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**REVIVAL AND METAMORPHOSES OF THE GODS
IN NINETEENTH CENTURY ART AND LITERATURE**

by

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LECTURE IV

THE RESURRECTION OF ISIS

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You may remember that Milton has placed Isis, along with Osiris, Horus and Anubis, among the gods were about to die at the advent of Christ.

What I hope to show you this afternoon is that not only did Isis survive for centuries, but that she experienced the most extraordinary transfigurations.

Before starting my demonstration, I should recall, briefly, that ever since it had been rediscovered and conquered by Bonaparte in 1798, Egypt had fascinated French imagination, and has played an important part in literature and the arts. • [*In the extended version for publication Seznec wrote: This is the frontispiece of the monumental record of the campaign, Vivant-Denon's Description de l'Egypte published under Napoléon, full of splendid plates, some in colour, which provided, at last, a valid support for the imagination. These plates were once praised by Ruskin as "one of the greatest monuments of calm human industry, honestly and delicately applied, which exists in the world".*] We already had the opportunity to mention Flaubert's *Tentation* and Leconte de Lisle's *Poèmes barbares*. In 1856, Gautier published his famous *Roman de la momie*, largely based on Champollion and Prisse d'Avesnes; this novel, in turn, inspired painters.

But Egyptian pictures had already appeared in the *Salons*. Lassale-Bordes' *Cleopatra*, exhibited in 1846, reveals, as you can see, some concern for exactness in the detail of furniture and jewelry – • a concern even more obvious in Guignet's *Joseph explaining the dreams of Pharaoh*, exhibited in the preceding year, 1845. The setting is actually taken from the

frontispiece of the *Grande Description* [we have just seen]: the columns are those of the Isis temple at Philae; behind the throne of Pharaoh is the zodiac of Denderah.

This attempt at archaeological accuracy was bound to fail, according to Baudelaire. “M. Guignet, he wrote, has borrowed some motifs from Egyptian sculptures and mosaics, and he has coloured them on papyrus; but wherever he draws his models from, M. Guignet can only do a Guignet”.

Music, too, had been affected by the Egyptian fashion. Rossini’s *Mosè in Egitto*, when it was performed in Paris in 1852, made Gautier delirious with visions of crouching sphinxes, obelisks and hypogea. Let us remember also, that it was a French Egyptologist, Mariette, who gave Verdi the subject of *Aïda*, which should have been performed in the new Opera house in Cairo, on the occasion of the opening of the Suez Canal.

Now what about Isis? • She had lived on all through the Middle Ages, in the most improbable places. The Centaur, as we saw the other day, had found a shelter in the Chartres Cathedral. Isis managed to find an even earlier shelter in another cathedral, Aix-la-Chapelle, where she appears on an ivory plaque decorating the ambo, or pulpit, of an XIth century Germanic emperor, Henry II.

How did she ever get there?

She is represented with several attributes, among them a ship – which indicates that she is the Isis of Pharos, the patroness of the famous lighthouse in Alexandria. In Hellenistic times, her cult, Hellenized by the Greeks in Egypt, spread throughout the Greco-Roman world, precisely in the wake of her ships. She became, in fact, the darling of that world: she had sanctuaries everywhere in the Roman empire, including in Gaul – and of course the paraphernalia of her cult, her portraits, her statuettes, were also exported by the Alexandrian ships.

But she survived for more centuries under many other garbs. • During the Quattrocento, Pinturicchio painted her in the Pope’s apartment as a wise and benevolent queen, seated on a throne between Moses and Hermes Trismegistus. At the end of the XVIIIth century one could still hear, in Mozart’s *Magic Flute* the invocations of her priests. In the early XIXth century she turned up again, • this time in the frontispiece of a history of freemasonry.

And now comes the time when she will be truly reincarnated at the hand of two major French writers, Nerval and Michelet.

• Their notion of the goddess was originally derived from documents – texts and pictures.

Nerval’s source is a late one: Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*, or *The Golden Ass*. You know the story. A young man, Lucius, is changed by a witch into a donkey. He then appeals to Isis for help; and one night, by moonlight, Isis appears to him in a dream – and the next day, on the occasion of the procession of the goddess, he is restored to his human form; after which he is initiated into the mysteries of Isis and becomes, for some time, one of the servants of her temple.

Now Nerval was deeply impressed by two features in that story. One is the goddess's answer to Lucius' invocation. He had invoked her under various names, as he did not know which one to use:

“O blessed Queen of Heaven, whether thou art Dame Ceres, or whether thou art the Celestial Venus ... or whether thou art the sister of the god Phoebus, and art thou adored at the sacred places in Ephesus”, etc.

He does not, however, mention Isis by name. When she appears, she reveals to him that she is all these goddesses in one:

“My divinity is adored throughout the world, and under many names. The Phrygians call me Mother of the Gods, the Athenians Minerva, the Eleusinians Ceres; some Juno, others Bellona, others Hecate, others Rhamnusia – but the Egyptians call me by my true name: Queen Isis”.

And indeed, as Nerval himself comments in the short story entitled *Isis*, during the last period of paganism, through the process of syncretism which tended to unify various mythological conceptions, the Egyptian goddess had absorbed all others.

- This picture is taken from the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, where the Jesuit father Athanasius Kircher claimed to have deciphered the most enigmatic of Egyptian symbols: you can see that he lists the symbolic meaning of the attributes of the Apuleian Isis, as well as her various names. Now Nerval had perused the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*; he had developed an early passion for productions of this kind – that is, of esoteric character. He had fed, for instance, on Dom Pernety's *Dictionnaire mytho-hermétique* and on his *Fables égyptiennes*; he had plumbed their allegories. Any book dealing with secret doctrines and societies would appeal to him. He found in abbé Terrasson's *Sethos* the origins of the Masonic ritual. As we know, the Isiac mysteries served as a prototype of that ritual – and *Sethos* is the main source of *The Magic Flute*.



Isis from Kircher's *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* (1652)
Sackler Library

This is another feature of the *Golden Ass* which fascinates Nerval : it is a book of initiation. When Lucius, through a miracle, has resumed his human form, he is taken into the temple of Isis, and there is gradually introduced to the most secret ceremonies of her cult.

Nerval had visited Egypt. He actually went down inside one of the great pyramids – which he believed to be religious monuments. He describes the lower gallery – one hundred feet below the ground, he says – where the trials of the neophytes were held before they were admitted (forty days afterwards) to see the unveiled statue of Isis. Nerval even expressed the wish that *The Magic Flute* could be performed, one day, inside the pyramid. ●

Curiously enough, it was in Italy that he discovered the goddess. In a short story, *Octavie*, he tells us how, after having seen the ruins of Herculaneum, he went to visit Pompeii with an English girl. Together they came to the temple of Isis “There”, Nerval says, “I was able to explain to my companion the details of the ritual, and of the offices, which I had read in Apuleius. She herself insisted in playing the part of the goddess – and I assumed the role of Osiris. I was the interpreter of the divine mysteries”.

This is the temple of Isis as it was in 1780 when it was drawn by Desprez – and probably as Nerval saw it. Nerval claims, in fact, that he was a witness to a scene of initiation. In another short story, entitled *Isis*, he reports that one of the ambassadors to the Court of Naples ● once gave a kind of fancy dress party, designed to revive the physiognomy of the town in classical antiquity; but the most curious part of the festival took place [here] in the evening, in Pompeii, in the very temple of Isis where the solemn liturgy of the goddess was performed.

Here, however, Nerval was drawing from a German source, Böttinger’s *Die Isis Vesper*, published in 1809, rather than from his personal experience; but he kept dreaming about these mysteries.

● He might have looked, besides Desprez’s reconstitution, at another imaginary scene which is set, this time, in Egypt, in the great temple at Denderah (a plate of the great *Description*).

● Or he might have looked at a genuine document, the famous fresco from Herculaneum.

● However, what his heart was really longing for was the goddess herself, grave, motherly, benevolent, as he had seen her in the Museum at Naples.

Here comes the strangest part of the story, and the most poignant one.

In commenting upon Apuleius’ tale, recent scholars have stressed its autobiographical character: it is the record of a conversion – the passage from a sinner’s miserable condition to a pure and sanctified life. The feeling of Lucius for Isis is an impassioned tenderness, an intense devotion. He feels that he must be loved by the goddess, since she sought him out in his misery – and, once admitted into her temple, he derives an ineffable delight from the contemplation of her image.

This personal link also exists between Nerval and Isis, even more intimately, but with tragic overtones.

Nerval's *Aurélia* is the record of a dream – a heart-rending record, since the man who wrote it was already a prey to insanity (he had to be placed in a mental home) and on his way to suicide. *Aurélia* dates from 1855. In that same year, on a winter night, Nerval's body was found hanging from a lamp-post in a sordid alley in Paris.

This last work had really been a desperate attempt to reach the other world, a descent in pursuit of his beloved dead, and also in hope of personal purification.

What were the visions which had assailed him when he was locked up in the mental home?

He saw, on the walls, a great mythological figure: Aurélia as a goddess, escorted by other divinities; then these divinities seemed to be merging, so to speak, into a single one. The syncretic process took place, not on the historical level, however, but on a purely personal one.

“I had a marvelous vision. It seemed to me that a goddess appeared who said: ‘I am the same as Artemis, the same as the Virgin Mary, the same as your mother. I am also the same woman whom you have always loved. After each of the miseries and torments which you have undergone, I have shed one of my veils – and before long you shall see me as I am : the Eternal Isis.’”

“Je reportai ma pensée à l'éternelle Isis, la mere et l'épouse sacrée; toutes mes aspirations, toutes mes prières se confondaient dans ce nom magique; je me sentais reviver en elle – et parfois elle m'apparaissait sous la figure de la Vénus antique, parfois aussi sous les traits de la Vierge des Chrétiens. La nuit me ramena plus distinctement cette appartion chérie.”

During the night, alas, there is also at his bedside, a woman in black with tears like diamonds in the empty sockets of her eyes. “I cried a long time, calling my mother by the names given to pagan divinities”, and Isis warns him of more ordeals to come, and more sufferings, but she also promises ultimate redemption, and salvation. “La divinité de mes rêves m'apparut souriante et me dit: Il s'agit de faire ton salut.”

This does not exhaust the account of Nerval's relation with Isis. I should have liked to quote at least some of his sonnets: *Les Chimères*, which are among the most perfect gems in French poetry; but we must move on to another Isis, resuscitated under a still more unexpected garb.

Michelet was a professional historian (he even was for a time keeper of the historical division of the National Archives). One would expect him to deal with ancient religions as a sober, objective scholar. Michelet, however, was never sober, and rarely objective: history, for him, was a personally, passionately relived experience.

When *Le Génie des Religions* appeared in 1842, Michelet, who was a close friend of Quinet, criticized his approach. Instead of isolating religions, and of subdividing them in order to show their influence on philosophy, on history, on poetry, etc., Quinet should have asked from each of them: “What remedy, what comfort, did you bring, in your days, to the souls of men? For religions are born of moral needs. I would have extracted them all from within...”

He felt that he was, in fact, uniquely qualified for the task – because, more than any of his contemporaries, he was affected by the twilight of the gods, and their ultimate extinction. “Do

you want to know”, he wrote, “why I was so tender to the gods? Because, one after the other, they pass away”.

Michelet then started dreaming of his own book – but he had already made several preliminary sketches for the work, and indeed completed parts of it. His dream was not fulfilled until 1864, when he published his *Bible de l'Humanité*. The original intention was educative. Michelet wanted to compose a sort of popular anthology, made of excerpts from the great religious texts of Persian, India, Judea – and of course Egypt. Although they belong to the remote past, these religions are still alive: they still contain a vital element, whereas present-day Christianity is really dying – or dead. That is why, in the age of revolutions, the masses, craving for that moral nourishment which can no longer be provided by the Gospel, should be put, so to speak, on an eastern diet. “Mort de la religion vivante; Vie des religions mortes” – such is the theme of Michelet’s lectures at the Collège de France in 1848. Their anti-Christian bias is obvious. But in November of that same year, 1848, an event occurred which was to give an entirely new twist to the enterprise. Michelet, then fifty, met a girl thirty years younger, Athénaïs Mialaret, and married her almost immediately.

In one of his first love letters we read: “O ma fiancée! I am going to present you with a marvellous bouquet made of? Religions, now arranged in a different way – and with a different purpose.”

The most conspicuous, the most vivid flower in the bunch is a lotus, I mean, Egyptian religion. Michelet’s main authority on the subject is Plutarch’s *On Isis and Osiris*. He draws from it with obvious predilection – and there is good reason for this. ● It is in Plutarch that the story of the goddess – *and of her husband* – is told in the most pathetic detail. Through the treachery of his brother Set, Osiris was nailed in a coffin, then murdered and dismembered. Isis sought for the pitiful remains of her husband, which had been scattered in the swamp along the Nile; she finally found them all, but one [*in a later version*: the genital organ which had been devoured by the fishes]. You can see her collecting the mutilated limbs in a fresco by Pinturicchio, in the Borgia apartments.

Now listen to Michelet’s comment on this gruesome episode: “L’Egypte débordée dans l’amour, et l’amour physique, Isis poursuivant par delà la mort son Osiris et le membre aimé!” These expressions, which I find in a lecture given by Michelet in April 1849, make us suspect that the projected book on religions is now taking a turn away from the social and educative towards the erotic. Everything from now on will revolve around Athénaïs. “L’Egypte!” Michelet exclaims again, “l’Egypte où les maris sont obéissants aux femmes!”

Our suspicions are confirmed by Michelet’s diaries, published only some twenty years ago: they contain some entries which it would be embarrassing to quote.

I don’t have to explain, either, under whose influence two of Michelet’s next books were written. The titles: *L’Amour* (1858), *La Femme* (1859) speak for themselves. The relevant point is that, once more, Isis plays a conspicuous part in *La Femme*. A whole chapter (chapter X) is dedicated to Egyptian religion – and this is how it begins: “La religion en Egypte est sortie tout entière du profond de la tendresse physique, de l’amour, et de la douleur”. I would rather

suggest that the whole chapter has sprung from the feverish passion of Michelet's middle age. "Egypt", he says again, "was raving about her Isis" – "L'Égypte délirait de son Isis" – as Michelet was raving about his Athénaïs.

Yet, however coloured his vision was by his never-ending honeymoon, it would not be fair to ignore his genuine interest in the legend itself. He speaks in heartfelt accent of the quest of Isis the widow, searching among the reeds for the bleeding remains of her husband; and he echoes her lament – that ancient lament which has never ceased to be heard along the Nile:

"Isis s'arrache les cheveux en cherchant son Osiris. Cette douleur africaine, la plus naïve du monde, abandonnée, sans orgueil, confie à toute la nature le cruel tourment de la veuve, son regret, son cuisant désir, la désolante impuissance où elle est de vivre sans lui. Elle toruve enfin de ses membres que les flots ont emportés – elle va, pour les ravoir, jusqu'en Syrie, à Byblos, obtient qu'on lui restitue ce qui reste de debris. Un seul manque. Profond désespoir! Hélas, celui-ci, c'est la vie".

I know, Michelet continues, that commentators have interpreted this simple story in a symbolic sense, even in astronomical terms – but these are late additions, and they are secondary. The primary origin is human, and real: the grief of a disconsolate widow.

Consolation comes, at last, for such sorrow deserved a miracle. Osiris, mutilated as he is, comes back from the dead and makes Isis a mother, once again: the mother of that pale and sickly god, Harpocrates.

Osiris, according to Plutarch, did consort with his widow, and she gave birth to a child "untimely born and weak in the lower limbs". One sees in Abydos to-day a relief representing the dead Osiris with Isis and Horus, their first-born, by his tomb. The miracle is about to take place through the intervention of a bird, hovering over the tomb: the dead god will procreate another child, Harpocrates.

"Dans ce combat de la tendresse et de la mort, Osiris, tout démembré qu'il est, ressuscite, revient à elle... et si grand est l'amour du mort que par la force du Coeur il retrouve son dernier désir. Il n'est revenu du tombeau que pour la rendre mère encore. Oh, combien avidement elle reçoit cet embrassement! Hélas, ce n'est plus qu'un adieu, et le sein ardent d'Isis ne réchauffera pas ce germe glacé. N'importe. Le fruit qui en naît, triste et pale, n'en dit pas moins la suprême victoire de l'amour qui féconde au-delà de la vie".

● In this legend, so tender, so naïve, Michelet concludes, there is a taste of immortality. Do not despair, afflicted hearts, widows that mourn, orphan children. You are weeping – but Isis also weeps – and she does not despair. Osiris is still alive. He has become the keeper of the world of shadows – and your beloved one is with him, down below."

Michelet had not been content with reading Plutarch. He had never been to Egypt, but he had visited the Egyptian collections in Turin, in Leyden, and of course in the Louvre. He had seen the colossal statues, the mummies, and the scrolls of the Book of the Dead. Also, as he points out himself, he had looked at books – not the kind of old, bizarre compilations so dear to poor Nerval but serious works of modern erudition: Creuzer, Champollion, Rossellini, Lepsius,

and, above, all the great *Description*. All these books have plates – and Michelet picked up, • among these plates, those which supported his views on Egyptian religion, or rather, which fed his private obsessions.

“Isis, the good genius, the queen of the heart, was enthroned as a woman, candidly adorned with her beautiful breast and all the attributes of fecundation. She wore the horns of the milk-giving cow – or perhaps it is the crescent of the moon, the restful moon which, at the end of a day of toil, brings men back to their beds, to their wives, and which regulates the periods of love. She also wore the scepter with a lotus on top – that is, the pistil of the flower of love. Such she appears in her temple at Philae, with all her attributes”.

Michelet, as it seems, was fascinated • by the breast of Egyptian women, ever since he had read in Cailliaud’s *Voyage à Meroe et au Fleuve blanc*, the following observation: “On the Upper Nile, women have the privilege of keeping, even in their old age, that beautiful shape which we admire on monuments – that very full, firm breast”. In order to substantiate his remark, Cailliaud gives a picture of a woman from Sennâr – and Michelet comments: “that immutable breast, always erect, seems to offer the cup of immortality”.

• And of course Isis is a real mother, not a virgin. Osiris is a real husband – you can’t laugh at him (an oblique reference to Joseph and Mary). “C’est un mari dont on ne peut se moquer, mais réel et actif, de generation assidue, si amoureux de son Isis que cet amour surabondant féconde toute la nature”. Horus is a real son, the living glory of love and marriage. The whole family, in Egypt, is on the altar.

• Finally, Isis wore a diadem in the shape of a vulture, “the rapacious bird which never says: enough – the vulture, symbol of death, that severe procuress who imposes love, and demands its constant renewal. The emblem of the mother – cow, which sometimes appears above the vulture’s wings in this strange headdress, repeats the same lesson: love should renew life and renew it incessantly”.

• “As I was writing this”, Michelet adds, “with a heart full of these sublime myths, I was also looking for pictures of real, everyday life, which I could place side by side with them. One of these pictures struck me, and started me thinking. It is an engraving in Rossellini’s *Monumenti civili*. A tenant farmer, followed by his cattle, comes to report to a scribe, who records the number of animals. The farmer, still a young man, as it seems, crosses his arms on his breast, in an attitude of respect. This scribe is obviously an agent of the King, or of the priests. At his feet, another figure lies prostrated, so low that he looks terrified, and imploring.”

This picture starts a long, drawn-out discussion of the miserable condition of the Egyptian people. Where is Isis now, the good goddess whose story had been the comfort of these poor labourers – “la consolation sublime d’un peuple laborieux”.

Alas, the popular religion, so touching, so consoling, - the religion issued from a woman’s heart – has become a harsh, sacerdotal system.

• Here, in this plate from Champollion’s *Monuments d’Egypte de de Nubie*, is an implacable Osiris. The dead are coming up the staircase to stand, one by one, before the judge. He has just condemned to Hell a miserable soul, which has been changed into a sow; it is now being

carried away on a ship, under the charge of two malevolent demons (I can't make out, Michelet remarks, whether they are leopards or monkeys).

All this, alas, already prefigures the Christian times – the advent of a dry, severe, inhuman religion, hostile to nature and fertility : a religion of terror – for here we already have the casting out of devils and the Gandarene swine; and we face, already, the nightmares of the Christian Middle Ages.

Once again, Michelet is carried away by his wild prejudices and by his frantic compassion. Yet, towards the end of his life, he claimed that compassion was the key, the only key, to the understanding of the past; it had opened up for him those mysteries of Egypt which erudition had been trying in vain to elucidate. "I had", he reflected, "a very rare gift, and a very fecund one: the gift of tears. All those whom I bewailed, nations or gods, came alive again. This kind of naïve magic had an almost infallible efficacy. Others, for instance, had spelled out, deciphered Egypt, and excavated its graves; they had not recovered its soul. I found it. I found it in the heart of Isis, in the mutilated Osiris, in the long sufferings of the people of the Nile". He found it also, as we have seen, in the embracing of his young consort.

These avatars of Isis in XIXth century France, the maternal Isis of Nerval, the conjugal Isis of Michelet, should perhaps make us pause for a moment in conclusion. Have these reincarnations of the goddess any value, besides their literary and psychological interest? Before the historian dismisses them as sheer extravagance, he might notice that they evoke, at least, a distant but faithful echo: they still quiver with the impressions which the figure of Isis and her adventures made on the Ancients themselves. Nerval, after all, revived the emotions of Apuleius, and those of the initiates. As for Michelet, his exclusive concern with Isis' widowhood may look, at first, like the result of an erotic fixation; but in fact, one can hardly exaggerate the hold that the worship of Isis and her search for the scattered body of Osiris exerted upon the Greeks from the late Vth century down to the time of Plutarch, and beyond.

I am quoting from Professor Kirk's recent book on *Myth*; he goes on to stress that for the Egyptians themselves this drama of murder, dismemberment and piecemeal discovery had become central in the course of time: it was the core of popular religion, ritual, and mythology.

Even for the modern man, myth – at least those myths which have retained the seeds of emotion, have kept, at the same time, the chance of resurrection. Myths, Camus once said, are potentially alive; they are just waiting for us, calling to us to incarnate them. Should a man, a single man, answer their call – and they offer us their sap and their savour – intact.

Barrès, for his part, was fond of claiming that intuition had an essential part to play in the understanding of history- for we do not penetrate the secrets of human souls unless we share, somehow, in their passions; and Barrès called to witness the incurably sensuous and sentimental Michelet. "Ill-informed as Michelet was about the Egyptians, such was the yearning of his heart towards them that they came back to life, more vividly than through all the learned dissertations of the specialists. Only the passionate are far-sighted. "Seuls verrons loin les passionnés".

●● To be the advocate of feeling is to be, perhaps, the devil's advocate. Let us not, in any case, underestimate the power of art in the process of revivification. We have been dealing to-night with two artists: Nerval and Michelet – and there is a third one.

About the time when Michelet published his *Bible de l'Humanité*, in the 1860's, young Degas, also, was looking through the plates of the great *Description*, and making copies of them. Some of these copies, in fact, are simple tracing. Yet, if you look at the profile of Isis and compare it to the original engraving, you will perceive that a subtle operation has been taking place: the sheer sensitiveness of Degas' pencil has turned Isis, once more, into a living woman.