

COMPARING AND CONTRASTING
THOREAU'S USE OF MYTH AND FABLE
WITH THE
1855
1ST EDITION
OF
BULFINCH'S MYTHOLOGY:
THE AGE OF FABLE;
OR,
STORIES OF GODS AND HEROES
BY
THOMAS BULFINCH



LIFTING THE VEIL OF THE

GODDESS OF NATURE

WITHDRAWING THE PEPLUM OF ISIS, THE GODDESS OF SAIS



From an old book on 19th-Century Freemasonry: "Isis was the Goddess of Sais; and the famous Feast of Lights was celebrated there in her honor. There were celebrated the Mysteries, in which were represented the death and subsequent restoration to life of the God Osiris, in secret ceremony and scenic representation of his sufferings, called the Mysteries of Night." (After the Egyptian god Seth killed the god Osiris, the goddess Isis, his wife, searched out the parts of Osiris's dismembered body and reassembled him, veiling herself and taking on the role of goddess of the dead. She then impregnated herself from his body in order to give birth to Horus, whom she would raise in secrecy in order to protect him from Seth.) In the temple in her honor at Sais, there is an inscription: "I am all that has been, and is, and shall be, and my peplum (this was a loosely draped body covering held by shoulder pins, a normal form of female attire) no mortal has withdrawn."

Here is the Isis of the Vatican – and notice how she is attired:



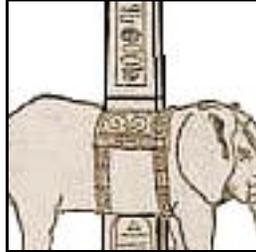
The 5 1/2-meter red granite Egyptian obelisk in Minerva's Square in Rome was taken by the Romans from the Egyptian city of Sais on the Nile River at the border between upper and lower Egypt, where it had been erected in 600 BCE. When this obelisk had originally arrived at Rome, it had been



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installed in front of the Temple of Isis.



(Now, because a medieval pope wanted it that way, it has been placed atop a bronze elephant. You will note that to bear the enormous weight of the stone, the sculptor had been forced to position a block under the belly of the elephant.)



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SOMETHING TO DREAM ABOUT:

LIFTING THE VEIL OF THE GODDESS OF NATURE





LIFTING THE VEIL OF THE

GODDESS OF NATURE

A WORD OF APPRECIATION:

This file is occasioned by a footnote in Alexander Gottfried Friedrich Gode-von Aesch's *NATURAL SCIENCE IN GERMAN ROMANTICISM* (NY: Columbia UP, 1941; reprint NY: AMS Press, 1966, pages 97-108), to the effect that "A connection between the symbolism of the motif of the goddess at Sais and the problem of time and eternity ... seems to be established by Henry David Thoreau, *WALDEN*, at the beginning of the chapter on "Reading":

WALDEN: With a little more deliberation in the choice of their pursuits, all men would perhaps become students and observers, for certainly their nature and destiny are interesting to all alike. In accumulating property for ourselves or our posterity, in founding a family or a state, or acquiring fame even, we are mortal; but in dealing with truth we are immortal, and need fear no change nor accident. The oldest Egyptian or Hindoo philosopher raised a corner of the veil from the statue of the divinity; and still the trembling robe remains raised, and I gaze upon as fresh a glory as he did, since it was I in him that was then so bold, and it is he in me that now reviews the vision. No dust has settled on that robe; no time has elapsed since that divinity was revealed. That time which we really improve, or which is improvable, is neither past, present, nor future.

PEOPLE OF
WALDEN

ISIS

EGYPT

**“NARRATIVE HISTORY” AMOUNTS TO FABULATION,
THE REAL STUFF BEING MERE CHRONOLOGY**



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1,250 BCE

 This figure of [Isis](#) was created in the grave intended for Nofretiri:



NOBODY COULD GUESS WHAT WOULD HAPPEN NEXT



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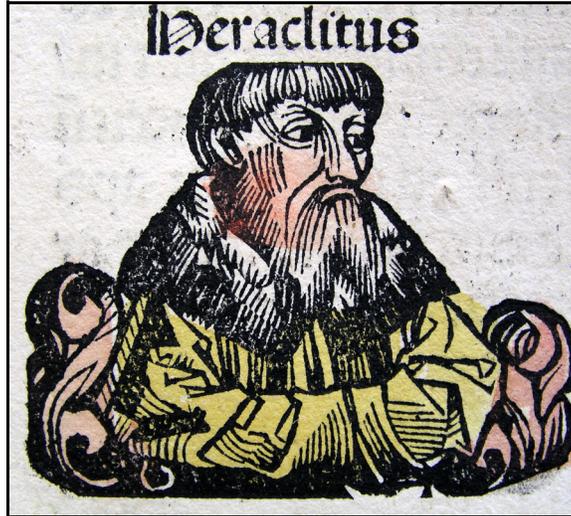
GODDESS OF NATURE

544 BCE

In about the period from 544 BCE to 480 BCE, in Mesopotamia, there was coming about an increase in the accuracy of observations of the Zodiac, and of the periods of the planets. After establishing an accurate [lunar calendar](#), they began to apply their mathematical skills to tasks other than the astrological.

ANCIENT CALCULATION

[Heraclitus](#) was born in Ephesus, a Greek colony in Asia Minor.



He would be deemed “the obscure philosopher” (*skoteinos*) because of his sometimes cryptic utterances such as “Nature loves to hide” (*physis kryptesthai philei*). For him the essential substance that united all things was fire (as opposed to the “air” of Anaximenes or the “water” of Thales). His [astronomy](#) was that the cosmos consisted of an “ever-living fire kindling in measures and being extinguished by measures” (although due to the embarrassment that astronomy has progressed while philosophy has not, this early take on the cosmos is now being categorized as philosophy rather than astronomy). He taught that everything was in eternal flux due to contending opposites, and that “reality” was a trope for “harmony.” He summarized this doctrine of eternal change in the epigram “one cannot step twice into the same river” (this must sound better in the classic Greek, because in American English grammar one doesn’t poke one’s toe **even once** into **the same** river). For Heraclitus, the first principle of the world was not static “being” but dynamic “becoming” (which would perceive him, in modern terms, as having functioned as the original “process philosopher”).

DO I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION? GOOD.



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100 CE

The Emperor [Trajan](#) was succeeded by the Emperor [Hadrian](#).
(On the following screen is a statue of [Isis](#) at Hadrian's villa.)

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1652

[Athanasius Kircher](#)'s *OEDIPUS AEGYPTIACUS* was published in [Rome](#).



He was the Joseph Campbell of the era and, Joseph-Campbell style, he easily equated [Isis](#) with Cybele the Mother of the Gods, with Minerva, with Venus, with Juno, with Proserpina, with Ceres, with Diana, with Rhea (Mother Earth), with the war-goddess Bellona, with Hecate, with the Moon, and with the “polymorphous Daemon.”

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Here she is:



Sameness was all over the place. You only had to put your mind to it and this became this and that and the other.



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1681

Gerardus Blasius's *ANATOME ANIMALIUM: TERRESTRIVM VARIORVM, VOLATILIVM, AQUATILIVM, SERPENTIVM, INSECTORVM* ... (on the following screens):

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GERARDI BLASII
ANATOMIE
Animalium

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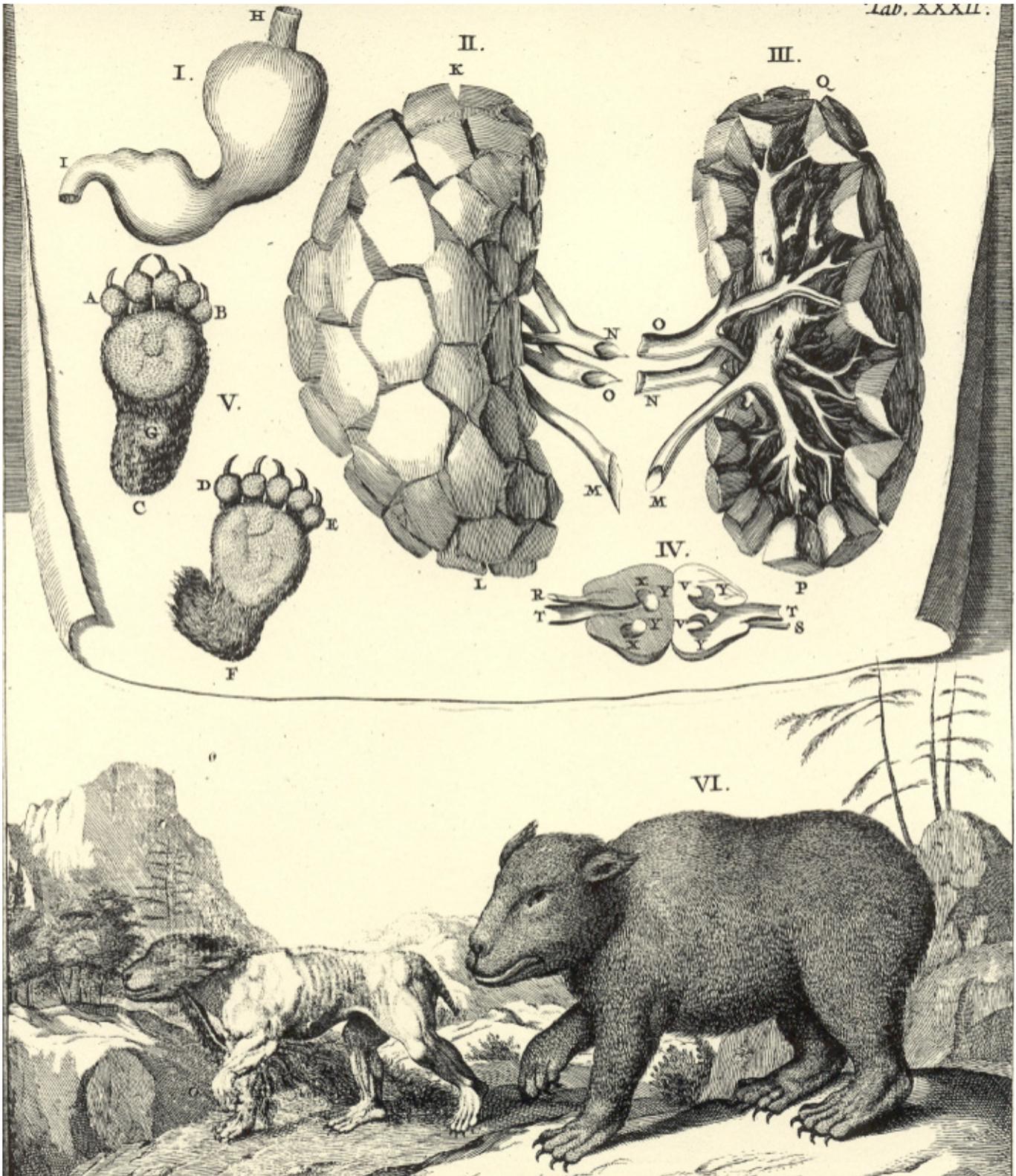
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1712

[Isis](#), or Diane, or Artémis, according to Urbain Hiérne—like the famous young lady from Knizes in the limerick— had breasts of two different sizes:





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(Clearly this alchemist was unaware that on the famous ancient statue, the torso lumps depicted had not been intended as breasts with indistinct nipples, but instead had been intended as representations of pairs of bull testicles, testicles that worshipers had as part of their ceremony of offering hung around the neck of the statue of the goddess.)

CHANGE IS ETERNITY, STASIS A FIGMENT

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1733

In Jean-François Detroy (1679-1752)'s oil on canvas "Time Unveiling Truth," the winged naked old guy in the sky with a scythe is personifying Time, and he is exposing the charms of the beautiful woman, personifying Truth, as she likewise reaches out and unmasks an old woman, personifying Fraud. Personifications of the Four Cardinal Virtues kneel in tribute at Truth's feet: Fortitude is posing with a lion symbolic of her courage, Justice is posing with a sword and scales symbolic of her power and impartiality, Temperance is posing with a pitcher of water symbolic of her abstinence and moderation, and Prudence is posing with a snake symbolic of her wisdom. Truth has her foot on the globe of the earth, on which are inscribed the name of the artist and the date of his painting:

[ISIS](#)

Establishment of the church in Scotland as an "Established Church" meant in effect that it was the central government of the nation, rather than each local religious congregation, that controlled the mechanisms of church governance. According to the legislature's "Patronage Act," local landowners had been calling the shots during the selection of a minister for a congregation. In this year, however, Time must have Unveiled Truth, for a movement led by the Reverend Ebenezer Erskine achieved the creation of an Associated Congregation of Original Seceders or "Secession Church" in which in the future each congregation was to control its choice of minister (there would be further such splittings or realignments or Unveilings of Truth in 1761, 1820, 1847, 1843, and 1900).



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1740

Pope Benedict XIV (Prospero Lorenzo Lambertini).

During this year and the following four years Pompeo Girolamo Batoni (1708-1787) would be preparing his oil on canvas “Time Unveiling Truth,” which is now at The Art Institute of Chicago:



ISIS

**LIFE IS LIVED FORWARD BUT UNDERSTOOD BACKWARD?
— NO, THAT’S GIVING TOO MUCH TO THE HISTORIAN’S STORIES.
LIFE ISN’T TO BE UNDERSTOOD EITHER FORWARD OR BACKWARD.**

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1743

In about this year Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696-1770) prepared an oil on canvas “Time unveiling Truth” (*Il Tempo scopre la Verita*) which is now at the Museo Civico Palazzo Chiericati in Vicenza, Italy:

[ISIS](#)

In conformity with the rules of iconography published in Cesare Ripa's *ICONOLOGIA* dating to the late 16th Century, we see Time depicted as a bearded and winged old guy with a scythe. He's crushing a serpent with his foot while removing the clothing from a pretty girl. She's holding the sun to show that she represents Truth and a mirror to indicate how reflective she is. In the background, a used-up older woman (Lies, his first wife, it would appear) is in full retreat and headlong fall.



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1745

Between this year and 1750, Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696-1770) would be preparing another oil on canvas “Time Unveiling Truth” (*Il Tempo scopre la Verita*), one that is now at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

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In conformity with the rules of iconography published in Cesare Ripa's *ICONOLOGIA* dating to the late 16th Century, nubile woman is being stripped down to her essentials by gnarly dude. Time and Truth are exchanging glances with Cupid to make it clear what's next on their hot agenda. Truth's emblem, the sun, shines above her head while everything mundane, such as the planet Earth, lies beneath her foot. A parrot and a mirror represent the old regime, which would be sensuousness, vanity, and deceit. This scene is described on pages 162-63 of Martha J. Reineke's *SACRIFICED LIVES* — read it and weep:

The sacrificial economy's awesome capacity for multiple disguises is most rivetingly attested to in a painting by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696-1770) titled "Time Unveiling Truth." The representation of woman in this painting is a cautionary motif for all feminists who seek emancipation. Tiepolo's painting depicts Father Time -muscular, sunburned, gnarled with age- grasping the figure of Truth, who is a beautiful young woman. As this painting is described by Perry Townsend Rathbone ("Giovanni Battista Tiepolo" in *Museum of Fine Arts: Boston. NY: Newsweek and Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1969, 124-27*), Truth sits serenely on the lap of Time, yielding to a "ceremonious disrobing." Regally dominating the composition, Truth's foot rests on the globe below her; her symbol, the sun, flies high in the sky above. For his part, Time's giant wings spell "irresistible strength" and his lowered head "speaks of determination." At the feet of Time are his customary attributes: a chariot, a scythe representing death, an infant symbolizing birth, and a parrot attesting to the vanity of human life.... In Tiepolo's fantasy as Rathbone reports it, Truth conquers all: does she not have the world at her feet? And her elegance, which Rathbone classifies as "triumphant," makes Time a rough-hewn servant to Truth's sacred authority. Even so, Rathbone's gushing commentary is curious; for, to an observant eye, something is terribly amiss in the painting. Notwithstanding Tiepolo's mastery of the art of drawing, Truth's right leg is positioned in relation to her body where her left leg should be. What is the meaning of this apparent dismembering and re-membering of Truth? Does Time hold her in coitus or, to the contrary, has Truth been the victim of a brutal rape? Julia Kristeva submits ("About Chinese Women" in *THE KRISTEVA READER*, ed. Toril Moi. NY: Columbia UP, 1986, pages 154-55) that Tiepolo's painting attests to a scene of conflict which, but for the telling leg, would be unknown. Only Truth's misplaced limb confirms the work of sacrifice: Truth is not the solar priestess of the Symbolic order, for she is one whose violation has caused Time and the sign to be. For Kristeva, the dis-ease of Truth's body suggests that heterosexual coitus is not the subject of Tiepolo's portrait, as Rathbone claims. For a difference which the love-making of Time and Truth might celebrate has been supplanted in the wake of a violent erasure of that difference by Time. Thus, in the homologous logic of the painting, Truth is a phallus. What is the lesson of Tiepolo's painting for feminism? According to Kristeva, if feminists applaud that moment when woman becomes the truth of the temporal order through surrogate valorization, they fall prey to a crude but



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enormously effective trap. This trap is all the more lethal to the degree that the seductive beauty of a phallic Truth appears to attest to a feminine difference –a salutary trope of woman– which promises to elevate women’s position in the world. Kristeva asks that feminists not overlook the dismembering of Truth’s body by Time: her awkwardly placed limb gives the lie to the phallic fantasy of Tiepolo and shows that emancipation does not follow a dream of a goddess. To the contrary, within the sacrificial economy which bonds Time’s Truth, the difference she bears –an alterity paradigmatically represented by sexual difference– always already has been throttled. Its force –jouissance and rejection– always already has been subjected to a matricidal sign. Thus, for Kristeva, the emergence of a nonsacrificial Truth awaits a change in the signifying economy. Only then could sexual difference, now structured by sacrifice, be expressed on other terms. Only then could genuine alterity and difference among persons be affirmed.

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1764

The middle section of MODERN FABLES in Robert Dodsley's SELECT FABLES OF [ÆSOP](#) AND OTHER FABULISTS (London: Printed for J. Dodsley in Pall-mall) contained many from [La Fontaine](#).



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To fix the first Book





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WALDEN: Why do precisely these objects which we behold make a world? Why has man just these species of animals for his neighbors; as if nothing but a mouse could have filled this crevice? I suspect that Pilpay & Co. have put animals to their best use, for they are all beasts of burden, in a sense, made to carry some portion of our thoughts.

HITOPADESA

ÆSOP

XENOPHANES

PEOPLE OF
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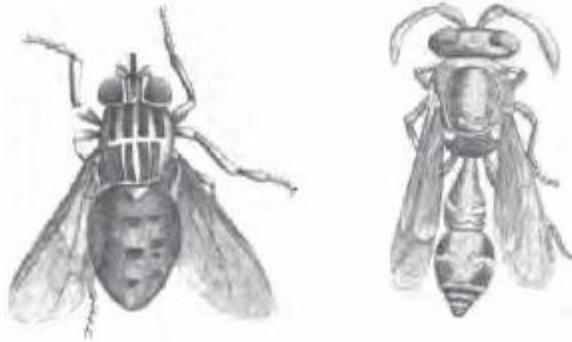


LIFTING THE VEIL OF THE

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1770

Jean-Baptiste-François Hennebert's and Gaspard Guillard de Beaurieu's *COURS D'HISTOIRE NATURELLE, OU TABLEAU DE LA NATURE CONFIDÉRÉE DANS L'HOMME, LES QUADRUPÈDES, LES OISEAUX, LES POISSONS ET LES INFECTES. OUVRAGE PROPRE À INSPIRER AUX GENS DU MONDE LE DESIR DE CONNOÎTRE LES MERVEILLES DE LA NATURE. (A PARIS, CHEZ DESAINT, LIBRAIRE, RUE DU FOIN S. JACQUES. M. DCC. LXX. AVEC APPROBATION, & PRIVILÈGE DU ROI.)*, a 7-volume treatise that would find its way into the personal library of [Henry Thoreau](#).



Note carefully, on the following screen, the six cute white breasts of the frontispiece figure. The reference, of course, would be to [Isis](#), or Diane, or Artémis, and to the then-standard misinterpretation of ancient votive statues which actually had depicted her as having many pairs of bull testicles slung around her neck.



(Despite the fact that Thoreau had this inaccurate illustration in his personal library, he seems never to have been interested in entering into the misappreciation common during his time, of [Isis](#) being “she-of-many-tits” rather than being, with historical accuracy, “she-of-the-veil.”)

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*Omnibus haeciens blandum per pectora amorem.
Laet. L. I.*

COURS
D'HISTOIRE
NATURELLE,
OU,
TABLEAU
DE LA NATURE

Considérée dans l'Homme, les Quadrupèdes,
les Oiseaux, les Poissons & les Insectes.

*Ouvrage propre à inspirer aux gens du monde
le desir de connoître les merveilles de la Nature.*

TOME PREMIER.



A PARIS,

chez DESAINT, Libraire, rue du Foin S. Jacques.

M. DCC. LXX.

Avec Approbation, & Privilège du R.





LIFTING THE VEIL OF THE

GODDESS OF NATURE

1795

In this year [Friedrich Schiller](#)'s "The Veiled Statue at Sais" sponsored typical 18th-Century philosophical resignation of the "presume not to scan" variety. The poem is based upon a transcription from an Egyptian temple devoted to Isis at the dividing line on the Nile between upper and lower [Egypt](#), at the city of Sais, in which there is an inscription warning against attempts to look upon divinity naked: "I am all that has been, and is, and shall be, and my peplum [this was a loosely draped body covering held by shoulder pins, a normal form of female attire] no mortal has withdrawn." (In the divinity legend, Isis had veiled herself when she sneaked into the palace to reassemble the parts of her dismembered husband.) The moral that is drawn is that we are simply to admire the works of God, rather than have the presumption to suppose we might be able to understand them. This attitude taken by Schiller in this poem is congruent with the general attitude of German Romanticism, which he would adopt in his LETTERS ON AESTHETIC EDUCATION, in which he would berate philosophy and natural philosophy for their attempts to make rents in the necessary veil surrounding Truth. This, we will find, is noncongruent with the attitude that [Alexander von Humboldt](#), and [Henry Thoreau](#), would take toward the lifting of the veil of [Isis](#):

[WALDEN](#): With a little more deliberation in the choice of their pursuits, all men would perhaps become students and observers, for certainly their nature and destiny are interesting to all alike. In accumulating property for ourselves or our posterity, in founding a family or a state, or acquiring fame even, we are mortal; but in dealing with truth we are immortal, and need fear no change nor accident. The oldest Egyptian or Hindoo philosopher raised a corner of the veil from the statue of the divinity; and still the trembling robe remains raised, and I gaze upon as fresh a glory as he did, since it was I in him that was then so bold, and it is he in me that now reviews the vision. No dust has settled on that robe; no time has elapsed since that divinity was revealed. That time which we really improve, or which is improvable, is neither past, present, nor future.

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1797

[Alexander von Humboldt](#) reviewed a series of experiments he had been conducting with muscle tissue and electricity and concluded that he needed to give up on the conviction, common among the German *Naturphilosophen*, that a vital force or soul inhabited all organic matter and that therefore if nature could be comprehended this must be “*a priori*, by means of the intuition only, without scientific methodology.”¹



This caused much *Sturm und Drang* in Humboldt’s relationship with [Friedrich Schiller](#), who had published his young friend and ally’s allegorical essay “The Vital Force: or, the Rhodian Genius” in his *Hören* in 1795. Ever afterward, Humboldt would be deeply critical of the “neglect of available factual data in preference to wide speculation”² exhibited by the German transcendentalists.

Friedrich Schlegel, in the first of his “Ideas,” disagreed with [Schiller](#) by suggesting “that the veil of [Isis](#) be torn, that the secrets be made public. He who cannot endure the sight of the goddess must flee or perish.” (“*Die Forderungen und Spuren einer Moral, die mehr wäre als der praktische Teil der Philosophie, werden immer lauter und deutlicher. Sogar von Religion is schon die Rede. Es ist Zeit den Schleier der Isis zu zerreißen, und das Geheime zu offenbaren. Wer den Anblick der Göttin nicht ertragen kann fliehe oder verderbe.*”)

1. Nelkin 20.
2. Van Dusen 53.



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Here is the Isis statue at the Vatican — and notice how she is attired:





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1799

In this year [Friedrich Schiller](#) took up residence in Weimar, where he and [Johann Wolfgang von Goethe](#) would collaborate to make the Weimar Theatre one of the most prestigious theatrical houses in Germany. He was creating his play THE PICCOLOMINI. The German playwright again, as he had in 1795 in his poem “The Veiled Statue at Sais,” asserted, in his THE WORDS OF ILLUSION, that “no mortal hand will lift the veil of truth.” This was typical Germano-Romantic philosophical resignation of the “presume not to scan” variety: we are simply to admire the works of God, rather than have the presumption to attempt to understand them. Philosophy and natural philosophy are simply wrong in their attempts to make rents in the necessary veil surrounding Truth. Needless to say, this was very much at odds with what we will find to be the attitude that [Alexander von Humboldt](#), and [Henry Thoreau](#), would take toward the lifting of the veil of [Isis](#):

[WALDEN](#): With a little more deliberation in the choice of their pursuits, all men would perhaps become students and observers, for certainly their nature and destiny are interesting to all alike. In accumulating property for ourselves or our posterity, in founding a family or a state, or acquiring fame even, we are mortal; but in dealing with truth we are immortal, and need fear no change nor accident. The oldest Egyptian or Hindoo philosopher raised a corner of the veil from the statue of the divinity; and still the trembling robe remains raised, and I gaze upon as fresh a glory as he did, since it was I in him that was then so bold, and it is he in me that now reviews the vision. No dust has settled on that robe; no time has elapsed since that divinity was revealed. That time which we really improve, or which is improvable, is neither past, present, nor future.

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1802

→ 1802: [Friedrich Schiller](#) repeated in his poem “Kassandra” the idea he had been expressing at least since 1795, his idea that “error alone is life while knowledge is death”:

*Frommt's, den Schleier aufzuheben,
Wo das nahe Schrecknis droht?
Nur der Irrtum ist das Leben,
Und das Wissen ist der Tod.*

[Henry Thoreau](#) of course would not concur in this sort of German [Transcendentalism](#):

[WALDEN](#): With a little more deliberation in the choice of their pursuits, all men would perhaps become students and observers, for certainly their nature and destiny are interesting to all alike. In accumulating property for ourselves or our posterity, in founding a family or a state, or acquiring fame even, we are mortal; but in dealing with truth we are immortal, and need fear no change nor accident. The oldest Egyptian or Hindoo philosopher raised a corner of the veil from the statue of the divinity; and still the trembling robe remains raised, and I gaze upon as fresh a glory as he did, since it was I in him that was then so bold, and it is he in me that now reviews the vision. No dust has settled on that robe; no time has elapsed since that divinity was revealed. That time which we really improve, or which is improvable, is neither past, present, nor future.

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[Georg Philipp Friedrich, Freiherr von Hardenberg](#) (“[Novalis](#)”), in the 1st volume of the posthumous *HISTORISCHE-KRITISCHE AUSGABE*, or *NOVALIS SCHRIFTEN*, directly contradicted [Schiller](#) by declaring that “He who does not wish to lift the veil is no worthy disciple of [Sais](#).” Thoreau would agree with [Novalis](#) and with [Schlegel](#), not with [Schiller](#):

Die Lehrlinge zu Sais

Mannichfache Wege gehen die Menschen.
Wer sie verfolgt und vergleicht,
wird wunderliche Figuren entstehen sehn;
Figuren, die zu jener großen Chifferschrift zu gehören scheinen,
die man überall,
auf Flügeln, Eierschalen, in Wolken,
im Schnee, in Krystallen und in Steinbildungen, auf gefrierenden Wassern,
im Innern und Außern der Gebirge, der Pflanzen, der Thiere, der Menschen,
in den Lichtern des Himmels,
auf berührten und gestrichenen Scheiben von Pech und Glas,
in den Feilspänen um den Magnet her,
und sonderbaren Conjunctionen des Zufalls,
erblickt.

In ihnen ahndet man den Schlüssel dieser Wunderschrift, die Sprachlehre derselben;
allein die Ahndung will sich selbst in keine feste Formen fügen,
und scheint kein höherer Schlüssel werden zu wollen.



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Ein Alcahest scheint über die Sinne der Menschen ausgegossen zu seyn.
Nur augenblicklich scheinen ihre Wünsche, ihre Gedanken sich zu verdichten.
So entstehen ihre Ahnungen,
aber nach kurzen Zeiten schwimmt alles wieder, wie vorher, vor ihren Blicken.

Von weitem hört' ich sagen: die Unverständlichkeit sey Folge nur des Unverstandes;
dieser suche, was er habe, und also niemals weiter finden könnte.
Man verstehe die Sprache nicht,
weil sich die Sprache selber nicht verstehe, nicht verstehen wolle;
die ächte Sanscrit spräche, um zu sprechen,
weil Sprechen ihre Lust und ihr Wesen sey.

Nicht lange darauf sprach einer: Keiner Erklärung bedarf die heilige Schrift.
Wer wahrhaft spricht, ist des ewigen Lebens voll,
und wunderbar verwandt mit ächten Geheimnissen dünkt uns seine Schrift,
denn sie ist ein Accord aus des Weltalls Symphonie.

Von unserm Lehrer sprach gewiß die Stimme,
denn er versteht die Züge zu versammeln, die überall zerstreut sind.
Ein eignes Licht entzündet sich in seinen Blicken, wenn vor uns nun die hohe Rune liegt,
und er in unsern Augen späht, ob auch in uns aufgegangen ist das Gestirn,
das die Figur sichtbar und verständlich macht.
Sieht er uns traurig, daß die Nacht nicht weicht,
tröstet er uns, und verheißt dem ämsigen, treuen Seher künftiges Glück.

Oft hat er uns erzählt, wie ihm als Kind
der Trieb die Sinne zu üben, zu beschäftigen und zu erfüllen, keine Ruhe ließ.
Den Sternen sah er zu und ahmte ihre Züge, ihre Stellungen Sande nach.
In's Luftmeer sah er ohne Rast, und ward nicht müde
seine Klarheit, seine Bewegungen, seine Wolken, seine Lichter zu betrachten.
Er sammelte sich Steine, Blumen, Käfer aller Art,
und legte sie auf mannichfache Weise sich in Reihen.
Auf Menschen und auf Thiere gab er Acht,
am Strand des Meeres saß er, suchte Muscheln.
Auf sein Gemüth und seine Gedanken lauschte er sorgsam.

Er wußte nicht, wohin ihn seine Sehnsucht trieb.

Wie er größer ward, strich er umher,
besah sich andre Länder, andre Meere, neue Lüfte,
fremde Sterne, unbekannte Pflanzen, Thiere, Menschen,
stieg in Höhlen, sah wie in Bänken und in bunten Schichten der Erde Bau vollführt war,
und drückte Thon in sonderbare Felsenbilder.

Nun fand er überall Bekanntes wieder, nur wunderlich gemischt, gepaart,
und also ordneten sich selbst in ihm oft seltsame Dinge.
Er merkte bald auf die Verbindungen in allem, auf Begegnungen, Zusammentreffungen.
Nun sah er bald nichts mehr allein. -
In große bunte Bilder drängten sich die Wahrnehmungen seiner Sinne:
er hörte, sah, tastete und dachte zugleich.
Er freute sich, Fremdlinge zusammen zu bringen.
Bald waren ihm die Sterne Menschen, bald die Menschen Sterne,
die Steine Thiere, die Wolken Pflanzen,
er spielte mit den Kräften und Erscheinungen,
er wußte wo und wie er dies und jenes finden, und erscheinen lassen konnte,
und griff so selbst in den Saiten nach Tönen und Gängen umher.

Was nun seitdem aus ihm geworden ist, thut er nicht kund.
Er sagt uns, daß wir selbst, von ihm und eigner Lust geführt,
entdecken würden, was mit ihm vorgegangen sey.

Mehrere von uns sind von ihm gewichen.
Sie kehrten zu ihren Eltern zurück und lernten ein Gewerbe treiben.



LIFTING THE VEIL OF THE

GODDESS OF NATURE

Einige sind von ihm ausgesendet worden, wir wissen nicht wohin; er suchte sie aus.
Von ihnen waren einige nur kurze Zeit erst da, die Andern länger.

Eins war ein Kind noch, es war kaum da, so wollte er ihm den Unterricht übergeben.
Es hatte große dunkle Augen mit himmelblauem Grunde, wie Lilien glänzte seine Haut,
und seine Locken wie lichte Wölkchen, wenn der Abend kommt.
Die Stimme drang uns allen durch das Herz,
wir hätten gern ihm unsere Blumen, Steine, Federn alles gern geschenkt.
Es lächelte unendlich ernst, und uns ward seltsam wohl mit ihm zu Muthe.
Einst wird es wiederkommen, sagte der Lehrer, und unter uns wohnen,
dann hören die Lehrstunden auf. -

Einen schickte er mit ihm fort, der hat uns oft gedauert.
Immer traurig sah er aus, lange Jahre war er hier, ihm glückte nichts,
er fand nicht leicht, wenn wir Krystalle suchten oder Blumen.
In die Ferne sah er schlecht, bunte Reihen gut zu legen wußte er nicht.
Er zerbrach alles so leicht.
Doch hatte keiner einen solchen Trieb und solche Lust am Sehn und Hören.

Seit einer Zeit, - vorher eh jenes Kind in unsern Kreis trat, -
ward er auf einmal heiter und geschickt.
Eines Tages war er traurig ausgegangen, er kam nicht wieder, und die Nacht brach ein.
Wir waren seinetwegen sehr in Sorgen;
auf einmal, wie des Morgens Dämmerung kam,
hörten wir in einem nahen Haine seine Stimme.
Er sang ein hohes, frohes Lied; wir wunderten uns alle;
der Lehrer sah mit einem Blick nach Morgen, wie ich ihn wohl nie wieder sehen werde.
In unsre Mitte trat er bald,
und brachte, mit unaussprechlicher Seligkeit im Antlitz,
ein unscheinbares Steinchen von seltsamer Gestalt.
Der Lehrer nahm es in die Hand, und küßte ihn lange,
dann sah er uns mit nassen Augen an und legte dieses Steinchen auf einen leeren Platz,
der mitten unter andern Steinen lag,
gerade wo wie Strahlen viele Reihen sich berührten.
Ich werde dieser Augenblicke nie fortan vergessen.
Uns war, als hätten wir im Vorübergehn
eine helle Ahndung dieser wunderbaren Welt in unsern Seelen gehabt.

Auch ich bin ungeschickter als die Andern,
und minder gern scheinen sich die Schätze der Natur von mir finden zu lassen.
Doch ist der Lehrer mir gewogen,
und läßt mich in Gedanken sitzen, wenn die Andern suchen gehn.

So wie dem Lehrer ist mir nie gewesen.
Mich führt alles in mich selbst zurück.
Was einmal die zweite Stimme sagte, habe ich wohl verstanden.
Mich freuen die wunderlichen Haufen und Figuren in den Sälen,
allein mir ist, als wären sie nur Bilder, Hüllen, Zierden,
versammelt um ein göttlich Wunderbild,
und dieses liegt mir immer in Gedanken.
Sie such' ich nicht, in ihnen such' ich oft.
Es ist, als sollten sie den Weg mir zeigen,
wo in tiefem Schlaf die Jungfrau steht,
nach der mein Geist sich sehnt.

Mir hat der Lehrer nie davon gesagt, auch ich kann ihm nichts anvertrauen,
ein unverbrüchliches Geheimniß dünkt es mir.
Gern hätt ich jenes Kind gefragt, in seinen Zügen fand ich Verwandtschaft;
auch schien in seiner Nähe mir alles heller innerlich zu werden.
Wäre es länger geblieben, sicherlich hätte ich mehr in mir erfahren.
Auch wäre mir am Ende vielleicht der Busen offen, die Zunge frey geworden.
Gern wär' ich auch mit ihm gegangen.
Es kam nicht so.



LIFTING THE VEIL OF THE

GODDESS OF NATURE

Wie lang' ich hier noch bleibe, weiß ich nicht.
Mir scheint es, als blieb' ich immer hier.
Kaum wag' ich es mir selber zu gestehen,
allein zu innig dringt sich mir der Glauben auf:
einst find' ich hier, was mich beständig rührt;
sie ist zugegen.

Wenn ich mit diesem Glauben hier umher gehe,
so tritt mir alles in ein höher Bild, in eine neue Ordnung mir zusammen,
und alle sind nach Einer Gegend hin gerichtet.
Mir wird dann jedes so bekannt, so lieb;
und was mir seltsam noch erschien und fremd,
wird nun auf einmal wie ein Hausgeräth.
Gerade diese Fremdheit ist mir fremd,
und darum hat mich immer diese Sammlung
zugleich entfernt und angezogen.

Den Lehrer kann und mag ich nicht begreifen.
Er ist mir just so unbegreiflich lieb.
Ich weiß es, er versteht mich,
er hat nie gegen mein Gefühl und meinen Wunsch gesprochen.
Vielmehr will er, daß wir den eignen Weg verfolgen,
weil jeder neue Weg durch neue Länder geht,
und jeder endlich zu diesen Wohnungen,
zu dieser heiligen Heimath wieder führet.

Auch ich will also meine Figur beschreiben,
und wenn kein Sterblicher, nach jener Inschrift dort, den Schleier hebt,
so müssen wir Unsterbliche zu werden suchen;
wer ihn nicht heben will, ist kein ächter Lehrling zu Sais.



LIFTING THE VEIL OF THE

GODDESS OF NATURE

1803

 Erasmus Darwin's THE TEMPLE OF NATURE; OR, THE ORIGIN OF SOCIETY.³



'Ere Time began, from flaming chaos hurled
Rose the bright spheres, which from the circling world;
Earths from each sun with quick explosions burst,
And second planets issued from the first.
Then whilst the sea at their coeval birth
Surge over surge involved the shoreless earth;
Nursed by warm sun-beams in primeval caves
Organic life began beneath the waves.....
Hence without parent by spontaneous birth
Rise the first specks of animated earth;
From nature's womb the plant or insect swims,
And buds or breathes with microscopic limbs.

Organic life beneath the shoreless waves
Was born and nurs'd in ocean's pearly caves
First forms minute unseen by sphearic glass
Move on the mud, or pierce the watery mass;
These, as successive generations bloom,
New powers acquire and larger limbs assume;
whence countless groups of vegetation spring
And breathing realms of fin and feet and wing.

3. The frontispiece from Erasmus Darwin's THE TEMPLE OF NATURE (depicted on a following screen) was drawn by Henry Fuseli to indicate the goddess of poetry pulling aside the veil of the Artemis of Ephesus, goddess of wild nature whose statues were being presumed incorrectly at that time to have been many-breasted. According to Frazer's THE GOLDEN BOUGH—one of those magisterial works out of the dark ages of scholarship upon which we rely far to much—"I am the Mother without spouse, the Original Mother; all are my children, and therefore none has ever dared to approach me."



LIFTING THE VEIL OF THE

GODDESS OF NATURE

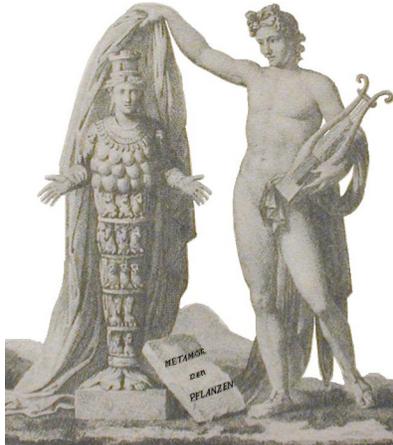
1807



New Jersey women were deprived of their right to vote, with this repeal being sponsored by a male politician who, a decade earlier, had been voted against by a female voting block.

FEMINISM

A most interesting illustration appeared in this year as the frontispiece of the 1st volume of [Alexander von Humboldt](#)'s *AL. VON HUMBOLDT UND AIMÉ BONPLAND'S REISE*.⁴ According to Alexander Gode-von Aesch's *NATURAL SCIENCE IN GERMAN ROMANTICISM* (NY: Columbia UP, 1941; reprint NY: AMS Press, 1966, pages 97-108), this naked male carrying a lyre is a period illustration of the spirit of poetry, and we notice that Mr. Naked Guy is raising a cloth covering which had been draped over a statue representing the feminine mystery of nature. The figure used in this period illustration in order to represent the spirit of poetry happens to be



Bertel Thorwaldsen's (1770-1844) "Genius of Poetry" statue. The figure used in this illustration for the goddess of nature is the famous statue of the cult of Diana of Ephesus, in which the female figure's upper torso is completely covered with lumps very suggestive of female breasts (actually, to the ancient Greek worshipers at this shrine, the lumps on the upper torso of the statue represented not the breasts of a human female but the testicles of sacrificed bulls, ostensibly hung around the goddess's neck as an offering, but this may well have been being misunderstood in the early 19th Century). A cloth drape is carefully positioned over Mr. Naked Guy's genitals so that we don't have to preoccupy ourselves with whether he is being adequately sexually

4. This 1st volume was [Humboldt](#)'s *IDEEN ZU EINER GEOGRAPHIE DER PFLANZEN NEBST EINEM NATURGEMÄLDE DER TROPENLÄNDER...* (Tübingen, bey F.G. Cotta; Paris, bey F. Schöell, 1807), offered in homage to Göthe's 1790 *METAMORPHOSIS DER PFLANZEN* (which, as you can see, figures in the illustration — I have artificially heightened the contrast of the lettering so that you can make it out).

BOTANIZING

LIFTING THE VEIL OF THE

GODDESS OF NATURE





LIFTING THE VEIL OF THE

GODDESS OF NATURE

aroused at that upon which he is gazing.

WALDEN: With a little more deliberation in the choice of their pursuits, all men would perhaps become students and observers, for certainly their nature and destiny are interesting to all alike. In accumulating property for ourselves or our posterity, in founding a family or a state, or acquiring fame even, we are mortal; but in dealing with truth we are immortal, and need fear no change nor accident. The oldest Egyptian or Hindoo philosopher raised a corner of the veil from the statue of the divinity; and still the trembling robe remains raised, and I gaze upon as fresh a glory as he did, since it was I in him that was then so bold, and it is he in me that now reviews the vision. No dust has settled on that robe; no time has elapsed since that divinity was revealed. That time which we really improve, or which is improvable, is neither past, present, nor future.

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THE SCIENCE OF 1807

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LIFTING THE VEIL OF THE

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1817



Carl August Eschenmayer, in his *PSYCHOLOGIE IN DREI THEILEN ALS EMPIRISCHE, REINE UND ANGEWANDTE*, disagreed with [Friedrich Schiller](#) by suggesting that “The customary form of observation of nature is thoughtless and seems to expect that she will reveal her secrets all by herself. That is impossible, for the veil, the robe, is essential to her. Only the naïve (*unbefangen*) and chaste mind is granted the privilege of being allowed to lift the veil of [Isis](#) and to throw a glance into the mysteries. For the crude and unchaste mind it remains an eternal secret.”

[WALDEN](#): With a little more deliberation in the choice of their pursuits, all men would perhaps become students and observers, for certainly their nature and destiny are interesting to all alike. In accumulating property for ourselves or our posterity, in founding a family or a state, or acquiring fame even, we are mortal; but in dealing with truth we are immortal, and need fear no change nor accident. The oldest Egyptian or Hindoo philosopher raised a corner of the veil from the statue of the divinity; and still the trembling robe remains raised, and I gaze upon as fresh a glory as he did, since it was I in him that was then so bold, and it is he in me that now reviews the vision. No dust has settled on that robe; no time has elapsed since that divinity was revealed. That time which we really improve, or which is improvable, is neither past, present, nor future.

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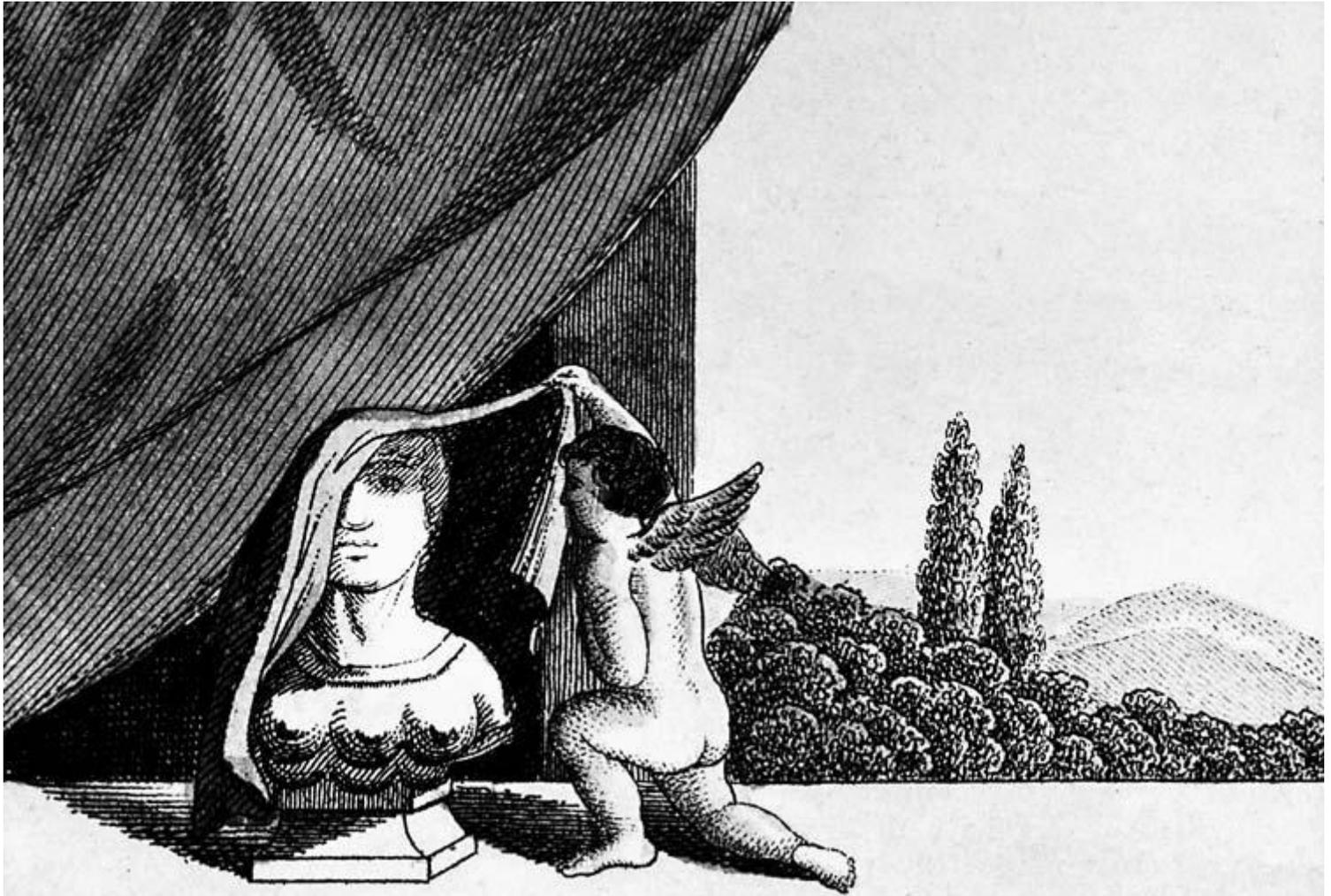
LIFTING THE VEIL OF THE

GODDESS OF NATURE

1825



September 3, Saturday: "Genius Unveiling a Bust of Nature," per [Johann Wolfgang von Goethe](#):





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Quoting from page 349 of Pierre Hadot's *THE VEIL OF ISIS: AN ESSAY ON THE HISTORY OF THE IDEA OF NATURE*, in the 2006 translation by Michael Chase:

In 1814, when the archduke Karl August returned from a trip to England, there was a celebration at Weimar to mark his homecoming. Goethe had the town's drawing school decorated with eight paintings that were intended to symbolize the various arts and the protection Karl August accorded to them.⁵ Among these symbolic figures executed in the style of emblems, there was one that represented "Genius Unveiling a Bust of Nature," with Nature represented in her traditional aspect as Isis/Artemis. In the distant background, behind the figure, a landscape could be seen, which contrasted strongly with the somewhat artificial atmosphere created by this statue of Nature unveiled. Goethe used these same pictures to decorate his own house for the jubilee of Karl August on September 3, 1825, and for his own jubilee, or more precisely for the anniversary of his entry into the service of the archduke, on November 7 of the same year.

The meaning that Goethe ascribed to this drawing can be inferred from his poetry:

Respect the mystery;
Let not your eyes give way to lust.
Nature the Sphinx, a monstrous thing,
Will terrify you with her innumerable breasts.

Seek no secret initiation
beneath the veil; leave alone what is fixed.
If you want to live, poor fool,
Look only behind you, toward empty space.

If you succeed in making your intuition
First penetrate within,

5. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Weimars Jubelfest am 3ten September 1825 . . .*, ed. Johann Peter Eckermann (Weimar: Hoffmann, 1825), sec. 1.



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Then return toward the outside,
Then you will be instructed in the best way.⁶

In [Newport, Rhode Island](#), Friend [Stephen Wanton Gould](#) wrote in his journal:

*7th day 3 of 9 M / Most of this day engaged in the Trustees
Meeting - my time is much consumed in the concerns of Society -
I often feel discouraged under it -*

RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF FRIENDS

6. "Genius die Büste der Natur enthüllend."



LIFTING THE VEIL OF THE

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1829



February 13, Friday: [Johann Wolfgang von Goethe](#), in a letter to Eckermann, disagreed with [Friedrich Schiller](#)'s German [Transcendentalist](#) reluctance to inquire into nature's secrets by opining that "*Die Natur versteht gar keinen Spas, sie ist immer wahr, immer ernst, immer strenge; sie hat immer recht, und die Fehler und Irrtümer sind immer des Menschen. Den Unzulänglichen verschmäht sie und nur dem Zulänglichen, Wahren und Reinen ergibt sie sich und offenbart ihm ihre Geheimnisse.*"

ISIS

WALDEN: With a little more deliberation in the choice of their pursuits, all men would perhaps become students and observers, for certainly their nature and destiny are interesting to all alike. In accumulating property for ourselves or our posterity, in founding a family or a state, or acquiring fame even, we are mortal; but in dealing with truth we are immortal, and need fear no change nor accident. The oldest Egyptian or Hindoo philosopher raised a corner of the veil from the statue of the divinity; and still the trembling robe remains raised, and I gaze upon as fresh a glory as he did, since it was I in him that was then so bold, and it is he in me that now reviews the vision. No dust has settled on that robe; no time has elapsed since that divinity was revealed. That time which we really improve, or which is improvable, is neither past, present, nor future.

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1847

February: During this year [Henry Thoreau](#) was working on drafts of both WEEK and WALDEN, using recent Journal passages on memory, history, fable, and religion, and probably inserted revised versions of “Dark Ages” and “Homer. Ossian. Chaucer” from The Dial. His 2d draft of the [A WEEK ON THE CONCORD AND MERRIMACK RIVERS](#) manuscript had by this point expanded to nearly twice the length of the 1st draft. By this point, presumably, the manuscript would have included its reference to the goddess [Isis](#) as “unspotted,” which is to



LIFTING THE VEIL OF THE

GODDESS OF NATURE

say, unblemished by time:

A WEEK: As I pass along the streets of our village of Concord on the day of our annual Cattle-Show, when it usually happens that the leaves of the elms and buttonwoods begin first to strew the ground under the breath of the October wind, the lively spirits in their sap seem to mount as high as any plough-boy's let loose that day; and they lead my thoughts away to the rustling woods, where the trees are preparing for their winter campaign. This autumnal festival, when men are gathered in crowds in the streets as regularly and by as natural a law as the leaves cluster and rustle by the wayside, is naturally associated in my mind with the fall of the year. The low of cattle in the streets sounds like a hoarse symphony or running bass to the rustling of the leaves. The wind goes hurrying down the country, gleaning every loose straw that is left in the fields, while every farmer lad too appears to scud before it, - having donned his best pea-jacket and pepper-and-salt waistcoat, his unbent trousers, outstanding rigging of duck or kerseymere or corduroy, and his furry hat withal, - to country fairs and cattle-shows, to that Rome among the villages where the treasures of the year are gathered. All the land over they go leaping the fences with their tough, idle palms, which have never learned to hang by their sides, amid the low of calves and the bleating of sheep, - Amos, Abner, Elnathan, Elbridge, -

“From steep pine-bearing mountains to the plain.”

I love these sons of earth every mother's son of them, with their great hearty hearts rushing tumultuously in herds from spectacle to spectacle, as if fearful lest there should not be time between sun and sun to see them all, and the sun does not wait more than in haying-time.

“Wise Nature's darlings, they live in the world
Perplexing not themselves how it is hurled.”

Running hither and thither with appetite for the coarse pastimes of the day, now with boisterous speed at the heels of the inspired negro from whose larynx the melodies of all Congo and Guinea Coast have broke loose into our streets; now to see the procession of a hundred yoke of oxen, all as august and grave as Osiris, or the droves of neat cattle and milch cows as unspotted as Isis or Io. Such as had no love for Nature

“at all,
Came lovers home from this great festival.”

They may bring their fattest cattle and richest fruits to the fair, but they are all eclipsed by the show of men. These are stirring autumn days, when men sweep by in crowds, amid the rustle of leaves, like migrating finches; this is the true harvest of the year, when the air is but the breath of men, and the rustling of leaves is as the trampling of the crowd. We read now-a-days of the ancient festivals, games, and processions of the Greeks and Etruscans, with a little incredulity, or at least with little sympathy; but how natural and irrepressible in every people is some hearty and palpable greeting of Nature. The Corybantes, the Bacchantes, the rude primitive tragedians with their procession and goat-song, and the whole paraphernalia of the Panathenaea, which appear so antiquated and peculiar, have their parallel now. The husbandman is always a better



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Greek than the scholar is prepared to appreciate, and the old custom still survives, while antiquarians and scholars grow gray in commemorating it. The farmers crowd to the fair to-day in obedience to the same ancient law, which Solon or Lycurgus did not enact, as naturally as bees swarm and follow their queen.

It is worth the while to see the country's people, how they pour into the town, the sober farmer folk, now all agog, their very shirt and coat-collars pointing forward, – collars so broad as if they had put their shirts on wrong end upward, for the fashions always tend to superfluity, – and with an unusual springiness in their gait, jabbering earnestly to one another. The more supple vagabond, too, is sure to appear on the least rumor of such a gathering, and the next day to disappear, and go into his hole like the seventeen-year locust, in an ever-shabby coat, though finer than the farmer's best, yet never dressed; come to see the sport, and have a hand in what is going, – to know "what's the row," if there is any; to be where some men are drunk, some horses race, some cockerels fight; anxious to be shaking props under a table, and above all to see the "striped pig." He especially is the creature of the occasion. He empties both his pockets and his character into the stream, and swims in such a day. He dearly loves the social slush. There is no reserve of soberness in him.

I love to see the herd of men feeding heartily on coarse and succulent pleasures, as cattle on the husks and stalks of vegetables. Though there are many crooked and crabbled specimens of humanity among them, run all to thorn and rind, and crowded out of shape by adverse circumstances, like the third chestnut in the burr, so that you wonder to see some heads wear a whole hat, yet fear not that the race will fail or waver in them; like the crabs which grow in hedges, they furnish the stocks of sweet and thrifty fruits still. Thus is nature recruited from age to age, while the fair and palatable varieties die out, and have their period. This is that mankind. How cheap must be the material of which so many men are made.

THE FUTURE IS MOST READILY PREDICTED IN RETROSPECT





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1855

When Osiris had been murdered, his consort [Isis](#) had wept and mourned and, clothed in mourning and with shorn hair, beating her breast, had gone in search of the chest that contained his body. Discovering it to be inside a huge wooden column in the palace of the king of Phoenicia, she gained admittance to the palace veiled and disguised as a servant. This Isis who obtained entrance to this palace with her head veiled is consequently represented in statuary and in poetry as a symbol of mystery. Thus we have in this poem by Tennyson, IV. 8:

For the drift of the Maker is dark, an Isis hid by the veil...

This is part of the background to [Henry Thoreau](#)'s use of the lifting of a corner of the veil from the Goddess of Truth unblemished by time:

WALDEN: With a little more deliberation in the choice of their pursuits, all men would perhaps become students and observers, for certainly their nature and destiny are interesting to all alike. In accumulating property for ourselves or our posterity, in founding a family or a state, or acquiring fame even, we are mortal; but in dealing with truth we are immortal, and need fear no change nor accident. The oldest Egyptian or Hindoo philosopher raised a corner of the veil from the statue of the divinity; and still the trembling robe remains raised, and I gaze upon as fresh a glory as he did, since it was I in him that was then so bold, and it is he in me that now reviews the vision. No dust has settled on that robe; no time has elapsed since that divinity was revealed. That time which we really improve, or which is improvable, is neither past, present, nor future.

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[HDT](#)[WHAT?](#)[INDEX](#)**LIFTING THE VEIL OF THE****GODDESS OF NATURE**

The 1st edition of [Thomas Bulfinch's THE AGE OF FABLE](#) (what we now know as [BULFINCH'S MYTHOLOGY](#)),⁷ which sanitized, sterilized, and embalmed the pagan deities of Greece and Rome, the Celts, Scandinavia, and the Orient,⁸ the author dedicated to the academic poet [Longfellow](#), who seemed to know so very much about the mythologies of the various cultures and about the various uses to which these said mythologies might be turned:

TO

HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

THE POET ALIKE OF THE MANY AND OF THE FEW THIS
ATTEMPT TO POPULARIZE MYTHOLOGY AND EXTEND
THE ENJOYMENT OF ELEGANT LITERATURE IS
RESPECTFULLY INSCRIBED

7. Sometimes we see this referred to as THE AGE OF FABLE; OR, BEAUTIES OF MYTHOLOGY, published by S.W. Tilton & Co. in Boston and by C.T. Dillingham in New York in 1855, and sometimes we see it referred to as THE AGE OF FABLE; OR, STORIES OF GODS AND HEROS, published by Sanborn, Carter, & Bazin in Boston in 1855. What gives? Might there be two different books?

8. [Thomas Bulfinch](#) would also write about Arthurian and Welsh legends, in 1858 in his AGE OF CHIVALRY.



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In the section on the Druids in Bulfinch's work, originally serialized in a Boston newspaper, Bulfinch commented on the poetry attributed to "Ossian" that "In the poems of [Ossian](#) we have, if not the actual productions of Druidical times, what may be considered faithful representations of the songs of the Bards." Crude line drawings were used as illustrations in this work.



LIFTING THE VEIL OF THE

GODDESS OF NATURE

1861

From W. Winwood Reade's THE VEIL OF ISIS:

ISIS

It may perhaps interest you to listen to the first fable of the world.

From the midst of chaos was born Osiris, and at his birth a voice was heard proclaiming – "The ruler of all the earth is born." From the same dark and troubled womb were born Isis the Queen of Light, and Typhon the Spirit of Darkness.

This Osiris traveled over the whole world, and civilized its inhabitants, and taught them the art of agriculture. But on his return to Egypt the jealous Typhon laid a stratagem for him, and in the midst of a banquet had him shut up in a chest which exactly fitted his body. He was nailed down in his prison, which cast into the Nile floated down to the sea by the Taitic mouth, which even in the time of Plutarch was never mentioned by an Egyptian but with marks of detestation.

When Isis learnt these sad news she cut off a lock of her hair, and put on her mourning robes, and wandered through the whole country in search of the chest which contained the dead body of her husband.

At length she learnt that the chest had been carried by the waves to the shore of Byblos, and had there lodged in the branches of a tamarisk bush, which quickly shot up and became a large and beautiful tree, growing round the chest so that it could not be seen.

The king of the country amazed at the vast size the tree had so speedily acquired, ordered it to be cut down to be hewn into a pillar to support the roof of his palace – the chest being still concealed in the trunk.

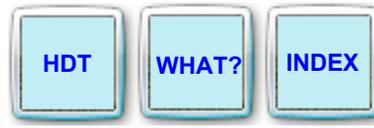
The voice which had spoken from Heaven at the birth of Osiris made known these things to poor Isis, who went to the shore of Byblos and sat down silently by a fountain to weep. The damsels of the queen met her and accosted her, and the queen appointed her to be nurse to her child. And Isis fed the infant with her finger instead of with her breast, and put him every night into fire to render him immortal, while transforming herself into a swallow she hovered round the pillar which was her husband's tomb, and bemoaned her unhappy fate.

It happened that the queen thus discovered her, and shrieked when she saw her child surrounded by flames. By that cry she broke the charm and deprived him of immortality.

By that cry Isis was summoned back to her goddess-form, and stood before the awe-struck queen shining with light and diffusing sweet fragrances around.

She cut open the pillar, and took the coffin with her, and opened it in a desert. There she embraced the cold corpse of Osiris, and wept bitterly.

She returned to Egypt and hid the coffin in a remote place: but



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Typhon, hunting by moonlight, chanced to find it, and divided the corpse into fourteen pieces. Again Isis set out on her weary search throughout the whole land, sailing over the fenny parts in a boat made of papyrus. She recovered all the fragments except one which had been thrown into the sea. Each of these she buried in the place where she found it, which explains why in Egypt there are so many tombs of Osiris.

And instead of the limb which was lost, she gave the *phallus* to the Egyptians – the disgusting worship of which was thence carried into Italy, into Greece, and into all the countries of the East.

When Isis died, she was buried in a grove near Memphis. Over her grave was raised a statue covered from head to foot with a black veil. And underneath was engraved these divine words:

I am all that has been, that is, that shall be, and none among mortals has yet dared to raise my veil.

Beneath this veil are concealed all the mysteries and learning of the past. A young scholar, his fingers covered with the dust of venerable folios, his eyes weary and reddened by nightly toil will now attempt to lift a corner of this mysterious and sacred covering.

These two Deities, Isis and Osiris were the parents of all the Gods and Goddesses of the Heathens, or were indeed those Gods themselves worshipped under different names. The fable itself was received into the mythologies of the Hindoos and the Romans. Sira is said to have mutilated Brahma as Typhon did Osiris, and Venus to have lamented her slain Adonis, as Isis wept for her husband-god.

As yet the sun and moon alone were worshipped under these two names. And as we have seen, besides these twin beneficial spirits, men who had begun to recognize sin in their hearts had created an Evil One who struggled with the power of light, and fought with them for the souls of men.

It is natural for man to fabricate something that is worse than himself. Even in the theology of the American Indians which is the purest of the modern world, there is found a Mahitou or dark Spirit.

Osiris or the sun was now worshipped throughout the whole world, though under different names. He was the Mithra of the Persians, the Brahma of India, the Baal or Adonis of the Phoenicians, the Apollo of the Greeks, the Odin of Scandinavia, the Hu of the Britons, and the Baiwe of the Laplanders.

Isis also received the names of Islene, Ceres, Rhea, Venus, Vesta, Cybele, Niobe, Melissa – Nehalennia in the North; Isi with the Indians; Puzza among the Chinese; and Ceridwen among the ancient Britons.

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1901

December 10, Tuesday: The 1st Nobel Prizes were awarded. The recipients of the [Nobel Peace Prize](#) were Jean Henry Dumont, the Swiss founder of the Red Cross, and Frédéric Passy, the founder of the International League for a Permanent Peace.

ALFRED NOBEL



THE FUTURE CAN BE EASILY PREDICTED IN RETROSPECT



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1922

During this year and the following three years, John Singer Sargent would be creating “The Unveiling of Truth,” an oil-on-canvas mural at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston:

[ISIS](#)



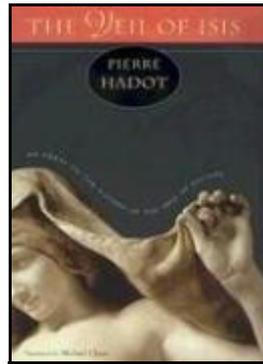


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2006

October 30, Monday: Harvard University Press issued Michael Chase's translation of Pierre Hadot's THE VEIL OF [ISIS](#): AN ESSAY ON THE HISTORY OF THE IDEA OF NATURE.



**WHAT I'M WRITING IS TRUE BUT NEVER MIND
YOU CAN ALWAYS LIE TO YOURSELF**

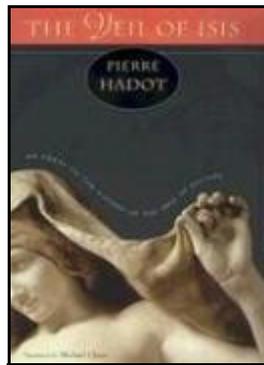


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2007

May 10, Thursday: Ian Hacking, a *professeur honoraire* at the Collège de France, reviewed Michael Chase's translation of Pierre Hadot's *THE VEIL OF ISIS: AN ESSAY ON THE HISTORY OF THE IDEA OF NATURE* (Harvard UP, 2006) in the pages of the [London Review of Books](#):



Almost Zero

'The word "nature" is encountered everywhere,' notably in the writing and talk of poets, scientists, ecologists and even politicians. 'But though they frequently employ the word, they seem not to have much considered what notion ought to be framed of the thing, which they suppose and admire, and upon occasion celebrate, but do not call in question or discuss.' Thus Robert Boyle, progenitor of English science, in *A Free Inquiry into the Vulgarly Received Notion of Nature*, 1686.

Boyle found eight meanings for the word, and pretty much suggested we scrap the lot. No one paid him any heed. Nature is too deeply entrenched in our awareness of the world. Nature is awesome. Nature is gentle tranquillity itself. Nature is terrifying. Nature is the Lake District. Nature is female. Nature is how things ought to be. Nature is crueller even than Man, so that from its very beginning, the human race has had to shield itself from the forces of nature. Nature, above all, is other than us - except that we are part of nature.

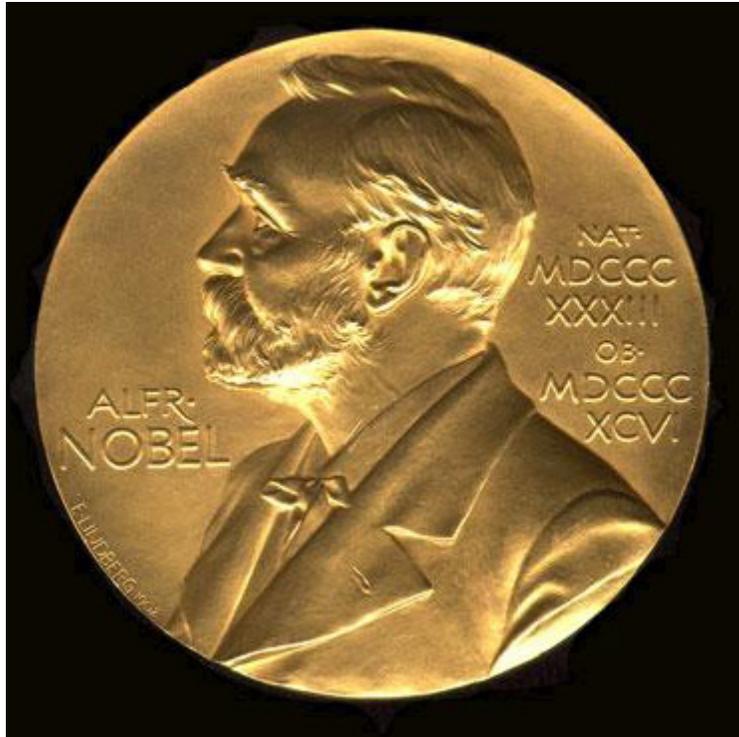
And nature has secrets. Most metaphors die in the course of a lifetime; their play is forgotten, and they become literal or lost. How long can a metaphor live? Pierre Hadot's absorbing book is written around a single phrase: 'Nature loves to hide.' That is a translation, or mistranslation, of a fragment that Heraclitus inscribed some 2500 years ago. It is alive and well. Here is a physicist, Steve Chu, in 1994: 'I'm betting on nature to hide Bose condensation from us. The last 15 years she has been doing a great job.' Bose condensation is a weird phenomenon that takes place when atoms of the right kind get very cold, ultracold, almost to absolute zero. Einstein foresaw it in 1925, but no one could produce it until 1995. (Chu lost his bet.) Chu



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himself shared a Nobel Prize in 1997 for one of the tricks needed to make this strange condensate (using laser light to cool atoms). The people who first made the stuff got another Nobel, in 2001.



And what is on the back of the gold medals for physics and chemistry that they received? An engraving of Nature, whom the Swedish Academy describes as a goddess resembling Isis. She is being unveiled by an unclothed youth, the genius of science.



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He [sic] is revealing her secrets, not to mention her breasts.



Hadot's book has 18 plates reproducing such images - often less chaste than the Nobel one - from throughout the history of modern science. They include engravings in books by the likes of Leeuwenhoek, the pioneer of the microscope. Hadot oddly does not mention the Nobel medal, even though he had several prizewinners as colleagues at the Collège de France. But then some, and possibly most, physics and chemistry laureates are astonished, or even appalled, when told to look at what is on the back of their medal. They seem never to have noticed the woman being undressed.

Hadot, who is now 85, is a great scholar of Neoplatonism. He is working on a definitive edition of Marcus Aurelius. He is an extraordinary guide to the history of the idea of nature from Heraclitus to now. You will find yourself in the company of a wise Greek, a pagan, a philosopher who believes that a role of philosophy is to teach us how to live. (See, for example, the essays collected in *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, 1995.)

Pagan? Monotheism has been so triumphant that we have forgotten about pagans. Hadot recalls a pagan prefect, appalled that a Christian emperor wanted to remove the Altar of Victory from the Roman Senate: 'We contemplate the same stars, the Heavens are common to us all, and the same world surrounds us. What matters the path of wisdom by which each person seeks the truth?' Hadot imagines a world in which these words are inscribed in gold on



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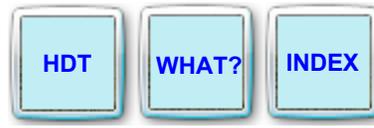
GODDESS OF NATURE

the doors of all 'churches, synagogues, mosques and temples'. He uses other pagan texts of the same period to argue that Heraclitus' aphorism underlies this gentle plea for tolerance: for a pagan, the truth that is sought is the hidden truth of nature and the gods.

The Veil of Isis is an amazing source of other sayings, which Hadot drops like ripe peaches from a tree. Heraclitus' phrase exemplifies Nietzsche's dictum that 'a good maxim is too hard for the teeth of time, and all the millennia cannot succeed in consuming it, though it always serves as nourishment; it is thereby the great paradox of literature: the imperishable in the midst of all that changes.' Imperishable but not constant. This is a tale of mutation, of an inscrutable saying that is used to say many things. 'To write the history of thought is sometimes to write the history of a series of misinterpretations.' The ancients referred to Heraclitus as 'the obscure one'. No one knows what he meant in the phrase that became 'Nature loves to hide.' Hadot tries out a few candidates, and favours the unimpressive thought that what causes birth tends to cause death, that what is born wants to die. Only much later do we get 'Nature loves to hide.' The Greek word we translate as 'nature' - physis (the root of our word 'physics') - evolved almost beyond comprehension. In Heraclitus' day, Hadot says, it was nature of; the nature of a thing was, on the one hand, its process of genesis, appearance or growth, hence Hadot's reading. On the other hand, it meant a thing's 'constitution, or proper nature' - one of our meanings today, and out of which ancient philosophy constructed the idea of essence. But when the word became not of, but absolute, the secrets of nature were much talked about. Nature became personified, and she had secrets. She was addressed by Marcus Aurelius, 'O Nature'; soon there was an Orphic hymn: 'O Nature, mother goddess of all things, mother of innumerable ruses'. Dame Nature came on stage, though always in the role of a divinity.

In the midst of this rush of talk we get the first explicit attribution of 'Nature loves to hide' to Heraclitus, some five centuries after his death. It is in the biblical exegesis by Philo of Alexandria, in the first century after Christ. Philo, a Jew, is making sense of the Hebrew Bible with the eyes of a Neoplatonist, reading each story as bearing a secret whose truth is uncovered by explaining an underlying allegory. What Philo actually wrote is lost; we have only an Armenian mistranslation of his words. Philo is important in other contexts, because he helped the early Christians to figure out how to put the Old Testament and Plato together.

Physis had not yet settled down to anything like what we call physics, although that was one way it was going. Aristotle's book called Physics is discernibly on that road. But as long as Nature was not only a dame but also a goddess, her secrets could be elicited in many ways, including myth and allegory. We no longer hold these to be ways to find out the truth, but they were exactly that, styles of thinking that tried as intensely



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to find out about nature as the experimenter who cools atoms down to nearly zero.

Who's who in the images of Nature? Isis is an Egyptian goddess. She becomes identified with Artemis of Ephesus, Diana to the Romans, but not the huntress. Nature is the progenitor, and the Ephesians endowed their statues of Artemis with many breasts so that she might suckle her creatures [no, not really: the objects depicted, so often taken to have been multiple breasts, actually had been multiple pairs of bull testicles that were draped around the neck of her statue in offering]. Thus equipped she enters the modern world. But thanks to Heraclitus' maxim, she is veiled. As the ambitions of science take hold, she is represented as unveiling, or being unveiled. It was one of these images that got Pierre Hadot going many years ago, an unintelligible frontispiece to a book published in 1807.

The great German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt came back from South America to produce a timeless masterpiece, *The Geography of Plants*; he had it prefaced with an engraving, a dedication to Goethe, in which a naked man with a lyre is lifting the veil off a many-breasted Artemis, at whose feet is a volume of Goethe's botanical tract, *The Metamorphosis of Plants*. Goethe was much pleased when he got the book from the scientist. He wrote in a letter that it was 'a flattering illustration that implies that Poetry too might lift the veil of Nature'. In those days, Hadot asserts, any educated person could read the engraving, and see exactly why the poet said what he said. But for us it is just one big decoding exercise.

Is it worth the candle? This strange history is a history of the present. It helps us to understand why nature has all those manifold connotations that I mentioned. Nature is as politically alive now as she has ever been, precisely as we begin to worry that technology has irrevocably destroyed her, as we argue about genetically modified organisms, the climate that we have changed at our peril, or simply how much land we want to consign to what we call 'nature reserves'. Nature works her rhetoric as much as she ever did. Hadot tells us some of the reasons why.

There are two overarching attitudes to nature, Promethean and Orphic. Zeus was disturbed that people were becoming too uppity, and hid fire away from their knowledge. Prometheus by trickery stole it, thus exposing one of the secrets of nature for us all to use. There is a raft of metaphors at work here. Secrets must be extracted from nature. The initial model is not the laboratory but the law. Nature must be brought to court and tried. In a trial, informants were tested by torture. Nature's secrets must be wrung from her. One book that Hadot praises, in certain respects as a precursor of his own, is Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* (1980). In the original French version of his book he does not give her subtitle, *Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, and does not point to its importance as a major feminist statement about science. Merchant emphasised that modern science was founded on the idea of torturing nature. She was much vilified for this. There is a



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retrospective discussion of these debates, a quarter-century long, in last autumn's *Isis* (not the goddess but the history of science journal).

The great prophet of the 17th century was Francis Bacon, who proposed, as parable, that Prometheus invented experimental science. Merchant argued that Bacon too subscribed to the torture model, and passionately defended her position in the same issue of *Isis*. He certainly praised dominance. As well as the passages cited by Hadot, Bacon wrote in a long letter (which he did not publish): 'I am come in very truth leading to you Nature with all her children, to bind her to your service and make her your slave.' Since he never printed this, he cannot be held fully responsible - someone could even have inserted the line - but the idea is to be read in his well-known works, *passim*. Our present civilisation is founded on the use of 'technical procedures to tear Nature's "secrets" from her in order to dominate and exploit her', Hadot writes, but he also insists that Bacon's programme was foreseen in ancient times, even around the end of the third century BCE. He quotes a long passage including two clear statements: that everything produced contrary to nature is made by human technology or technique (*techne*); and that the aspect of technology needed to overcome difficulties is trickery.

The Greek words that he translates as 'trickery' are none other than ancestors of our word 'mechanics'. Hadot argues that there was a lot of technological innovation, engineering and mechanics in the ancient world. I've been too brainwashed with the idea of a scientific revolution in the 17th century wholly to agree with him; it is the old metallurgists that impress me. Their god was Hephaestus, whose temple in the agora at Athens was respectfully repaired with Pittsburgh steel money, and whose work was neither mechanics nor what I would call trickery. But it is right to think that a lot of laboratory science is trickery, cunning. More than eighteen centuries after that ancient talk of trickery, mechanics came into its own, not only with machines but also with what the physicists still call Galilean mechanics, Newtonian mechanics, classical mechanics. Twentieth-century physics is quantum mechanics. Those Nobel Prizes I mentioned earlier are for new techniques for tricking nature (no other word will do): quantum tricks that cool atoms to almost zero in an almost vacuum. Prometheus stole fire to warm us and to cook by, and we end by stealing the ultracold. Recall those Nobel medals. Underneath *Isis* being unveiled is a line adapted from Virgil. Rendered by Dryden, it speaks of a gathering 'beneath a laurel shade' of patriots, poets and 'searching wits, of more mechanic parts, / who grac'd their age with new-invented arts'.

[HDT](#)[WHAT?](#)[INDEX](#)**LIFTING THE VEIL OF THE****GODDESS OF NATURE**

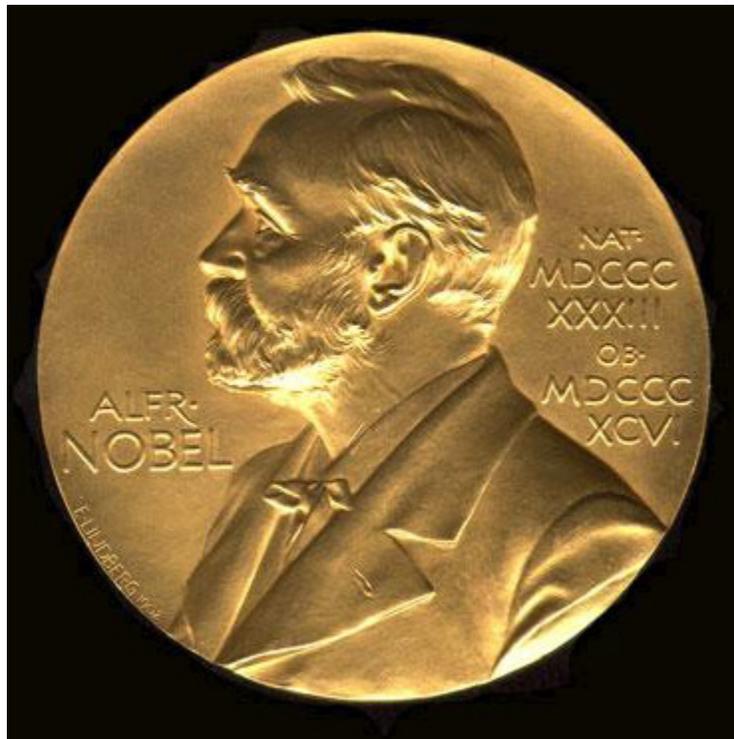
Then there is the other attitude to nature, which Hadot calls Orphic: the poets, if you will, who are also in the laurel grove. The Orphic 'penetrates the secrets of Nature not through violence but through melody, rhythm and harmony . . . inspired by respect in the face of mystery and disinterestedness'. Hadot singles out Leonardo as both Promethean and Orphic, but I would say the same of many of the living scientists whom I most respect, including those who are the most cunning tricksters. Hadot also mentions his contemporary and colleague François Jacob. Jacob said - in a remark that Hadot loves - that whereas Jacques Monod wanted life as produced by natural selection to be logical, Cartesian, rational, Jacob, in his own charmingly sexist words, 'saw Nature as a rather nice girl who was generous but a bit sloppy, a bit muddleheaded, working at one thing at a time, and doing her best with what she found handy'. The heyday of the Orphic attitude in Europe was the Romantic era. Wordsworth and company gambolling by the Lakes, and their heirs fighting to keep wind turbines and other Promethean tools away from fell and moor. But for Hadot, its epitome is Goethe, the Orphic scientist. 'Poetry too might lift the veil of Nature,' Goethe said when he received Humboldt's tribute, but we tend to forget that Goethe expressed very strong views in prose about most of the sciences: plants, the origin of the earth, light. He was an obsessive collector of geological specimens - if you want to please the old man, it was said, take



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him a new rock for a present. I knew something about his theory of the nature of light and the colours, which still retains interest, but before I read Hadot I did not realise how intensely he hated Newton. Newton had done the unspeakable; he had tortured light by splitting it into colours with his damn prism. (It seems to have been OK for nature to do it with raindrops.) Goethe published *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, so admired by Humboldt, in 1790. It is the culmination of a line of observation and marvelling that began on his Italian journey, when he speculated that there had to be one original plant, which he called the Ur-plant. Darwin adored Humboldt and his works, but did not share his enthusiasm for Goethe on plants. Other readers praise it, along with Erasmus Darwin, as prefiguring evolutionary thinking. Well, that seems confused: Goethe would have detested natural selection as much as he detested Newton's torturing of light. Yet *The Metamorphosis of Plants* has an extraordinary 'feeling for the organism' - a phrase I take from Evelyn Fox Keller's study of Barbara McClintock, a stand-alone plant geneticist who thought in terms of organisms as collaborative wholes at a time when everyone else saw them as masterminded by genetic codes, and who won a Nobel Prize in 1983. That was when the ultimate secrets of life were being unveiled as DNA, or so it was said, but McClintock did not agree.



Goethe thought Nature has secrets, but not that she is veiled. The shutters are on our eyes for not seeing what she shows us outright. Everything inside is also outside: inner and outer are



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one for those who will see, or so he said in a short poem, 'Epirrhema'. In about 1798 he wrote a marvellous love poem of two pages, 'The Metamorphosis of Plants', which joyously conveys the emotion behind his botanical tract. A long passage from the poem was translated into French prose in Hadot's book, and is here further translated into numbing English. It could put you off the poem for life. Seek out Michael Hamburger's version, in Christopher Middleton's Goethe: Selected Poems. It begins, incidentally, by making fun not only of the search for a secret inside, but also of Linnaean nomenclature. Don't classify, it says: look!

'Nature, it seems, must always clash with Art, /And yet, before we know it, both are one' - another of Goethe's poems, about 1800. Hadot has a good deal to say about the visual arts as ways of unveiling nature, especially in the Romantic era. That is right, but I suspect it is an anomaly. Throughout the ages, visual and tactile art have focused on the human body and the human face, not nature - with the obvious exceptions of the Inuit, and the peoples of the north-west coastline of North America, where animals dominate the art forms. Hadot's idea is that the arts unveil nature by imitation, rediscovery and reportrayal. But that instinct is not specifically Orphic. Galilean science was prefigured in the high middle ages by the image of God the architect; the secrets of nature would be revealed by figuring out the machinery by which he made the world. Leibniz called that architectonic reason, and it is the essential obverse of Promethean intervention in nature, for you can mess with her successfully only if you have some idea how she is put together.

Hadot sums up the Goethean stage in the evolution of the Heraclitan adage as 'Isis has no veils.' But she still has secrets. Another of Keller's books is Secrets of Life, Secrets of Death (1992); it is about, among other things, codes. And here is one thing Hadot gets wrong. He says that we no longer talk about the secrets of nature. Well, we do. Witness both the Orphic Keller and the Promethean Chu with whom I began. The metaphor is thriving today.

That antique phrase, 'Nature loves to hide,' could be an emblem for life itself, constantly mutating, evolving, changing its meaning. Perfect: because mutations, so we are taught, are often just misinterpretations, mistranscriptions, of code. Hadot takes us as far as an ultimate Orphic misreading: Heidegger and dread. The anxiety is caught by two of Sartre's titles, Being and Nothingness, on the one hand, and Nausea, on the other. (Both works figure at the end of Hadot's book.) How can there be being? Some schoolmen said God had to create everything, every instant, to keep things going. Existentialism turns such thoughts into fear and trembling, but also a kind of self-loathing.

Yet even here there is a strange play between the Promethean and the Orphic. There may be a physicist's response to the wonder (or dread) of existence, and I do not mean the much touted idea of a Big Bang when everything came into being. The closest to



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nothingness that can be imagined is a vacuum at zero degrees Kelvin. In classical mechanics, that is where nothing happens. Here lies one of the most marvellous paradoxes of quantum mechanics: an absolutely cold vacuum is a buzz of quantum activity. There is talk, at present, that when the almost empty, almost zero, is probed by amazing tricks, it may reveal core truths about the fundamental forces of nature. That in turn would tell us more about being and nothingness than has yet been dreamt of in our philosophies. What a wonderful place for nature to hide some of her deeper secrets: an absolutely cold total vacuum.

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“MAGISTERIAL HISTORY” IS FANTASIZING, HISTORY IS CHRONOLOGY



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"It's all now you see. Yesterday won't be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago."

- Remark by character "Garin Stevens"
in William Faulkner's INTRUDER IN THE DUST



Prepared: April 9, 2014



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ARRGH AUTOMATED RESearch REPORT

GENERATION HOTLINE



This stuff presumably looks to you as if it were generated by a human. Such is not the case. Instead, someone has requested that we pull it out of the hat of a pirate who has grown out of the shoulder of our pet parrot "Laura" (as above). What these chronological lists are: they are research reports compiled by ARRGH algorithms out of a database of modules which we term the Kouroo Contexture (this is data mining). To respond to such a request for information we merely push a button.



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Commonly, the first output of the algorithm has obvious deficiencies and we need to go back into the modules stored in the contexture and do a minor amount of tweaking, and then we need to punch that button again and recompile the chronology – but there is nothing here that remotely resembles the ordinary “writerly” process you know and love. As the contents of this originating contexture improve, and as the programming improves, and as funding becomes available (to date no funding whatever has been needed in the creation of this facility, the entire operation being run out of pocket change) we expect a diminished need to do such tweaking and recompiling, and we fully expect to achieve a simulation of a generous and untiring robotic research librarian. Onward and upward in this brave new world.

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