

of their destiny. Worse yet, we don't know how to name them without denigrating them. Legend has it that the Portuguese, discovering such objects on the hills of "Nigritia," called them "fetishes," from the Portuguese *fetizio*, "factice." "How can you think that they are gods," they supposedly asked the Africans, "if you made them yourself?"⁴

However, they are gods for having been "made"!

Let us keep this word "fetish," which has lost its derision but preserved its power to terrorize. It was a fetish like this that Michel Leiris and Marcel Griaule stole, in the *kono* hut, on September 7, 1931 in Dyabougou.⁵ The size and weight of a "suckling pig," it was a "god-thing" of the secret Bambara society called *kono*, in which the initiated protect the people from aggressions and favor the fertility of the earth and women.

The stolen thing, which would subsequently become, under the impetus of the surrealists, one of the jewels of the Musée de l'Homme, is called *boli* in Bambara and Mandinka. Brown and glossy from the coagulated blood of sacrificed animals that it received for decades, it has the form of an African cow, with its characteristic hump – a cow the bottom of whose feet would be sunk in water. Since that period, objects such as these have been analyzed and X-rayed. We know that they are composed of a wooden core on which a lightweight structure of twigs is mounted, giving it its shape. But their substance is made of dried mud, eggs, cola nuts chewed then spit out, blood from sacrificed animals, honey, millet beer, cow dung, human urine as well as sperm... It is clearly a fabricated god and, here too, it is a bovine – it has the shape and size of a very young calf. Its substance comes from each member of the initiatory society; one offered the animal for sacrifice, another the cola nuts, a third urine or sperm. Plant, animal and human substances too, which were probably represented in the biblical text by gold.

If it is correctly made, a *boli*, maintained, nourished, regularly receiving prayers, dances and sacrifices, is reputed to be alive and active. Youssouf Tata Cissé, a Malian anthropologist, himself a member of a "hunting society,"⁶ received from the masters of the tradition the concepts that govern the fabrication of *bolis*. The word *boli* means "placenta." In the uterus, the human being is first an egg, then becomes a fish, then a frog, then a little man with a big head. Once it is detached from its placenta, its form stabilizes. That is why a baby's placenta is buried in a spot kept secret because anyone who took hold of it could remotely order a new transformation of the human being.

Traditional Bambara thinking considers that it is useless to attempt to modify the appearance of things. To act on the world, you must touch its essence, that essence that lies in the *boli*, a composite object that seals the unity of the being.

We can see two magnificent examples, Makoungoba *bolis*, at the Musée du quai Branly, in Paris. Legend has it that there was one of them in the office of President Chirac, right alongside the photograph of General de Gaulle.

⁵ "Before leaving Dyabougou, a visit of the village and removal of a second kono, which Griaule had spotted by surreptitiously entering the reserved hut... Lutten detached the mask with his hunting knife... and gave me too, on my request – because it was one of the strange forms that had very much intrigued us yesterday – a sort of suckling pig, still in brown nougat (that is, coagulated blood) that weighed at least 15 kilos and that I wrapped with the mask. Everything was quickly taken out of the village and we reached our cars by the fields." Michel Leiris, *L'Afrique fantôme*, in *Miroirs de l'Afrique*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. "Quarto," 1996, p. 195.

⁶ Youssouf Tata Cissé, "Les nains et l'origine des *boli* de chasse chez les Malinké," *Systèmes de pensée en Afrique noire*, cahier no. 8, p. 13-24, 1985 and, of course, *La Confrérie des chasseurs Malinké et Bambara*, Paris, Nouvelles du Sud, 1994.

THE HYBRID IN ART AND LANGUAGE EMMANUEL SCHWARTZ

Animal-men

The ancients had evocative words to define beings, imagined by the gods against the laws of nature, with too many or too few limbs for the body's harmonious functioning, the Romans' monsters and *portenta*, the Greeks' mythological beings, *terata*, Cyclops with its round eye, the Minotaur, the son of two fathers, a Phoenician bull and a king... The pseudo-Latin word "*hybride*," accepted in French, is itself doubly *hybrid*: Latin saw the crossing of a boar and a sow in it; the priggish pedantry of etymologists grafted the Greek *hubris* onto it, that turgidity of certain men who believed they were composed of god and man. Is the hybrid a vile or divine thing, a sow or an ideal? Pegasus, the siren of Copenhagen, the Cluny unicorn, pouring their fantasies onto young minds to deliciously form them into the nightmares of the adult age, that Ingres and Gustave Moreau incarnated as the Sphinx or Sphinge, and Caravaggio into the Medusa or the Fury. As for the Centaurs, they were wonderful teachers according to Achilles. The division between the attraction of the wondrous and the taste for the morbid is decided between thinking humanity and devouring animality, between man and the werewolf.

Ancient words

To name monsters, crossings of gender or species, nature's mistakes or likable *fantasmata*, satyrs or fauns, the terms make us smile more than they frighten us. The two gods Hermes+Aphrodite produced a mythological ancient being and a modern pathological case. The French language hesitates about the gender of our loves, delights and [musical] organs – of all work and all artwork –, and all those people, good and evil people, but comprehensive and human people. The siren's etymology has its secret, that of the Sphinx its mystery. *Frightening* creatures – in Greek *deinon*, like dino-saurs – haunted the world before Greece imposed reason; it was incumbent on the Athenian Theseus, the Theban Heracles, the Corinthian Bellerophon, the Thessalian Jason, the liar Ulysses, the Greek city, to rid the earth of the monsters fabricated by gods or nature with the sole aim of poisoning men's life. These monsters therefore had pre-Hellenic barbarian names. There is no reason to complain about that: apart from the medical domain, few women would be offended at being called sirens; Richelieu and François Mitterrand liked their nickname – Sphinx; chimeras arouse the imagination... and dinosaurs enchant children.

Vocabulary

There are words in French, terms with two genders, bastard terms, made from bits and pieces, that do not describe hybrid animals but ambiguous ideas. The humanists reinvented many Greek and Roman terms, engendering in the French language Siamese twin words, which highlighted the duality of an idea: *étroit* (from the Latin *strictum* ["narrow" in English] is the path, *strict* the law; as for the idiot, he is *narrow*-minded. This is the result of the formation of a scholarly French, crossbred with Latin, even Greek, superimposed on everyday French. The lucidity of the peasant or the scholar invents composite words for you that are savory and logical: *chèvrefeuille* [goat-leaf, "honeysuckle" in English] that wafts its sweet fragrance over men and animals, the *vide-gousset* [empty the gusset, "pickpocket"] inseparable from the kleptomaniac, for example: these wonderful ideas arise from the marriage of words, like the imaginary beings that arise from the marriages of different species. The monstrous hybrids are elsewhere, beasts with two languages, barbarisms, French-Latin, Latin-Greek, Franglais above all, they have been denounced for centuries by the grumpy advocates of logic and poetry, Rabelais, Étienne, Queneau. The "verbocination" of the Limousin schoolchild makes two languages ugly and massacres them at the same time. Let us admire, in the domain that we are interested in, the *curators curating curatorial* art, speaking Latin and English in French. Victor Klemperer went much further than we did, considering that *verbocinations* flourish on the dung heap of propaganda, such as the *Lingua tertii imperii*, *The Language of the Third Reich*. These monsters take advantage of the slumber of reason, filling and emptying minds in the same way as vampires enter the skull of Goya's sleeper; this pompous, lingua franca void, Basic English, Simplified Technical English, Globish, Chinglish, Newspeak, cant, turned the École des Beaux-Art into a *pedagogic unit* or an *Ensba* [the acronym of École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts]. Horace, at the start of *Ars Poetica*, laughed about these creations "with a man's head, a horse's neck, multicolored feathers, a woman's torso, a fish's tail." The monster is amusing, until he takes power; he is then simply hideous.

WATER



MEDUSA, MEDUSAE CÉLESTE OLALQUIAGA

Medusa, the mythical snake-haired female who turns those who behold her into stone, is one of Western culture's most infamous icons. The face of horror,

she is a figure so terrible that her name is used in French to indicate paralyzing fear: "méduser" is to scare to death, to petrify. As such, Medusa is perceived as a deadly feminine force that must be contained or eradicated at all costs.

Yet the pre-Hellenic sources of this Greek myth tell a very different story: that of the *Gorgoneion*, a matriarchal emblem used to protect fertility from the evil eye of envy. Placed over doors and ovens, painted on vases and stamped on coins, the *Gorgoneion* was disseminated across the Peloponesus and later appropriated by the Greeks, who rewrote this powerful talisman as the product of a sacred catfight. The wide-eyed, winged Gorgon with its ferocious lion tongue then became Medusa, a beautiful and semi-divine priestess (the mortal offspring of marine deities) who had the bad idea to compare her beautiful hair to that of Athena's, and the bad luck to be raped by Poseidon in one of the goddess' temples. Irate, Athena transforms Medusa's mane into snakes and aids Perseus to decapitate her, placing her rival's head on her own armor and kicking off Medusa's long career as a lethal weapon: the icon of Medusa is often found on military shields, where it was used to frighten the enemy.

If the Gorgon Medusa was originally about protection and later sheer horror, its marine homonym, the *medusae* of transparent and burning fame, has always been about sex. The first multicellular organisms to reproduce sexually, *medusae*, commonly known as jellyfish, are by definition the sexual phase of the *Cnidaria*, a taxonomic category which these floating creatures share with their more rigid relatives: coral polyps and sea anemones. Yet, while the latter multiply through segmentation, *medusae* can do so in myriad ways. In the heterosexual version, the reproductive cells of male and female *medusae* are fertilized in the water or within their pouch. Alternatively, jellyfish develop from their sedentary but prolific versions, the polyps, by strobilation, with polyps shaking their heads off into tiny *medusae*, an event that takes place during the full moon and is known as "Gorgon Head." Finally, some *medusae* possess both male and female genitalia and reproduce hermaphroditically, while others may be considered immortal, as they continue to divide throughout the ages.

The polymorphic sexuality of jellyfish, known as metagenesis for its alternation between sexual and asexual stages, wreaked havoc among scientists for centuries. As ungraspable as their infamous namesake, *medusae* were not given their zoological identity until the 18th century, when Carl Linnaeus formally declared their distinctive character. Unaware of their sexual versatility, Linnaeus was inspired instead by the long, wavy tentacles and itching properties of jellyfish, so reminiscent of Medusa's snaky hair and her paralyzing qualities. It is a tribute to Linnaeus' nomenclative intuition that, beyond these physical or toxic analogies, *medusae* should also reiterate their terrifying patronym in their complex relationship to reproduction, as well as in prominent features like an incipient eye (jellyfish inaugurate the nervous system), a supposed tendency towards solitude (despite their traveling in groups) and, last but not least, an uncanny ability to escape and confound all classificatory efforts.

Understanding one of the ocean's most ancient inhabitants was problematic from the very beginning. The lifecycle of jellyfish is particularly hard to follow and their capture often destroyed all possibility of studying them, as they shrivel and disintegrate out of water. Yet the main challenge was that jellyfish, along with

¹ Literally translated: "Come make us gods (God)" *Exodus*, 32, 2.

² "He made a (cast) metal calf from them" *Exodus*, 32, 5.

³ Jean Bazin, "Retour aux choses-dieux" in *Des clous dans la Joconde: l'anthropologie autrement*, Toulouse, Anacharsis, 2008, p. 493-520. "The supposed open-mindedness of the ethnographer is nothing other than a Catholic prejudice." J. Bazin.

⁴ Charles de Brosses, *Du culte des dieux fétiches, ou Parallèle de l'ancienne religion de l'Égypte avec la religion actuelle de Nigritie*, Geneva, 1760.

their partners in crime, sea anemones and corals, display an uncanny ability to appear as something they are not, a hybrid character best expressed in the now abandoned term “zoophyte” (from the greek *zoo*, animal, and *phyte*, plant), an animal that looks like a plant. Erratic and ambiguous, hermaphroditic and androgynous, *medusae* are as far away from the straight, rational ambition of scientific language as they are close to the metaphorical twists and turns of poetry. This is probably why these mysterious beings haunt the collective imaginary almost as strongly as their ancient namesake: they are constantly transiting between male and female, biology and culture, fertility and venomousness.

Plant-animalia, or *zoophytes*, can be traced back to Aristotle, although he never used this term. What the “father of zoology” did do, however, was to speak of an intermediary nature between the animal and vegetal ones: “nature evolves gradually from inanimate to animate creatures, so much so that this continuity disables us from perceiving the boundary which separates them, and we can’t tell to which of the two groups the intermediary form belongs (...) Taken as a whole, the vegetal kingdom, when compared to other matter, appears as almost alive, but when compared to the animal kingdom it seems inanimate (...) It is unclear to which of the two kingdoms certain ocean beings appertain.”¹

Medusae, anemones, sponges, corals, starfish and sea-urchins – it would seem that the most spectacular, “picturesque” inhabitants of the ocean were also its most mysterious ones, capable of switching from flower to animal and back, simultaneously static and mobile, soft and hard, gorgeous and deadly. “Imperfect,” “obscure,” “equivocal,” “ambiguous,” there is no shortage of perplexed adjectives for these creatures whose “dubious nature” escaped all attempts at classification from ancient Greece through 18th-century Europe: “We firmly believe in the existence of zoophytes,” affirms Valmont de Bomare as late as 1775, “[whose] forms are strange and closer to plants than to animals; one could say that these beings were conceived and executed on a different plan than that followed by Nature to populate the globe we inhabit; that they are like the signs and visions of another order and another chain of beings.”²

What order this could possibly be was for the longest while anybody’s guess, “marine plants” having thrown the vegetal scheme overboard by their lack of roots. No matter how eagerly compared to the terrestrial flora in their properties or shapes, there were two very different biological realities at stake here, yet the insistence on aligning the unknown to the known kept this fact repressed against all odds. Furthermore, the ambiguity of medusae’s nature did not hinge on whether they were animal or vegetal, but rather in their being a hybrid of both, an ambivalence that recalls the androgynous male/female, half-human/half-beast character of Medusa’s predecessor, the Gorgon.

Hybrid beings populate ancient mythologies from Egypt to Pre-Columbian America, usually as divine figures that symbolically condense powerful qualities, often combining light and darkness, creation and destruction. It is only with Western culture and its rationalizing zeal that these extraordinary beings were given short shrift and that the monstrous and grotesque, until then an integral part of most cultural imaginaries, became negative and abject. The *Gorgoneion*’s treatment in patriarchal hands is an early example of this reductive shift. Transformed from a complex emblem that protects fertility into a deadly female that scatters death all around her (albeit by male will), the Gorgon’s lasting

fame came at the cost of its distortion and the loss of its polysemic richness.

Rather than illuminating darkness, modern reason often eradicates it wholesale, leaving a huge void it attempts to fill with endless explanations. Hybrid beings have come to represent otherness, that incomprehensible alterity that modern societies fear and pre-emptively wish to annihilate. The popular Mediterranean names for jellyfish (i.e. “potta marina”, or marine cunt) and the archaeological depictions of the Gorgon, where it often appears as a vulva, clearly indicate that both Medusa and *medusae* represent female genitalia. Female sexuality, that “dark continent” that Freud and others have strived for centuries to understand, is therefore not only intimidating, but also related to an excessive reproduction. In *medusae*’s case, this threat is not imaginary but literal, as global warming fuels an unprecedented population of jellyfish that endangers the ocean’s ecosystems. Yet whether real or mythical, marine or human, female sexuality is constantly treated as potentially lethal and out of control, attracting as much as it repels.

Sexual, mobile, sensitive to light and smell and capable of detecting danger, *medusae* are a floating paradox, since despite their relatively advanced features they lack one of the main characteristics of creature development: organ differentiation. If the Gorgon Medusa was a head without a body, *medusae* are bodies without organs, with all corporeal functions (digestion, reproduction, sensitivity) taking place at their tissue level. Basically made up of an outer and an inner cellular layer (ectoderm and endoderm, charged of sensitivity and digestion/reproduction, respectively), the animal matter of jellyfish is in fact a highly porous and complex skin, making them into beings that consist more of external elements – 98% water – than to anything they can call their own.

Polymorphic from birth, *medusae* multiply this open condition by coming in all shapes and sizes. Seemingly ubiquitous, these shifting organisms are invisible one moment and pervasive the next, their transparency confusing them with a sea rendered suddenly dangerous in the paradox of burning water (“aguamala,” bad water, is their Spanish name). Made of slippery, elusive jelly, medusae’s open stomach, just like a mouth or a vulva, imbibes and expels the liquid element as it contracts and expands for movement, making it unclear where the animal ends and the ocean begins.

¹ *Histoire des Animaux*, book VIII, part I.

² Valmont de Bomare, *Dictionnaire raisonné universel d’histoire naturelle; contenant l’histoire des animaux, des végétaux et des minéraux, et celle des Corps célestes, des Méétores, et des autres principaux Phénomènes de la Nature* (1775).

This text is part of a larger work in progress dedicated to petrification.

HANS BOL, THE FALL OF PHAËTON EMMANUELLE BRUGEROLLES

Taken from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (Book II, chap. 1 to 9), the different episodes of Phaeton’s story take place in the sky of an enormous panoramic landscape: on the left, Phaeton kneeling before his father Apollo implores his permission to drive the Sun’s chariot for a day; lower down, he reappears holding the reins of the steed soaring through the air; in the center is the tragic outcome of this whim so dreaded by Apollo. Having lost control of the horses, Phaeton is struck by lightning, on Earth’s request, by Jupiter, and falls into the river Eridanos. The disastrous consequences of such an undertaking that could have led to a return to the primitive chaos were largely described by the artist in the foreground: sea monsters stretched out without any movement, thirsty men dying, a sea nymph, with dishevelled hair, weeping over the disappearance of the waves and lastly a host of boats beached on the river banks. On the left, Phaeton’s sisters, gathered around his tomb, are metamorphosed into poplars, while Cynus, Sthenelos’ son, is transformed into a swan.

Born in Mechelen, Hans Bol is renowned for his small colored landscapes, enlivened by figures, painted in oil or distemper, on canvas or parchment, that were very much appreciated by art-lovers in Flanders and Germany. This imaginary view is an excellent example of his art, characterized by compositions in successive planes, while the small figures contrast with the vastness of the landscape, which fades into the distance.

FIRE



THE WONDERS OF CREATION AND THE STRANGENESS OF BEINGS ASHKAN SEPAHVAND

In our contemporary world where the “museum without walls” has made every image all too banal, where it seems that everything can be seen according to a logic of maximum visibility, it appears less urgent to articulate a spectacular “new” but rather to reconnect intimately with the possibilities of a tradition.

One of these modalities of enchanted knowledge I would like to (re)engage with is “cosmology,” a term I understand as the “science of world-pictures.” Cosmology has produced a rich body of knowledge-forms, visual, textual, and spatial, such as this example – a page taken from an 1847 Persian manuscript of the *Aja’ib al-makhlūqat wa gharā’ib al-mawjūdāt* and illustrated by Ali-Qoli Kho’i.¹ I look at this image and think of Michel Foucault’s amazement when encountering Borges’ fabled Chinese encyclopedia in his introduction to *The Order of Things*. The comparison is appropriate, for my interest in cosmology is an attempt to work backwards through our hypermodern malaise towards a more immanent form of knowledge in which sensual experience and the idiosyncratic variations of the mind’s eye take center stage. Composed shortly before the Mongol invasion of Baghdad in 1258 by Abu Yahya Zakariya ibn Muhammad Al-Qazwini, this masterpiece of cosmology, its title best translated as *The Wonders of Creation and the Strangeness of Beings*, is an illustrated register of all the creatures, figures, forces, and phenomena populating the Earth and the celestial realms. A combination of legend, ancient folklore, popular knowledge, and fantasy, the book presents a survey account of the wondrous, beautiful, terrifying, and queer qualities of Beings coming into and out of Presence. Lacking any “original” iteration, the *Wonders of Creation* would appear again and again over the course of centuries in various recensions, its visual language re-imagined to account for those phenomena its immediate contemporaries would apprehend as strange, as well as influenced by an increasing “scientific” awareness of the actual differences between peoples and geographies that abound in the world.

The genre of cosmological literature of which the *Aja’ib al-makhlūqat* is a part carries with it the remnants of mythology and the seeds of ethnography. It is as a tradition of proto-anthropological documentation, but can also be understood as narrative variations from the history of imagination as negotiated by indigenous practices of image-making. What makes this cosmological approach to knowledge interesting is its mobile qualities – that is, the world is always only a world, subject to change, and thus the object of worlding operations, of the ways in which images not only capture but also make worlds. Cosmology is an art of translation between the senses and the world, between the mind’s eye and the period eye. It assumes an immanent relationship to being-in-the-world, a mode of thinking-doing that has not undergone the paralysis of separation. It is imagination in motion, a choreography of images. In many ways, the lifespan of the *Aja’ib al-makhlūqat* can be read simultaneous to the development of the *Wunderkammer* in Europe, a textual space versus a spatialized text. In the *Wunderkammer* as well as in cosmological literature, there is a collection and presentation of materials that instill a sense of wondrous encounter, without the need to isolate and identify what this wonder exactly “is.” There is no categorizing imperative, with its goal of permanent stasis. Rather, strange materials appear in a fluid state of multiple becomings – fossils, plants, animals, and images within the Cabinet of Curiosities could bear an infinite possibility of relations to one another simply based on their spatial configuration. They are dancers. Thus, as with any dance, the art of distances and proximity between bodies determines the possibilities of sensual translation. As these objects move around, as they undergo translation over time and within spaces of encounter, they are re-presented differently, an action