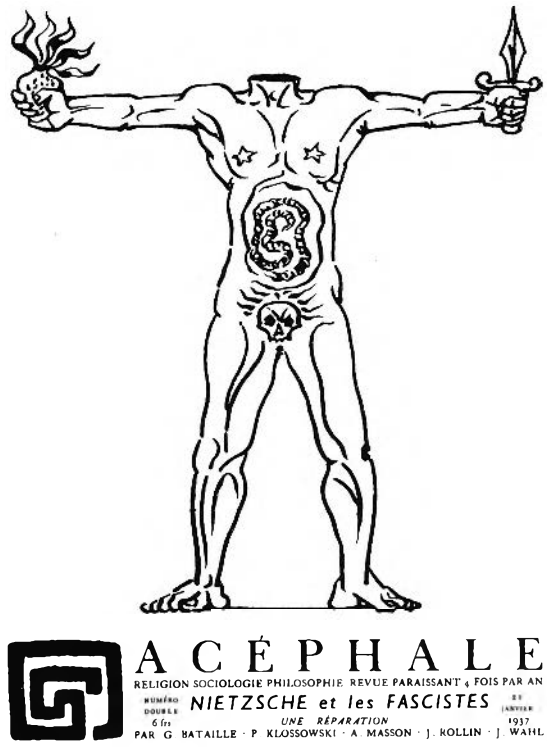

FIGURE 31. André Masson, cover of *Acéphale* (21 January 1937) (Photo: Louise Leiris, Paris. © Vis-Art Copyright Inc., 1988).

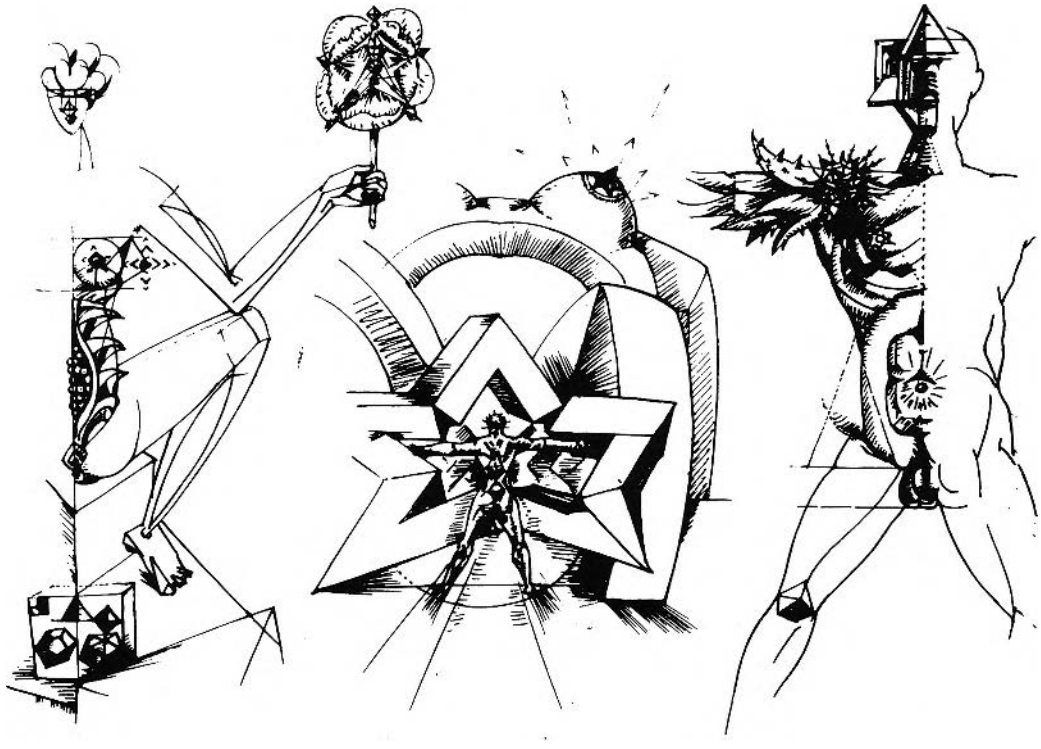

FIGURE 32. André Masson, *Number Five* (1938). Ink, 47.5 × 62 cm. From *Anatomy of My Universe* (New York, 1943) (Photo: Galerie Louise Leiris, Paris. © Vis-Art Copyright Inc., 1988).

André Masson's Earth-Mothers in Their Cultural Context

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In memoriam John Henry Belton

RÉSUMÉ

L'image mythologique présentée dans l'art surréaliste a fait l'objet de nombreuses publications. L'une d'elles, *Myth in Surrealist Painting, 1929-1939*, de Whitney Chadwick, consacre toutefois autant de temps à l'analyse de mythes inventés de toutes pièces qu'au récit « sacré » tributaire de la tradition. Les sources mythiques véritables d'André Masson s'en trouvent pour autant occultées. Cet article s'emploie à récupérer une partie des significations originelles conçues par Masson, en prêtant une attention particulière à un certain type d'image féminine : la figure nue acéphale, couchée et exhibant ses organes génitaux. Cette image plonge ses racines dans le milieu intellectuel extrêmement évolué de Masson, qu'on se réfère à des notions telles que le *Mutterrecht* de Bachofen, aux études de l'ami de Masson, Georges Bataille, ou encore aux ouvrages de Frazer et Freud. Le projet de Masson était de réinventer les mythes de la femme qui préside tout à la fois à la naissance et à la voie de ce qu'on pourrait appeler une théologie féministe. Mais ces images comportent aussi sa face cachée car Masson a puisé une partie de son inspiration dans des mythes soumis à l'interprétation de la psychanalyse freudienne qui implique en général une certaine dévalorisation du principe féminin. Il subsiste donc dans son oeuvre une trace de l'ambivalence qu'il n'a pas manqué de ressentir dans sa démarche vers une « psychologie matriarcale » au sein d'un système profondément patriarcal.

In 1937, André Breton called for an elaboration of the "collective myth belonging to our period." Five years later, Max Ernst described himself as having been, at the end of the Great War, "a young man aspiring to become a magician and to find the myth of his time."[1] Clearly, neither the leader of the Surrealist movement nor the artist who remained its most innovative exponent meant to examine myth as a straightforward ethnological phenomenon. They both singled out for attention the potential significance of primitive and ancient mythologies for their contemporaries. In practice, both men advocated a return to what they saw as a simpler form of life, one which could be lived within Western civilization but did not have its repressive effects on primal urges.

The Surrealists' profound interest in the arts and myths of primitive cultures was a symptom of their desire to isolate these urges. Moreover, their interest in the arts of children and the mentally disturbed were reflections of contemporary scientific interest in comparing so-called savage states of mind and those that Western society deemed abnormal or immature. For these scientists, the child, the primitive and the insane were regressive in that they reverted to chronologically earlier or less adapted patterns of behaviour and feeling. For the Surrealist, on the other hand, "less adapted" would in fact mean less repressed, less inhibited by what was perceived as the constraints of bourgeois morality and the like. In rummaging around in the myths of presumably less-adapted societies, the Surrealists hoped to establish a new mythology expressive of their own dilemma. They wanted to be able to respond to their primal urges without restrictions; they wanted to live their lives according to the pleasure principle, or as Breton put it, "to live out the most beautiful poem in the world."[2]

The bulk of Surrealist myth research took place in the 1930s, a decade that had opened with the

1 André Breton, "Limites non frontières du surréalisme," *Nouvelle revue française* (1 February 1937); Max Ernst, *Beyond Painting*, ed. R. Motherwell (New York, 1948), 29.

2 André Breton, *Le surréalisme et la peinture*, nouvelle éd. (Paris, 1965), 14.

publication of *L'Immaculée Conception*, a volume of poetic exercises by Breton and Paul Eluard simulating mental disorders. This was less an exercise in style than an attempt to discover the "Points of Agreement between the Lives of Savages and Neurotics," as the subtitle to Freud's *Totem and Taboo* had put it.[3] Known since its first French translation of 1924, Freud's study also offered psychoanalytical interpretations of various mythic structures, most of which were derived from James George Frazer's mammoth *The Golden Bough*.[4] Freud's explanations were of great interest to the Surrealists, who while repudiating attempts to psychoanalyse their own work at every opportunity,[5] nonetheless subscribed to certain Freudian notions, such as his characterization of art as the only human endeavour that could bypass the intellect to manifest an approximate accomplishment of a person's desires. This process, which he called "the omnipotence of thought,"[6] also explained most occult phenomena, such as clairvoyance, as the intersection of the contents of the unconscious and those of the outside world. The contents of the outside world function as triggers, bringing to consciousness forgotten or repressed information. The Surrealists called this process objective chance, the expectation and interpretation of signs, or simply magic art, and they preferred to retain the aura, if not the objective fact, of the occult.[7]

Most writers on the subject have acknowledged this element of pseudo-supernatural intervention, but few have fully examined how the whole process helps to reveal the character of the images that some Surrealists appropriated from the myths discussed by Frazer and Freud. For example, Evan Maurer remarks that André Masson's painting *The Earth* (1939, Fig. 28) "evokes the underlying idea of a woman as an embodiment of the earth itself, a concept frequently found in Primitive beliefs." He gives several examples drawn from Frazer, noting simply that is was Masson's favourite source of myths. Whitney Chadwick does not go much further when she notes that the same painting expresses "the female's double nature, simultaneously nourishing mother and harbinger of death."[8] What both writers fail to observe is that the image, drawn from a less-adapted or supposedly purer stage in human development, was a statement of contemporary significance. It speaks less of the eternal feminine than of the historical condition of women in Masson's era.

It is tempting to say that *The Earth* is a very positive, even proto-feminist image, for it seems to dispense with Western religion in favour of a return to a primeval mother-goddess. Readers of current feminist theology would no doubt agree. Carol P. Christ, for example, believes that the reintroduction of the goddess is necessary and even revolutionary because it legitimizes characteristically female powers and validates women's experiences. Furthermore, it fosters humankind's acceptance of its rootedness in nature and its mortality, both formerly suppressed by patriarchal society.[9] In this sense, Masson's painting seems a straightforward illustration of the goddess as a new/old centre of the universe. The painter even foresaw Christ's feminist theology in adhering scrupulously to long-established conventions of representation: the goddess has no face or feet; unclothed and large-breasted, she lactates and exposes her genitals. Even the technique of the painting—sand mixed into the oil medium—assists in the identification of the subject with the soil, around which spins the rest of the cosmos. She *is* the landscape, and in her all creatures live and move and find their being.

But of course, Masson could not foresee the future, and this irreducible fact has led most researchers to dwell on his reading of *Das Mutterrecht*, a thesis on matrilineal societies by Johann Jakob Bachofen published in 1861. For example, Chadwick writes: "Bachofen's description of a social organization based on the principles of equality, respect for human life and the power of love, advanced one alternative to the deeply entrenched patriarchal social and political order which had shaped the Surrealist revolt."[10] Masson might even be said to have confirmed this reading, for he enthusiastically declared that he was matriarchal.[11] But if Masson thoroughly accepted all that Bachofen had written, then he must surely have agreed

3 This is the subtitle to the English edition of Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, trans. J. Strachey (New York, 1950). The edition known to the Surrealists was *Totem et tabou: interprétation par la psychanalyse de la vie sociale des peuples primitifs*, trans. S. Jankélévitch (Paris, 1924).

4 The first edition of Frazer's work was in two volumes (1890); the second was in three (1900); the third was expanded to twelve (1911-15).

5 Masson, for example, maintained that "the first thing the Surrealists should have detested was psychoanalysis." See Deborah Rosenthal, "Interview with André Masson," *Arts Magazine*, IV, 3 (November 1980), 93.

6 Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 90.

7 See José Pierre, "Du surréalisme comme art magique," *Si e no*, I, 4 (March 1975), 3-25.

8 Evan Maurer, "Dada and Surrealism," in *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art*, ed. William Rubin (New York, 1984), II, 551, 549; Whitney Chadwick, *Myth in Surrealist Painting, 1929-1939* (Ann Arbor, 1980), 32.

9 Carol P. Christ, "Symbols of Goddess and God in Feminist Theology," in *The Book of the Goddess, Past and Present*, ed. Carl Olson (New York, 1983), 248-50.

10 Chadwick, *Myth*, 33-34.

11 See Jean-Paul Clébert, *Mythologie d'André Masson* (Geneva, 1971), 38.

that every woman's womb is "the mortal image of the earth-mother Demeter" and that "this religious primacy of motherhood leads to a primacy of the mortal woman."[12]

In fact, this attitude is far closer to that of the "patriarchal . . . order which had shaped the Surrealist revolt" than it is to that of any thinking woman with a revolutionary bent. For example, the First World War had established a need for repopulation in France, which led to repressive laws against abortion and contraception and general attitudes disparaging single women. Begun in 1919, this pronatalist campaign culminated in the very year Masson painted *The Earth*: a decree-law of 29 July 1939 offered a variety of financial inducements to women who fulfilled their maternal role.[13]

Masson wrote a letter to Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler in December of that year that corroborates this impression: "I am delighted with the continuation of my reading of the work of George Meredith, which I began in 1932. This delight comes in part from Meredith's confirmation of ideas I hold dear: the identity of woman and Nature, for example."[14] Anyone familiar with Meredith's works will know that Masson was concentrating only on the themes of the English writer's nature-poems, for his novels made significant strides in the portrayal of the emancipated women of the previous century.[15] Given that such enfranchisement is a cultural phenomenon, Masson's assertion that women are part and parcel of Nature is quite reactionary. Masson's painting is explicit only about woman as fertile, reproductive Nature, and as such it is implicitly intertwined with the ideology of patriarchy. The primary significance of the mother-goddess, after all, is that she is capable of endless reproduction, whereas the most outspoken French feminists were almost universally in favour of the right to female bachelorhood, free access to contraception, and abortion on demand.[16]

The revolutionary intentions of such art were seriously compromised by this unintentional instance of Masson's culturally determined "omnipotence of thought." The repressed contents of his unconscious were not mystical or psychological abstractions, but reflections in part of the deeply ambiguous disposition of his society to the role of women. The way in which this was manifested, in keeping with "objective chance," was stumbled upon in mythological researches. For example, in 1938, Masson made a drawing later used in the prologue of his 1943 publication, *Anatomy of My Universe*.[17] There, among other things, we find another reclining mother-goddess. She is the source of life and death, as symbolized by two fetal forms at the lower left, one healthy and the other skeletal. Above the goddess is a stylized bird that flies, via tiny repetitions of its form, into the heavens from right to left. Its trajectory forms a configuration not unlike a constellation. Slightly to the right, the sun whirls furiously. The other elements of the drawing were of less lasting interest, for the artist dropped them from a very similar watercolour, *The Metaphysical Wall* (1940, Fig. 29).

The source of the iconography of both images was Frazer's *Golden Bough*, of which the third volume, *The Dying God*, had inspired Masson's suite of etchings entitled *Sacrifices*, published along with a text by his close associate Georges Bataille in December 1936. Frazer sought in this volume to discover why so many cultures had practised the violent sacrifices of a man-god or his mortal representative, the king. He concluded that the action was intended to allay the fear that "with the enfeeblement of his body in sickness or old age, [the man-god's] sacred spirit should suffer a corresponding decay, which might imperil the general course of nature and with it the existence of his worshippers," and "to arrest the forces of decomposition in nature by retrenching with ruthless hand the first ominous symptoms of decay."[18] The plates in Masson's *Sacrifices* are straightforward illustrations of various dying gods and need no further discussion in this context. But certain aspects of Frazer's thesis reappear in the prologue drawing and in *The Metaphysical Wall*. Both pictures associate an image of death with a male figure. The implication is that the male must die in order to ensure the fertility of the female, just as in Frazer's stories of dying gods.

The flight of the stylized bird echoes this association, for it is the Phoenix. Not merely a bird that is cremated and reborn, the Phoenix had appeared in Frazer's books as an embodiment of the sacred king who had to be immolated to set the

12 Johann Jakob Bachofen, *Myth, Religion and Mother Right: Selected Writings*, trans. R. Manheim (Princeton, 1967), 80-87.

13 A. Sauvy, *Histoire économique de la France entre les deux guerres* (Paris, 1972), 386-88.

14 Reprinted in its entirety in Masson's *Le rebelle du surréalisme: écrits*, ed. F. Will-Levaillant (Paris, 1976), 260-61.

15 Masson seems not to have been aware of this interpretation, common among French critics. See René Galland, *George Meredith: Les 50 premières années (1828-1878)* (Paris, 1923), 344-57, 389.

16 For texts contemporary with Masson, see the excellent anthology *Le grief des femmes*, ed. M. Albistur and D. Armogathe (Poitiers, 1978), II, 174-200.

17 A more accessible reproduction is in William Rubin and Carolyn Lanchner, *André Masson* (New York, 1976), 138.

18 James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, III: *The Dying God* (New York, 1935), v-vi. Masson confirmed his interest in Frazer in Clébert, *Mythologie*, 38.

fertility magic into motion. After cremation, the Phoenix would rise to heaven in the form of the morning star, related in almost all mythic traditions to the phallic principle that achieves union with the mother-goddess.[19] Masson may not have known that in Western traditions this morning light is known as the light-bringer, Lucifer. Nevertheless, the structural elements of the tale appear in various guises in both Frazer's and Masson's works, so it serves as an interesting model. Lucifer's role was to announce the coming of the sun, the solar god whom we see leaping from the top of *The Metaphysical Wall* like a "thinking eye," as Masson wrote.[20] Lucifer is thus subordinate to the solar god, Yahweh. The light-bringer, despite his lower status, coveted the superior glory of the solar god, the father, and sought the sexual favours of the earth-goddess, the mother. Christian church fathers explained Lucifer's desires as the sin of *hubris*, a word usually translated as *pride* but actually meaning *sexual passion*.[21]

Freud held that the stories Frazer presented spoke of issues that ran deep in the mind and were not simply tales of supernatural beings with few roots in human behaviour. The sex act itself had long been known as the primary means of activating fertility magic in many primitive societies, and Freud sought to explain Frazer's dying gods with reference to such sexual passion. In *Totem and Taboo*, he proposed the existence of a primal horde, ruled by a tyrannical father-figure, as the source of the myth of the dying god. In this group, said Freud, the subordinate males became jealous of the ruler's right to exclusive sexual activity with all the females in the horde. The males eventually revolted, killing their ruler and taking his wives. The recurrent sacrifice of the sacred king was thus not merely the fertility magic of Frazer; it was the mythic prototype of the Oedipus complex: every son desired to kill his own father and marry his own mother. The Phoenix's intermittent life is due in part to the guilt which patricide entails. He had to be short-lived to prevent excessive enjoyment of the privileges of the previously sacrificed sacred king.[22]

Moreover, the image of the short-lived dying god is itself an outgrowth of copulation at the source of fertility magic. Sexual reproduction necessarily involves male detumescence or loss of erection. The male who sees himself chiefly as an embodiment of the phallic principle (in the same way that some people saw individual women primarily as walking wombs) cannot help but think of this physiological function as a loss, a defeat, a "little death" as Georges Bataille would put it.[23] Desire of the mother-goddess thus signifies both the life of the one to come and one's own death. This is why nearly all myths in which men enter the mother-goddess to explore the underworld were understood as metaphors of the little death or loss of reason presumed to be the result of male orgasm. It is essential to recall that Freudianism, thoroughly colouring the mythography of the 1930s, thus succeeded in bleeding the primordial goddess of nearly all her original religious significance. She who was once the centre of religious life had become a bit player in the tragicomedy of male psychology. Thus, the apparent balance of female and male principles in *The Metaphysical Wall* is an illusion.

Another interesting example of the influence of cultural fashion on Masson was an essay published by Bataille in *Documents* in 1930. Ostensibly a short description of the chief characteristics of the Hindu goddess Kali, Bataille's paper explained only her fearsome aspect as the devourer of souls. Kali is in fact also the same beneficent goddess who appears in most other matriarchal traditions, but she was reduced to an illustration of the sexual expectations of psychoanalytical fashion. The source of the reduction was a paper on Kali and castration anxiety by an English writer, Claude Daly.[24] In 1938, Masson was invited to contribute a decorated mannekin to an international Surrealist exposition. His work, entitled *Le Bâillon vert à bouche de pensée* (Fig. 30), was a classic example of redundancy, the repetition of the same message in different codes, so that the message cannot be mistaken. The figure's genitals were surrounded by tiger-eyes, like the severed heads strung around the neck of the sexual devourer Kali, and at her feet were little traps closed on phallic peppers that progressively lost their phallic rigidity, much to the artist's delight.[25] At the mouth of the figure was a pansy, in which the artist had discerned the forms of a copulating couple. (Drawings and captions on a page from a contemporary sketchbook show that the "heart of a pansy"—that is, a veiled sexual embrace—was an equivalent of an "erotic temple.")[26]

19 Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, abridged edition (New York, 1922), 328, 332-33.

20 André Masson, *Anatomy of My Universe*, trans. M. Schapiro (New York, 1943), n.p., final paragraph.

21 Stephen Potter and Laurens Sargent, *Pedigree* (New York, 1974), 176.

22 Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 152-53.

23 "The College of Sociology," in his *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. A. Stoekl (Minneapolis, 1985), 251.

24 Bataille's paper, "Kâlî," is reprinted in his *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. M. Foucault (Paris, 1970), 1, 243-44. Claude Daly's paper was "Hindu-Mythologie und Kastrationskomplex," trans. P. Mendelssohn, *Imago*, 13 (1927), 145-98.

25 See Clébert, *Mythologie*, 61.

26 Reproduced in Rubin and Lanchner, 45.

While the body of the goddess in *The Metaphysical Wall* loosely took on the quasi-architectural character of the erotic temple, the mannekin explicitly condensed the original mythic significance of the erotic temple with elements of a Freudian reading of the promiscuous rites that took place there. In other words, the mannekin is like Kali, yet another manifestation of the castrating woman. The pansy in her mouth, because it connotes sexual intercourse, equates her mouth with her vagina, ensuring that the viewer reads it as a vagina dentata. This toothed orifice predated Freud as the mouth of Hell in religious custom, but he made it an explicit source of castration anxiety. The Surrealist circle was thoroughly familiar with the concept. Max Ernst, for example, once told his son Jimmy: "All women have vaginas, but only in a few of them are they properly connected to their heads."[27] More pertinently, Man Ray's *L'Etoile de Mer*, a film of 1928 based on a poem by Robert Desnos, begins with the lines: "Women's teeth are objects so charming . . . that one ought to see them only in dreams or in the instant of love." The woman used to illustrate the point later appears as a shallow reflection of the formerly all-powerful vegetation goddess Cybèle (a pun on the words *Si belle*). Her priests had annually castrated themselves to revive the sacrificial magic of Attis, familiar to Frazer's readers as another version of the Phoenix-like son *and* lover. The goddess is simultaneously desirable and threatening, a description equally applicable to Masson's mannekin. The bird cage around her head, a threatening reference to the Phoenix, the Oedipal son who coveted his mother, indicates the walls of the erotic temple. More emblematic still is a drawing from *Mythologie de la nature* (1939), in which a male figure enters the earth-mother's labyrinthine temple through a genital gate that bristles with spikes.[28]

The original mystic meaning of the labyrinth was a journey into the otherworld and out again, in part a metaphor of sexual intercourse, like the sacred king's cyclic journeys into death and rebirth.[29] For Masson, Bataille, and their colleagues gathered around the review *Acéphale*, the labyrinth became a specifically male "rallying cry" to a new cult of dionysian excess.[30] The figure of the headless god contained the labyrinth within itself (Fig. 31), indicating both that the descent into a little death was considered an exploration of the irrational component of the personality and that the netherworld, formerly the exclusive province of the female principle, had been appropriated—literally ingested—by the male. In 1929 or 1930, Bataille had described the act of appropriation of that which is "other" (that is, the female) as part of the processes leading to the determination of the sacred in everyday life.[31] Almost all of the Surrealists held women to be somehow above normal humankind, but if Acéphale's appropriation of the sacred labyrinth is any example, then the Surrealist mythicization of women was predicated on the fallacy that women had no autonomous identity. Even Masson's *least* Freudian mother-goddess, based on medieval hermetic traditions, reveals the same prejudice when examined according to the principle of the "omnipotence of thought."

In 1938, Masson was inspired by cabalistic and numerological writings to make a drawing entitled *Number Five* (Fig. 32) for his *Anatomy of My Universe*. In the accompanying text, the artist observed simply that the science of numbers raises the mind to great heights, and most critics are inclined to leave it at that in the presumption that allusions to such elevating occult traditions are beyond examination.[32] What they fail to note is the contradiction in Masson's drawing, which only becomes clear when one acknowledges the Cabala's basic premise: all the world's ills stem from God's loss of contact with his female counterpart, the Shekhinah. It is essential to bring together the male and female cosmic principles, whether by sexual magic, reflecting the orgiastic fertility rituals of earlier societies, or psurely through symbols. The graphic sign of this mystic conjunction of equal male and female principles was the hexagram, the intersection of two identical triangles, the female's pointing downwards, the male's upwards. The sign is familiar to us now as the Star of David or Solomon's Seal, but it predated our traditions by centuries, first appearing in the context of Tantric Hinduism. Having spread all over Europe, the device can even be found at the centre of some labyrinths in Christian cathedrals, reiterating the ceremonial significance of the maze as sexual congress.[33] Now Masson's *Number Five* is quite clearly an image of sexual congress: the male representative of the dying god enters into the mother-

27 Quoted in Jimmy Ernst, *A Not-so-still Life: A Memoir* (New York, 1984), 91.

28 Reproduced in Chadwick, *Myth*, fig. 98.

29 Dorothy Norman, *The Hero* (New York, 1969), 107-8.

30 See Masson's "Le soc de la charrue," in *Le rebelle*, 72, and Bataille's "Le labyrinthe," in *Visions*, 171-77.

31 See his "Use Value of D. A. F. de Sade (An Open Letter to My Current Comrades)," in *Visions*, 91-102.

32 The text accompanies the third plate of chapter one. An example of the critical failure mentioned in the text is Rubin and Lanchner, 155-57.

33 Herbert Silberer, *Hidden Symbolism of Alchemy and the Occult Arts* (New York, 1971), 197; Elizabeth Pepper and John Wilcock, *Magical and Mystical Sites* (New York, 1977), 159.

goddess. Her headless body is once again a quasi-architectural structure, in this case with a gate made of great blocks forming a pentacle or pentagram. Masson's use of the five-pointed star instead of the proper hexagram is revealing, for the pentacle's original significance was exclusively female. It was originally the symbol of the Holy Virgin aspect of the earth-goddess Demeter, familiar to Masson as the central goddess in Bachofen's *Das Mutterrecht*. In Greece, this virginal aspect was known as Kore, and variations such as Ceres, Ker, Cara, Kauri, and even Kali can be found elsewhere. Kore the virgin was thought to be hidden in the heart of mother earth, just as her pentagonal symbol is hidden in the heart of an apple. The tradition of slicing an apple transversely to reveal the goddess, still practised by gypsies,[34] was an attempt to unveil her sacred heart or her star of knowledge. Quite clearly, this led to the Judaeo-Christian forbidden fruit on the one hand and to the Cabalist's thirst for knowledge on the other.

Masson, like the Cabalist, seeks the knowledge of the goddess, but he can only envisage achieving it through dionysian or "acephalic" appropriation. The rationale for this appropriation was occult number theory: it was reasoned that five was composed by two and three, the first even and odd numbers after the one of godhead. This in turn grew out of the hermetic tradition that lionized Hermes, the god who joined with his female counterpart Aphrodite to form the primal androgyne or Hermaphrodite.[35] The number five and the pentacle were thus altered in significance from the purely female to the androgynous, the sexually coupled. Why had occult traditions thus created a new code for a message already clear in the hexagram? It was because the standing male figure, as in Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man*, the Neoplatonists' *Pentamorph*, and Masson's *Acéphale* and *Number Five*, could be inscribed within the five-pointed star. In 1929, Masson's friend Michel Leiris had written about the hermetic concept of the man of the microcosm or "small world," as he put it:

> that is to say, man in his relations with the macrocosm or big world, that is to say the universe . . . man inscribed in a five-pointed star . . . as opposed to the six-pointed star . . . which is the sign of the Macrocosm.[36]

Leiris, then a dissident Surrealist like Masson and Bataille, nevertheless had based himself on a writer very dear to Breton, Cornelius Agrippa, whose original occult texts bury the role of the originally all-powerful goddess, just as Freud would do. The microcosm is man alone, and the occultist tries to unravel his relations not with women but with the androgynous macrocosm. In other words, there is no room for an autonomous female element; moreover, it is a male that now replaces the goddess at the centre of the universe. Woman appears only as an inseparable component of the sexually coupled macrocosm wheeling about man.

Masson's picture and text confirm this reading: the drawing shows roughly half a woman's body, the vegetation of which puns on yet another exposed vagina dentata. Although she is placed to balance a similar male component, she also holds a pansy, which has lost its significance as the erotic temple and the equal sexual union that took place there. It is now merely a repetition of the man of the microcosm. Like Acéphale, this man has not *accepted* the omnipotent goddess as much as he has *ingested* or appropriated her. There is thus an unwitting patriarchal corruption in the works that critics of Masson have called the most matriarchal.

The presumed elevation of the goddess, which Carol Christ has seen as desirable for women in our decade, was something of a fiction in the hands of Masson, whose earth-goddesses seem to offer two alternatives to women. The first is to fall in with the pro-natalist policies of the state, to become a mortal representation of the goddess, and to reproduce. The second is to forego this responsibility and to use their sexual identities not for their own benefit but for that of men. Interestingly, this pair of equally undesirable alternatives differs very little from the state of affairs *lamented* by the feminists of 1918:

> The rights of women increase. But what is their great duty: to give birth, to give birth again, always to give birth . . . . Should a woman refuse to give birth she no longer deserves her rights. The price of woman is the child. Childless by choice, she falls to the rank of the prostitute, obscene playthings, instead of remaining the venerable matrix of all the future centuries.[37]

Masson fully believed that erotic temples of the past were places of sacred prostitution, and his closest friends were not infrequent visitors to the contemporary brothels of Paris.[38] As a member of the Surrealist group, he was committed to a life lived according to the pleasure principle. This life, like that of a child, the insane, or the presumed savage, was best pursued outside the restrictions of

34 Pierre Derlon, *Secrets of the Gypsies* (New York, 1977), 157.
35 Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (New York, 1955), 1, 73.
36 Michel Leiris, "Notes sur deux figures microcosmiques des XIV^e^ et XV^e^ siècles," *Documents*, 1 (April 1929), 48, 51.
37 A neo-Malthusian text written by F. A. Doloris and J. Bouscatel, this is quoted in Mathilde Dubesset et al., "Les munitionettes de la Seine," in *1914-1919: L'autre front*, ed. Patrick Fridenson (Paris, 1977), 208.
38 On his awareness of the sacred harlot, see his *La mémoire du monde* (Geneva, 1974), 19-23. On his friends' patronage of the brothel, see Michel Leiris, "De Bataille l'impossible à l'impossible *Documents*," in his *Brisées* (Paris, 1966), 256-66.

adult responsibility and bourgeois morality. Masson understood the sexual urge as structurally akin to hunger: neither drive could be satisfied in dream.[39] Sexual arousal, therefore, had to be dealt with by recourse to the sexually emancipated woman, a cultural entity that was much rarer in fact than the Surrealists had hoped.[40] Moreover, the decades between the wars saw France struggling to maintain the *status quo* in the relations between the sexes, in which free-loving women were automatically considered prostitutes. Since public concern for the welfare of prostitutes was limited to the question of preserving male health,[41] it is not surprising that death and life, attributes of the goddess, were condensed with sexual subordination and the primacy of male release, attributes of the whore.

What then was the new myth promulgated here? It was that woman's *natural* identity was to serve men in repopulating France and that her *cultural* identity was to enable men to gain sexual access to a spiritual knowledge that was presumed to be asexual. This patriarchal conceit was obscured by a regressive primitivism that was thought to be revolutionary. Nevertheless, the principle of the "omnipotence of thought" holds that art bypasses the intellect to manifest an accomplishment of desires. Masson's earth-goddess is therefore not that far from the whore at the right of Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907), both in pose and in function. She is essentially an implement for dionysian self-expression and she carries the risk of death.[42]

As a Surrealist, Masson fully believed that he was participating in a drive towards artistic and social emancipation. But where the former purpose may have been adequately served, the latter was not. If Surrealism can be thought of as a means to reveal hidden features of the mind in order to change the world, then it failed to recognize the hidden implications of its own imagery: women were still subordinate to men and to their self-serving calls for sexual liberation. With cultural values like these so thoroughly entrenched in 1939, it is no wonder that contemporary French women still had not earned the right to vote, the first step to the real social emancipation that Surrealism ignored.

39 Masson, *Anatomy*, n.p., prologue.

40 Masson was one of the thirty-two signatories of "Hands Off Love," a collective text ridiculing the bourgeois values revealed in the divorce proceedings of Charles Chaplin. The basic thrust of the declaration was that men should be allowed to pursue love free from the need to reproduce. To this end, women should be open to non-genital sexuality. The first French publication was in *La Révolution Surréaliste*, 10-11 (1 October 1927), 1-6. James F. McMillan has written that the numbers of genuinely sexually emancipated women in the postwar era were very small. Only a few freethinkers of Montparnasse could qualify. See his *Housewife or Harlot: The Place of Women in French Society, 1870-1940* (New York, 1981), 163-77.

41 Alain Corbin, *Les Filles de Noce: misère sexuelle et prostitution, 19e et 20e siècles* (Paris, 1978), 491-93.

42 This is the gist of Leo Steinberg's reading of the *Demoiselles* in his "The Philosophical Brothel," in two parts: *Art News*, LXXI, 5 (September 1972), 20-29, and LXXI, 6 (October 1972), 38-47. The Surrealists were the first to give Picasso's masterwork any public recognition, well before its exhibition in the 1930s. It was reproduced in *La Révolution Surréaliste*, 4 (15 July 1925), 7, with a date of 1908.

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