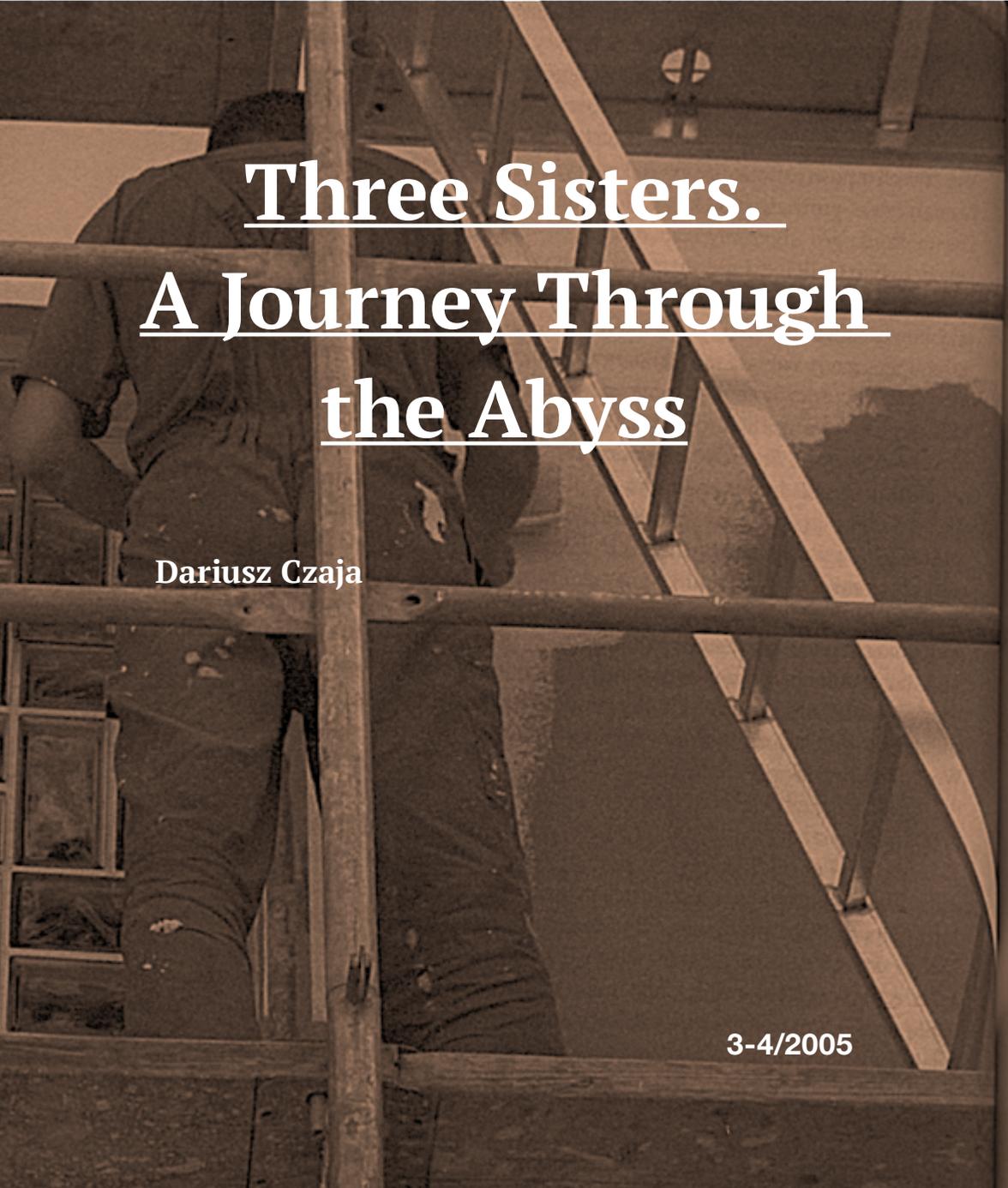


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Three Sisters.
A Journey Through
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1.

Only cultural force of habit or an illusion of perspective makes us believe that the sense of different kinds of space belongs strictly to archaic modes of thought. The truth is that we have the most difficulty **seeing** what is nearest to us, that which at some point entered the visual archive of our culture and was preserved in our gaze. When I say seeing, what I mean is – truly touching. And that, more precisely, means: to feel the agonizing sting of the unknown in our flesh. To go one step further, it also, or even primarily, means touching the edge of danger. A seashore is a strange place. First of all, it is the point where water and earth meet. The area of contact between the firm and the fluid. But it is also the outer limit of the oecumene, the world of people, exposed to the influence of the sea's chaos. It is the clear boundary dividing two separate worlds. The semantics of this thin strip of sand are inexpressibly special. To proceed further, we note that the

beach is quite an imperfect substitute for the desert, or, a sandy equivalent of the sea's element, only on a much smaller scale. It is an element somehow tamed, reduced to human dimensions. It is a patch of sand big enough that we abandon thoughts of the familiar sandbox, yet too small to get lost within. To use an amusing Structuralist skeleton-key, we might say that it is a piece of nature subjected to a cultural makeover. It is still nature, but, at the same time, has almost become culture, or, alternatively, nature in a cultural frame.

In any case, as we walk out onto the beach, we are treading along the shoreline the entire time. But the shoreline understood here in the broader sense of the word, as a border, with all of the ambiguity that word entails. For a border is that strange place that in joining, divides, and in dividing, joins. Belonging to both worlds, it simultaneously does not belong to either of them. It is shared land and no man's land. It is a space with an extremely peculiar ontology.

2.

It is, in truth, on the beach that our story begins. In truth, because chronologically it begins somewhat earlier. Andrea Severi, a middle-aged man, leaves Milan one day, abandoning his wife and toddler, and heads for Greece. It is unclear why he does this. Is he escaping his family? His past? Is he simply going on holiday? Or perhaps, as he claims, to make the dream of his youth come true: to see sunny Hellas and admire the masterworks of antiquity?

Piero Meldini's *Lune* presents the story, very tastefully told, of a fateful encounter.¹ An unexpected and utterly unplanned meeting on the Greek peninsula. It is a story of blind chance. Waiting in a Swiss clinic for a serious operation to remove a tumour, the protagonist spends his nights writing down memories from his sojourn in Greece, or rather, to give his situation the full dimension of tragic irony, his Greek excursion. He tries to reconstruct once more the fatal sequence of events that has passed.

In a tourist area, he has a chance meeting with a woman, a stranger named Dimitra. He is immediately enchanted with her. That word fits perfectly here, particularly if we keep in mind its connection with the singularly appropriate phrase "to fall under an enchantment." He tries to become better acquainted with her, but the woman has been playing a double game from the beginning: she gives neither her assent nor a resounding rejection. The most she manages is a rather shy invitation to see an erotic film. We know nothing about her. But there quickly comes a first feminine epiphany. Our hero lies on the beach. As he attempts to figure out the identity of the female voices he hears, he looks toward the sea:

When I could finally see, I saw the woman whom I had met in the port the evening before. She emerged from

¹ Piero Meldini, *Lune*, Milano: Adelphi, 1999. In addition to writing fiction, Piero Meldini, born in 1941, is an historian and essayist. For 25 years he was director of the Biblioteca Gambalunghiana in Rimini. Besides the novel discussed herein, *Lune* (1999), his books include: *L'avvocata delle vertigini* (1994), *L'Antidoto di malinconia* (1996), *La falce dell'ultimo quarto* (2004). All translations within are those of the author and the translator unless otherwise noted.

the water, standing straight, with her head held high and her arms stretched out in front of her, bent slightly. She walked through the waves in long, soft steps that reminded me of the tread of horses' hooves at riding school. Her black bathing suit, wet and clinging to her body, glimmered in the sun [24].

It is hard to resist such an invitation. The first step has been taken, and all of the rest are just its natural consequences. On the beach, a series of dominoes are fatefully set in motion. The bait has been set, and has unwittingly been taken. But that is not all; the woman was not alone. She emerged from the surf together with her three daughters:

Behind her three girls came out, one of whom was almost a child. All of them bore an amazing resemblance to her; I saw the same features, the same shape of the head, the same amber skin. Even the bathing suits they had on were identical. The girls chased each other, pushing one another and splashing each other with water as they laughed. Once again I was reminded of the female characters in Cretan frescoes [24].

One finished beauty and three not-yet-ripe emanations of the same. An expansive, imposing, perhaps even intrusive beauty, by virtue of its multiplication in three separate figures. Greek misfortune, *atichia*, likes threes. The Moirae and the Eumenides should suffice as resonant examples.

Already here, on the beach, the entire story has taken place, though in fact nothing has yet happened. Meldini is a seasoned storyteller. He does not give away too much too soon, but calmly paces out his emotional turbulence. He is economical with words, suggestively building an aura of suspense concerning the future fate of our hero. And he consistently underscores the growing strain placed on the character by a black loop of bad luck. Everything in this story is reversed. Nothing is as it should be. Traditional signifiers have been cleverly changed. The harmonious Greece of our grammar-school textbooks is seen to be primarily a place where destructive fate reveals itself, pushing the ruins of Eleusis and Mycenae far into the background. The beach, defying our usual image of calm and joy, becomes in this carefully reversed arithmetic a space of anxiety and unhappiness. And the burning sun of Greece is here outdone by the moon, with all the richness of its appearance: it follows the characters wherever they go and hangs over them like an implacable oracle. Night, not day, is the element wherein this story plays out.

3.

The events of several subsequent days can be summarized in a few sentences. Tempted by some explicit signs given by Dimitra, Andrea tries to seduce her, but she— under the influence of the moon's power? – alternates with the rhythmical regularity of the tides' inflow and outflow in her behaviour towards him. The relationship is stuck in a seemingly permanent state of *non consummatum*. See-

ing what is happening and understanding that he is nothing more than a toy in the hands of a fickle woman, he attempts to break off this tragic farce of inchoate desire. He resolves to leave Greece. He wants to go, but yet he stays. He wants to free himself from the trap, but is clearly unable to do so. The more he wants it, the less he is able. The enchantment cast on the seashore is too strong for him. Some overwhelming force makes him stay and play out the tragedy to the end. At this point, however, the flirtation involves not only the mother, but her daughters as well. Caught in a web of seemingly accidental glances, half-smiles, and all the standard rhetoric of tentative erotic gestures, Andrea submits. And it happens: what didn't work out with the mother, works out – sort of involuntarily or almost unconsciously – to the protagonist's surprise and horror, with her daughters. With each of them in turn. At first it is unclear, but gradually he begins to understand that all of this has happened with the mother's acquiescence. That it looks as though Dimitra were giving herself to him in the form of her three daughters. Before running away without a word.

And this is where we face a problem. Because in this kind of summary, the whole story sounds, we must admit, utterly wretched. For someone who has not read the story, it would not be difficult to imagine it as some kind of trashy pulp, bordering on pornography. Or as a fairly pretentious and distasteful tale of a drooling satyr preying on maidenly virtue. It should immediately be said, concisely and forcibly, that nothing could be further from the truth.

This is not a story about who did what with whom or who put what where. *Lune* has as much in common with pornography as did *Lolita* — a particularly apt example in this context, given the theme of paedophilia.

There are two reasons for this.

Firstly: Meldini tells his tale with (given the events it contains) singular restraint. He adroitly draws the reader into a game of promise and fulfilment drawn with but a few strokes of the pen. He impeccably employs a technique of slowing down the action to show, or rather bring to life for the reader, the gradual but ineluctable process of his protagonist's downfall. And though the book deals with extreme circumstances, the subtlety of the language does not permit the events described to be read with unleavened literality. It is the form that reaches profoundly into the character to penetrate his self-destructive attraction to the abyss, which cannot be rationally explained.

Secondly: the mythic layer of this story. Though the author takes great pains to present realistic details and endow his story with a dimension of lifelike verisimilitude, it is hard not to observe that *Lune* does not aim to be read as merely – or perhaps even primarily – a faithful account of contemporary events. There are many signals spread throughout the book that suggest that the represented world, though well-armed with the factual and psychological credentials of realism, time and again moves beyond the realistically literal and aims for metaphorical gener-

alization. Toward a mythic parabola with a moral ending. Let us now take a closer look at that mythic foundation.

4.

The key to this movement beyond the “ordinary” surface of things, and thus a clue to the deeper meaning of the whole story, is undoubtedly to be found in the figure of the aristocratically haughty, inaccessible Dimitra.

And in fact, who is this mysterious woman, really? Who is this captivatingly beautiful temptress from whom there emanates a powerful eroticism, but who will not be subdued? Who is this mother, who is so disturbingly reflected in her three daughters – three mirror images of herself? Who, in truth, is Dimitra?

Let us consider a mythological key. Her name carries unambiguous associations with the mythological figure of Demeter, but does she really have anything in common with that warm and accommodating goddess of the harvest, the patroness of agriculture? Let us go further. Perhaps instead we might read in her features the mask of Aphrodite, the highly alluring goddess of sensual love? That seems more promising. The noun *aphros*, contained in that deity’s name, refers to sea-foam, and tells of her “genetic” link with the sea; the related term *aphrodisios*, referring to sensual delight, also present evidence in favour of this interpretation. Dimitra emerging from the sea, each time offering a promise of erotic ecstasy... It is difficult to dismiss the connection as meaningless. And

yet this trope, too, though very convincing, leaves us unsatisfied somehow. On with our search.

We must return to the text. If there is some solution to the riddle of the dark Dimitra, it must certainly be located in the text, and not in our conjectures, whether clever or obtuse. Let us begin with a few significant descriptions, presenting the character in everyday situations:

Dimitra inclined her head, folded her hands on her chest and sank deeper into her armchair. In the corner of my eye I saw how two fingers of her right hand ran nervously along her arm [45].

She sat down right near me. She leaned over, placed her elbows on her knees and rested her head on her hands. She closed her eyes. Her hair fell on her temple in black, swirling tangles, like little snakes [46].

Halfway down that short road Dimitra stopped. She crossed her arms over her chest and leaned on the trunk of a pine tree. Suddenly her face grew frighteningly sad [59].

The seemingly ordinary gesture of folding her arms is so clearly and emphatically repeated, as is the description of her absent gaze directed downward, that they must be freighted with some surplus meaning. Where do we recognize these gestures from? Which ancient goddess do they bring to mind? Finding the answer does not demand

great effort. In an intriguing work by contemporary mythographer Roberto Calassa, we find the following passage describing a certain deeply mysterious goddess:

In one hand Nemesis held a designer's square, or a pair of reins, or an apple branch. The wheel of destiny stood beside her and could become the wheel of her griffin-drawn chariot. She also held the urn of destiny. 'Queen of motives and arbitress of all things,' she had always possessed the power to bind men in the 'never-to-be-loosened net of necessity'. Often Nemesis would lift a hand to her shoulder, as if to adjust her tunic. And often she bowed her head, eyes on her breast, as if deep in thought².

This description leaves no doubt that the character Dimitra in *Lune* is the mysterious Nemesis reborn. And when Calasso goes on to say that “only a few details have come down to us about the divine figure of Nemesis, and even these are often enigmatic,”³ it is hard to miss the strong resemblance here to the heroine of *Lune*.

That glimmer of recognition in turn leads us to examine another passage which might, in the flow of unexamined reading, appear a mere literary ornament, woven carelessly into the narrative. Consider how, at the beginning of his story, remembering the tragic events that he encountered in Greece, Andrea notes the following:

² Roberto Calasso, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, trans. Tim Parks, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993, p. 138.

³ Calasso, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, p. 138.

Now as well, it sometimes seems to me that everything is driven by some mysterious will and that I was led to Nauplia by the daughter of Night, that dark divinity whom Homer calls ruinous and Hesiod deceptive [17].

There is no doubt that the figure who appears as the daughter of Night in Hesiod's *Theogony* is none other than Nemesis. The goddess of fate and necessity. She who pitilessly metes out punishment for all transgressions of the natural limits governing human affairs. The one who is known as the antagonist of *hubris*.

But this solution also fails to settle the issue. Let us take note of a motif whose presence is too persistent (not to say too ostentatious) in the story, starting with its title, to be overlooked: that of the moon. The moon does not have much to do, it seems, with Nemesis. And yet the moon is insistently present in this story from the very beginning. That it is an element with symbolic importance is beyond doubt. But how, and for what reason, can it be linked with Nemesis?

Here are a few of the moon's entrances into the story:

The round, yellow, enormous moon cast its glow over the whole slope, from the base to the summit, and rose in the sky with unhurried loftiness [10].

The mountain of Palamidi covered half the sky. On the other side stood the moon, infixed like a passport

stamp. Its glow poured smoothly over the slope of the mountain [84].

I returned to the inn. Just over the horizon I saw the reddish, shrinking disc of the moon, which seemed to hang from the branch of a pine like a condemned man [117].

In following the moon's appearances in the text, we can sense that all of the events in the story have taken place under its watchful eye. As if they were controlled or perhaps even provoked by it. The use of personification is no accident. The moon is almost a living person, a witness, or perhaps – as we have said – the instigator of those tragic events.

In order to grasp this mysterious lunar semiotics, let us return once more to the text, to reconsider two details about Dimitra's appearance. They do not seem to be random additions. Two features in particular strike Andrea's attention: her thick, curly hair ("like little snakes") and the black bathing suit ("clinging to her body, glimmered in the sun") in which she emerged from the depths of the sea.

Those details allow us to cite the famous passage at the end of Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* or *Metamorphoses*, the expressive hymn to the moon goddess. In it, all of the elements referred to above are articulated in one harmonious sequence. In the final scenes, the donkey Lucius, the four-legged hero of this enthralling ancient tale, asks a certain goddess to return him to human form. Before

that happens, however, a spectacular lunar epiphany is revealed to him:

Not long afterwards I awoke in sudden terror. A dazzling full moon was rising from the sea. It is at this secret hour that the Moon-goddess, sole sovereign of mankind, is possessed of her greatest power and majesty. She is the shining deity by whose divine influence not only all beasts, but all inanimate things as well, are invigorated; whose ebbs and flows control the rhythm of all bodies whatsoever...⁴

Who is being described here? Let us wait a little longer with the answer, for here Lucius, in a dream, is given the honour of meeting face to face with this celestial goddess, but aware that only a small part of her beauty can be portrayed in words, he presents the following description of her:

*Her long thick hair fell in tapering ringlets on her lovely neck, and was crowned with an intricate chaplet in which was woven every kind of flower. Just above her brow shone a round disc, like a mirror, or like the bright face of the moon, which told me who she was. **Vipers rising from the left-hand and right-hand partings of her hair** supported this disc, with ears of corn bristling beside them. Her many-colored robe was of the finest linen; part glistened white, part crocus-yellow, part glowed red, and along the entire hem a woven bordure of flowers and fruit clung swaying*

⁴ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass of Apuleius*, trans. Robert Graves, New York: Pocket Books, 1951, p. 236.

*in the breeze. But what caught and held my eye more than anything else was **the deep black lustre of her mantle. She wore it slung across her body** from the right hip to the left shoulder, where it was caught in a knot resembling the boss of a shield.⁵*

There can no longer be any doubt: from beneath the figure of Dimitra-Nemesis shines forth the larger outline of the Queen of Heaven, who calls herself: “the universal Mother, mistress of all the elements, primordial child of time, sovereign of all things spiritual, queen of the dead, queen also of the immortals, the single manifestation of all gods and goddesses that are. My nod governs the shining heights of Heaven, the wholesome sea-breezes, the lamentable silences of the world below. Though I am worshipped in many aspects, known by countless names, and propitiated with all manner of different rites, yet the whole round earth venerates me.”⁶ In sum, she is the mighty Egyptian goddess Isis. But there is no concealing the fact that we are still in Greece. The right of mythological substitution makes it clear that we are dealing with the goddess we recognized before. We must remember that Isis, speaking about herself, mentions that she is honoured with many names, and those she lists— Venus, Ceres, Diana, Proserpine, Juno, Hecate — also include Rhamnusia. That is yet another local name for Nemesis, used to worship her in the Attic town of Rhamnus.

To make the connection between Dimitra and Nemesis even more convincing, let us observe that besides the

⁵ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, pp. 237-238 [emphasis mine—Dariusz Czaja].

⁶ Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, p. 238.

appearance in the description quoted above of several motifs discussed earlier, we can also detect there another incidence of the pattern of tripling, a signature leitmotif in this story. In Lucius's elaborate invocation to Isis, among the many names that she is endowed with is the suggestive announcement that "for the trilingual Sicilians, [I am] Stygian Proserpine." And the name of Ceres's daughter unambiguously evokes the world of magic and enchantment, and perhaps above all the motif, continually present throughout the story, of death.

5.

Those trips we make back to Greece when the season comes around...

Let us stop and consider for a moment, what do we in fact go to Greece for? Philosophically, literarily, filmically. I mean now. There are no simple answers to simple questions, as we know. The answers of the greats – Winckelmann, Nietzsche, Walter Otto – we know. Those ideas, belonging to the not-too-distant past, we have more (Winckelmann) or less (Otto) mastered. They are some of the most important threads that we follow as we seek to describe and name our connections with the reality of Greece. Nonetheless, unremitting attempts are made to reach a more profound understanding of them.

There is no doubt that Meldini has written a story with two faces: a contemporary one and a "Greek" one. Or, put differently: he has written about the contemporary world as

examined in an ancient Greek mirror. What then is Meldini's story, with its thick mythic underlay, about? What is the point of the masquerade? It is difficult, naturally, to give a straightforward answer on the subject. I would venture the thesis that the Greekness of *Lune* has to do not with the action of the story taking place in Greece, but with something much more important. Namely the fact that the story carries within it, like a deposit, a certain crucial fragment of the world of Greek mythology. A certain splinter of that anthropology of bygone days. Anthropology understood not as descriptive **knowledge** about human beings, but as pitiless **wisdom** about us, deposited in symbolic stories that transcend the historical.

Such wisdom brings a few simple truths that we apparently have forgotten or wish to forget. Meldini convinces us that the Greek tales are not fairyland pulp from the distant past, but stories about us, contemporary— that these stories are truly about ourselves, that chance still reveals itself to us as the flipside of destiny, that seduction and desire still draw us toward the abyss, that temptation, though it bears many names, still wears the figure of a tantalizing beauty, that the tragic encroachment of bounds, the hubris so rebuked by the gods, sooner or later brings punishment in its wake, that the ordinary is divided from the uncanny by only the thinnest of boundaries. And perhaps most importantly, that we enter misfortune with our eyes open. We have only to go out on the beach, there need not be three at once...

translated by Timothy Williams