Doorways, Divestiture, and the Eye of Wrath:
Tracking an Archetype

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“Thou hast turned my heaviness into joy; thou hast put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness” (Psalm 30: 12).

“As a man leaves an old garment and puts on one that is new, the Spirit leaves his mortal body and then puts on one that is new” (Bhagavad Gita 2:22)

“the heavens are the works of thine hands: they shall perish, but thou remainest; and they shall wax old as doth a garment; and as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed” (Hebrews 1: 1)

“clothed in glory, that is the Self” (Chandogya Upanishad)

The image cluster composed of doorways and divestiture is one of the most enduring and interesting in mythology, literature, painting, film and architecture. We can trace its transmission and transformation from the Sumerian “Descent of Inanna” of 1750 B.C. to Thomas Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49. In nearly every instance, the iconography of doorways has to do with the rhythms of incarnation and transfiguration, which can be approached from a variety of theoretical perspectives.

The oldest mythological occurrence of the iconography linking doorways and divestiture comes from the Sumero-Akkadian account of “The Descent of Inanna,” first written down in 1750 B.C., but undoubtedly much older. In this myth, the Goddess Inanna prepares for her descent to the underworld by donning the seven royal me, articles of clothing symbolic of her royal power, which gatekeepers then force her to remove as she passes through each of the seven doorways leading into the kur, where Ereshkigal, her sister goddess of death, awaits her with “the word of wrath” and “the eye of death” (Wolkstein and Kramer 60). Stripped finally naked, Inanna is killed and hung up on a peg on the wall to rot for three days and nights until she is brought back to life by the food of the kurgarra and the water of galatur (two little sexless creatures formed of Enki’s fingernail dirt). This glorious hymn establishes motifs very much alive (as we will see) in our current tradition: divestiture, doorways, the eye of wrath, crucifixion, and rebirth. Inanna’s descent and return also has an astronomical corollary which survived in the hermetic and Gnostic traditions: the naked soul descends from its celestial home in the empyrean by passing through each of the seven planetary spheres, to assume its appropriate material element before becoming fully incarnate on Earth. When it returns at the moment of death, the soul sheds each material element at each of the seven planetary spheres until the body is transfigured into pure spirit.

Clothing also becomes a symbol of incarnation in Genesis, as we see in the stories of Adam and Eve and of Joseph. After the Fall, Yahweh prepares Adam and Eve for their own descent into the underworld of human life by clothing them in “coats of skins” as they pass through the eastern gate of the garden, which is guarded by the Cherub with the “flaming sword” (3: 21-23). Doorways and investment here form a figure of physical incarnation. In the prelude to Joseph and His Brothers, Thomas Mann noted the Gnostic tradition which attributed a body of “pure light” to “Adam qadmon” before the Fall (23), which of course becomes a body of skin afterwards. In the story of Joseph, this pure body of light before incarnation is represented by the “coat of many colors,” which the jealous brothers are careful to dip in goat’s blood before showing it to Jacob as evidence of Joseph’s death (Gen. 37: 31-33). This is again a clear, simple and powerful figure of incarnation, the spiritual body of light represented by the radiance of the coat of many colors, and the material body of physical life represented by the coat dipped in blood. Clothing symbolism remains central when Jacob deliberately tears his clothes and puts “sackcloth upon his loins” after learning of his favorite son’s death (Gen. 37: 34). Later in the tale, when Joseph is stripped naked (like Inanna in the underworld) by Potiphar’s wife, the repetition of the word “garment” (six times in seven verses) keeps our attention focused on the divestiture motif (Gen. 37: 12-18). Joseph is then sent to the Pharaohis prison, which Mann calls the “bor,” the Babylonian word meaning underworld (854). To celebrate his resurrection and to indicate the godlike status Joseph attains by interpreting the famous dreams, Pharaoh gives him a ring, a gold chain, and “arrayed him in vestures of fine linen” (Gen. 41: 42). Like the coat of many colors, this fine linen represented (for the Egyptians, at any rate!) the spiritual body of properly mummified souls, as we know from the importance of linen in Egyptian burial rites, and from the frequent occurrences of the hieroglyph for clothing in the Books of the Dead (Wilkinson 174). Threshold imagery permeates these Books, in which the soul passes through a sequence of elaborately wrought doorways, leading through the chambers of the underworld (Budge 170-262).
The Gnostic “Hymn of the Pearl” makes the symbolism of incarnation and transfiguration associated with divestiture and re-clothing explicit. For the Gnostics, Egypt represented the “material world” (Jonas 118). Hence, before the Father sends his son to retrieve the pearl (which lies fallen in the middle of the sea encircled by a snorting serpent), the young man is divested of his “robe of glory” and “purple mantle” (Jonas 113). In Egypt he puts on the impure garments of the Egyptian, i.e., he is incarnated in the material world. When he returns to the realm of the Father, the hero is reinvested in his “robe of glory,” a radiant and royal mantle which looks like a mirror image of himself (Jonas 115). Thusly reinvested, the hero proceeds to a reunion with his Father at the “gate of salutation” (115). As Jonas points out, this Gnostic version of Joseph’s coat of many colors represents “the heavenly or eternal self of the person, his original idea, a kind of double or alter ego preserved in the upper world while he labors down below” (122). One of the most magnificent evocations of the royal mantle as a symbol of the divine is to be found in The Golden Ass of Apuleius, from about 158 A.D., in which the Goddess Isis appears wearing the “pitch-black cloak” of the night sky, which is embroidered with a sprinkling of stars, a “mid-month moon,” and a garland of every kind of fruit and flower which clings to the border of the “splendid robe” (237).

We find a very close analogy in the symbolism of clothing in the parable of “The Prodigal Son,” from the Gospel of St Luke. Like Joseph and the hero of “The Pearl,” the Prodigal Son undertakes a “journey into a far country” which the Father associates with the underworld (15: 13): “For this my son was dead, and is alive again,” he says upon the Prodigal’s return (15: 24), a metaphor reiterated in the last verse, when the Father says to his other sons, “for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again” (15: 32). To celebrate the Son’s return from the far country of death, the Father commands his servants to “Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet” (15: 22). These items of clothing indicate the boy’s return from Hell and reception into the Kingdom of Heaven, represented in the parable by the home of the Father. The “best robe” in particular recalls Joseph’s coat of many colors and the Pearl hero’s royal purple mantle, symbols of the spiritual body of the resurrection.

The motif linking doorways and divestiture is extremely widespread, and occurs in a tremendous diversity of cultural artifacture. Consider, for example, the Navaho “Prayer of Liberation” from the Night Chant, in which the warrior twins (Monster Slayer and Child of the Water) come to the place of emergence, where, even though “Smooth Winds” guard “the door,” their descent into the underworld to recover a soul body of the “patient” begins. The journey passes first through four rooms of black, blue, yellow and white cloud, each room of which is opened by a black wand, and then proceeds through four layers of mist in the same color sequence, before arriving at the “place of descent from one world to another.” This descent involves a progression through a sequence of the four doorways of a black, blue, yellow and white mountain, each doorway guarded by a different animal: Red Bear, Red Snake, Red Coyote and Red Hawk. This sequence leads at last to a lodge in the land of the dead, which is ruled by a woman whom the twins must overcome before they pass through the entrance, edge, fireplace, middle and back of the red-floored lodge, each threshold again opened by a black wand. Having overcome death for the sake of the patient, the twins then retrace their steps through the doorways and rooms leading to the upperworld, passing at last through the “Place of Emergence” where “Smooth Wind guards the door” to return to the patient lying on the sand painting on the floor of the hogan. The patient’s being is then healed and restored (feet, limbs, body, mind, dust, saliva and hair) (Sandner 185-93).

In the Big Star Chant, the doorways are replaced by five hoops of different colors, through which the patient must step, gradually divesting himself of a white cotton garment, “symbolizing the shedding of an old skin and rebirth” (Sandner 148). In so doing, the patient reenacts the process by which Badger crawls through five hoops in order to flay himself of Coyote’s skin, which has mysteriously attached to him (Sandner 152). The entire sequence is eerily reminiscent of the linkage between doorways and divestiture in the Inanna myth, which is also concerned with death and rebirth.

The correlated symbolism linking divestiture and doorways to the mythology of the soul’s descent into and return from the underworld of life persists in the literary tradition as well. Two of Chretien de Troyes Arthurian Romances of the late 12th century contain vivid scenes linking doorway symbolism with the journey to the otherworld. In “The Knight With the Lion,” the transition between the worlds is marked by a castle gate with a portcullis that cuts Yvain’s horse in half as he passes through it in pursuit of the Black Knight whom he has just wounded after the adventure of the fountain. A second door leading into the courtyard closes, leaving Yvain in a kind of limbo, from which he is rescued by Lunette, with the help of a ring that makes him invisible. These details mark the transition to the underworld, since Chretien says the portcullis falls upon the horse, “Just like the devil out of hell” (306). In “The Knight of the Cart,” Lancelot passes a similar threshold into the underworld during his quest to liberate Guenevere. This occurs in the famous sword bridge crossing, at the end of which two lions stand on guard in front of a tower: pictorial illustrations of the scene -- like the 13th century capital in St. Pierre, Caen (Barber 53) -- typically show the lions in front of a doorway leading into the tower. Chretien links the doorway to the descent to the underworld by calling the river Lancelot crosses above on the sword bridge, “the Devil’s stream” (244), and by including many motifs from the “Harrowing of Hell” in the Gospel of Nicodemus (Owen 513).

The Gnostic “Hymn of the Pearl” is the early 13th century, threshold imagery predominates in Lancelot’s passage into the Grail Castle at Corbenic. He comes at midnight to a castle gate guarded by two lions and open to the sea, passing through which Lancelot is struck down by a flaming hand after drawing his sword. Once inside the fortress, he comes upon a closed door which opens when he prays; but in attempting to pass through into the inner chamber to help an old man lift up the Grail, Lancelot is knocked unconscious for twenty-four days, each day for a year of his life in sin with the Queen (260-63).

One final example from the Arthurian material links doorways, the otherworld, and divestiture. In the anonymous Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Gawain prepares for his descent on All Soul’s Day, when he dons the magnificent armor that is to
The symbolism linking doorways and divestiture to the mythology of the underworld is as frequently found in the history of art as in the literary tradition. During the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, for example, painters frequently used demonic doorways to represent the passage into hell. In a splendid miniature from the Hours of Catherine of Cleves “Not one but three mouths are incorporated into ... the castellated gate of Heli” (Pl. 99). In pictures of the “Harrowing of Hell,” we see Jesus rescuing the souls of Adam and Eve from Hell, with the savior typically standing at the threshold with a spear, impaling the demons who would impede his mission. One of Breugel the Elder’s paintings, for example, shows Jesus standing in a bubble-like medallion summoning the souls of the just from Hell: they come pouring forth from the jaws of a huge dragon, trampling down the two large panels of a wooden door that has been knocked off its hinges (De Givry Fig. 9). A mid-16th century Russian icon of the “Descent into Hell” even shows Jesus standing on the two door panels of the entrance, lifting Adam with his right and Eve with his left hand out of their respective coffins, the lids of which have been knocked off like the door panels (Sacred Art, Back Cover). One must also adduce Albrecht Dürer’s wonderful engravings of the theme from the early 16th century: both use large arched doorways with demons perched on top to represent Christ’s passage into limbo.

The iconography linking doorways to the descent myth, however, persists into the Romantic and Modernist eras, as in William Blake’s illustrations of Blair, which show “The Soul Exploring the Recesses of the Grave” by passing into the kingdom of Hades through what Erasmus Darwin called “the door of death” (Raine 31). Blake repeated the image on the frontispiece to his poem Jerusalem, which shows a vigorous youth stepping through the half-opened doorway of a Gothic arch, carrying a kind of solar disk in his right hand (Raine 32). By the time we get to the modern, the Harrowing of Hell motif becomes relatively rare, though Cézanne did a “Christ in Limbo” in 1867, which shows Jesus coming through a pillar and lintel threshold in the left background, and a huge Mary Magdalene on the right (“Cézanne” Figs. 32-33). The doorway motif, however, persists in such works as Paul Klee’s “Gateway to Hades,” and in the otherworldly limbs of de Chirico’s urban hells -- like “Mystery and Melancholy of a Street” of 1914 (Janson Cp. 141) -- which are delineated by starkly shaded corridors and arcades reminiscent of Cocteau’s cityscape in the film Orpheus. Klee even sets doorways to dancing, as in his marvelous “Viaducts Break Ranks” of 1937 (Paul Klee 73).

During the Renaissance, the distinction between the earthly and spiritual realms, stemming from “two famous statues of Venus, one draped, the other nude” by Praxiteles (Panofsky 153), was central to Neoplatonic interpretations of the “Twin Venuses” of the Symposium, one celestial (Aphrodite Urania) and the other terrestrial (Aphrodite Pandemos) (Wind 138). In Ficino and Pico della Miranda, both were celebrated as two noble aspects of love, divine and human (Amore celeste e umano) (Wind 139). As Erwin Panofsky points out, this distinction humanized the moralistic distinction made during the Middle Ages between Nature (represented by the naked Eve) and Reason or Grace (represented by the fully clothed Virgin Mary) (154). Such considerations inform Neoplatonic interpretations of two of the greatest paintings of the Renaissance: Titian’s so-called “Sacred and Profane Love” of 1515, and Botticelli’s “Birth of Venus” of 1480.

In Titian’s masterpiece, the Twin Venuses, one naked and one clothed, who sit on opposite ends of a sepulchre turned into a well, represent a gentle dialectic between “eternal and temporal values,” between the celestial and ‘terrestrial’, and between “Amore celeste e umano” (Panofsky 151-153; Wind 148). Hence, the Church prominently visible in the less densely foliated landscape behind the naked Venus refers to the heavenly flame of spiritual love, represented by the burning jar of oil uplifted in her left hand, while the Castle in the dense background behind the clothed Venus may refer to the earthly values of courtly splendor, represented by the “vessel full of gold and gems” which she holds on the rim of the well (Panofsky 151).

In Botticelli’s “Birth of Venus,” we see the naked Goddess arriving on the shore line, blown hither across the sea by the passionate wind of two embracing Zephyrs. The Hour of Spring greets her with a glorious floral robe which, however lovely, represents her descent from the “pure celestial beauty” of her naked self at sea, into the clothed form of her earthly splendor as “Venere vulgare or Aphrodite Pandemos” (Wind 138).

Given the persistent use of clothing symbolism in religious, mythological, artistic and literary traditions having to do with the dialectic between the spirit and the flesh implied by the journey to the otherworld, it is perhaps not surprising to find its presence in several of our most interesting contemporary works, of both literature and film.1 In Thomas Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49, for example, the heroine Oedipa Maas is portrayed both as Persephone and as Inanna, as she journeys through the “underground of the unbalanced” in Los Angeles and San Francisco (29), trying to find out why a former lover (Pierce Inverarity) has willed her his estate (the riches of Hades?). Oedipa is seduced in her motel by Pierce’s lawyer, who takes nearly an hour to strip her down, removing “six pairs of panties in assorted colors, girdle, three pairs of nylons, three
brassieres, two pairs stretch slacks, four half-slips, one black sheath, two summer dresses” (23). The unveiling continues later in a bar where the “sinister blooming of The Tristero” (an underground postal conspiracy) begins. Oedipa watches a deathly striptease dancer shed “breakaway gowns, net bras, jeweled garters and G-strings” until she stands naked with her “luminous stare locked to Oedipa’s, smile gone malign and pitiless” (36) as the “eye of death” with which Ereshkigal killed the naked Inanna in the Sumerian kur (Wolkstein and Kramer 50-60). After another one of her lovers dies later in the novel, Oedipa again returns to the metaphor of the Inanna complex: “They are stripping from me,” she says, “stripping away, one by one, my men” (105).

Leonora Carrington’s terrific little surrealist masterpiece of 1944, Down Below, also combines the motifs of stripping down, the passage through a sequence of doorways, and the eye of death. The heroine is raped (like Persephone) and stripped naked (like Inanna, Joseph and Gawain), as she crosses the threshold from a hotel in Madrid to the insane asylum at Santander, where, after arriving “like a cadaver” (17), her “clothes are torn off brutally” and she is left “bound and naked” for several days and nights amid the “spirits of all the crushed Spaniards” (24-26). As in the stories of Yvain and Lancelot from the Middle Ages, the divestiture motif here dramatically signifies the stripping down of the ego during a psychotic episode. But this stripping down soon leads to a revelation of the archetypal contents of the unconscious: when Leonora is injected with drugs, she sinks down into a well with the “staring, ghastly eyes” of the doctors above fixed upon her in a “GHASTLY, GHASTLY stair” (36; caps original). As in “The Descent of Inanna” and The Crying of Lot 49, the nadir of the neyvia evokes the eye of death, after which the revelations proceed and lead eventually to rebirth. In Down Below, these revelations occur in a special room, reached by passing through “a small ogival door” that leads up a “spiral staircase” to a “circular room lighted by five bull’s eye windows” with a pentagonal table in the center (42-43).

There are numerous other instances linking doorways and the descent into Hades in modernist literature. The entrance to the underworld in Hermann Broch’s Death of Virgil is the “fiery gullet” of the imperial citadel of Augustus Caesar, through which the dying poet passes to reach the second peristyle and garden court leading to a staircase ascending three flights to the doorway of his room in the southwest tower (48-55). In Thomas Mann’s Death in Venice, Gustav von Aschenbach’s journey is announced by a stranger “standing in the portico above the two apocalyptic beasts that guarded the staircase” leading up to the Byzantine portal of a “mortuary chapel” outside a cemetery in Munich. The portal is “adorned with Greek crosses and tinted hieratic designs, and displayed a symmetrically arranged selection of scriptural texts in gilded letters” (379). It is through this doorway that Aschenbach metaphorically begins his journey to Venice, which is evoked as a labyrinthine underworld of various threshold images (piazzas, windows, narrow streets, arcades, windows and doorways).

Similarly, Marlow begins his trip to the Congo in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness when he walks up a “narrow and deserted street” lined by houses with “innumerable windows” and “imposing archways right and left” (550) to a pair of “immense double doors standing ponderously ajar,” passing through which he walks up an “ungarnished staircase” to open “the first door” he comes to at the top of the steps (551). This leads into a waiting room, in which a third “door opened,” and a “skinny forefinger” beckons Marlow into the “sanctuary,” where he will receive his commission. In another phrase emphasizing the threshold imagery characteristic of the journey, Marlow tells us that he often thought of the two women in the office, while off in the Congo, as “guarding the door of Darkness” (551).

Träume als Spiegel ihres Gefühlslebens

Rilke also links doorways and the descent into Hades in the Sonnets to Orpheus, in which he imagines the god as a “herald” who holds “far into the doors of the dead / a bowl with ripe fruit worthy of praise” (“weit in die Türen der Toten / Schalen mit rühmlichten Früchten hält”) (31). Indeed, this image embodies the impulse of the entire sequence, which Rilke writes was inspired by the image of a “dead girl, whose incompletion and innocence holds open the grave-door so that, having passed on, she belongs to those powers which keep the one half of life fresh, and open toward the other, wound-open half” (162). Oddly enough, the image of the door of Hades alone is one typically found in Roman sepulchral sculpture (Hillman 226).

Doors that open of their own accord permeate the works of Cocteau, Borges, Eco and Cortazar. In Cocteau’s The Knights of the Round Table, we find numerous doors opening and closing by themselves in Klingsor’s enchanted castle (229). The imagery of doorways is consistently linked with the descent into the underworld in the stories of Borges: there is a cell door upon which the Aleph appears in the story of that title (159); the “tall rusty gate” outside the pavilion in “The Garden of Forking Paths” (23); the “rusty wrought iron fence” and “insurmountable gate” that swings open of its own accord in “Death and the Compass” (83); the labyrinthine network of chambers, each with nine doors in “the Immortal” (109); and finally the infinite hexagonal galleries in the “Library of Babel” (51). Umberto Eco picks up on the linkage of doorways, hieratic texts and the underworld in the marvelous library of Name of the Rose. Finally, the doorway that leads into the refrigerated Hades (320) of a mental hospital in Julio Cortázar’s Hopscotch is the entrance to a freight elevator, which the narrator calls “the hole of Eleusis” (317).

I would like to conclude with three modern films in which the symbolism of doorways, divestiture and the eye of death converge: Murnau’s Nosferatu, Cocteau’s Beauty and the Beast, and Bergman’s Wild Strawberries. In Murnau’s famous film, Jonathan Harker travels to the Transylvanian underworld of Count Dracula, in whose castle he spends several weary and uncanny nights. One morning, Harker wakes up and descends from his chamber in the upper story of the castle down through three doorways to a large gate that opens into a stairway to the basement of the castle where the coffins are stored. Here he discovers the body of the Count sleeping in his un consecrated bed of dirt. This descent into the basement is achieved economically in a quick series of shots, in each of which we see Harker walking into or emerging from a doorway.
The sequence relies heavily on the kind of threshold imagery characteristic of the Sumerian and Egyptian iconographies of the underworld. All of this is not to say that Murnau was necessarily aware of the Sumerian and Egyptian material, but the intuitive imperatives of his artistic vision certainly informed the innovative techniques used to evoke an innate and archetypal response in his viewers: some level of our psyche responds spontaneously to Murnau's linkage of doorways, stairways, corridors, descent and death in this sequence, and that resonance between the imperatives of artistic technique and audience response greatly enriches our experience of the deeper layers of the film's visual symbolism.

Apart from the activation of archetypal levels of response, the doorway, corridor and stairway sequences also serve to establish that pleasing relationship between the parts of an aesthetic whole that James Joyce (following Aquinas) designates with the terms integritas, consonantia, and claritas: We recognize the aesthetic object as one thing (integritas) composed of interrelated parts (consonantia), the perception of which releases that special quality of radiance (claritas) which emanates from its essence (quidditas) (A Portrait 212-213). Hence the repeated imagery of passageways in Murnau's film not only serves to link frames in one particular sequence, but also to create parallelisms of visual and thematic detail between distinctly separate sequences.

In Jean Cocteau's glorious film, Beauty and the Beast of 1946, a magnificently detailed sequence devoted to Beauty's departure from home and arrival at the Beast's chateau gives us approximately fifteen passages through exactly seven doorways in only a few minutes. This is the exact number of gateways through which Inanna passes on her descent to Ereshkigal in the Sumerian underworld. Furthermore, Beauty collapses in a dead faint when the Beast emerges glaring from the basement, just as Inanna is killed when the Ereshkigal fastens the "eye of wrath" upon her. A further connection is suggested by the shared motifs of divestiture: Inanna is stripped down at each of the seven gateways, but Beauty is stripped down as she passes through the final door of the sequence, only to be re-clothed in glory. A careful sequence of shots focuses on Beauty's change of dress (country rags to royal riches) at the moment when the Beast carries her through the doorway into her room.

A similar sequence combining doorways, the underworld and clothing symbolism occurs in Ingmar Bergman's Wild Strawberries, during the second dream sequence, when Isak goes to the door-length windows of a lakeside country cottage. Looking through, he sees his cousin Sara sharing a romantic dinner with his brother Sigfrid. Leaning his head against the wall, Isak puts his hand on a protruding nail, and the descent into limbo sequence begins. We watch as Isak walks first through the outer door which a man (analogous to the gateway guardians of the Sumerian myth) opens for him, and then through a doorless portal separating the living room from the hall stairs, beneath which Isak pauses to remove his overcoat for the first time during his journey. This is a divestiture characteristic of the stripping down phase of the hero's descent, leading to a re-investiture in the royal robes of the award ceremony in the Cathedral at the end of the film.

As Isak walks through this third door in the sequence, the camera is re-positioned to the viewer's end of a basement corridor into which the third door opens, and down which Isak is now led by his inquisitor to a fourth door to the right. The camera zooms in to a close up of Isak's profile as he passes through into an examination chamber, where he fails to identify a bacterial specimen under a microscope. Instead he sees his own eye reflected, as if the specimen to be examined is himself; the image recalls the eyes above the clock and the close up of the corpse face and eyes from the film's opening dream sequence. It also recalls the iconography of the descent in Sumerian myth, where, after passing through seven gateways, Inanna is killed by Ereshkigal's "eye of death" (Wolkstein and Kramer 60). The severity of this last judgment sequence (appropriate to a journey into Hades) yields to redemption when Isak finally arrives at his destination in Lund (a sort of promised land). Here he is re-invested with a contemporary version of Joseph's "coat of many colors": an academic robe of glory, complete with the colorful hood of an honorary doctorate.

The metaphorical imagery of doorways and divestiture is not, of course, restricted to artistic manifestations. It also informs contemporary philosophy, anthropology and theory. Jean-Paul Sartre uses the metaphor of doorways and eyes in his discussion of "The Look" in Being and Nothingness, in which he imagines a man motivated by "jealousy, curiosity, or vice" peering through the keyhole of a doorway. Both door and keyhole are seen as "instruments and obstacles" simultaneously, and the imagined appearance of another man approaching down the corridor introduces the element of the "look," for in the act of being seen, while looking through the keyhole, certain "modifications" rapidly evolve in the consciousness of the beholder, who now becomes "an object for the Other," and therefore must recognize the "shame" of looking through the doorway (259-261).

Arnold van Gennep focuses on doorways and the rituals associated with them as symbols of liminality and transition, noting the widespread diffusion of such imagery in the anthropological literature. That state of being betwixt and between, floating in a marginal condition between exile and homecoming, has attracted much attention in contemporary critical theory.

Jacques Derrida, for example, has focused not on threshold imagery but on the related motif of divestiture, in his analysis of the apocalyptic thinking. Derrida has recently addressed the apocalyptic themes of "découverture" or "dévoilement" in a manner that suggests their relation to the myth of the descent to the underworld in the previous chapter (13). Essentially, what is involved is a stripping down ("l'idée de mise à nu"), an apocalyptic unveiling ("de dévoilement précisément apocalyptique"), and a subsequent revelation of the tetragrammaton ("découverture de YHWH"), the four letter figure of the name of God upon which all Creation is based (14-15). Derrida is primarily interested in what he calls the oracular voice ("la voix oraculaire") of philosophers whom he terms mystagogues (33), to whom alone the secrets are revealed or unveiled ("La révélation ou le dévoilement du secret se réserve à eux") (27), and in the themes of circumcision and castration implied by scenes of divestiture in the Old Testament, in which the unveiling allows us to see that which had remained covered the way
Our focus, however, has been on the symbolism of disrobing and the revelation of the archetypal forms of the imagination, more in the line of Renaissance Neoplatonism than Neo-Freudianism. Doorways represent chance, choice, thresholds of the unknown, guardians protecting us from what is within or without. They lock threatening items or events out or in. In the many works which we have quickly glanced at, however, it seems that the image cluster linking doorways to divestiture forms an archetype which transcends the boundaries of genre and period, offering us a persistent image of spiritual, social and psychological transfiguration.

Notes

1 I discuss the descent to the underworld in a wide range of Modernist works in my books and articles (See Works Cited).

2 Some of these shots may be seen collected in Beauty and the Beast: Scenario and Dialogs by Jean Cocteau. For shots from Bergman’s Wild Strawberries, see Bergman on Bergman: Interviews with Ingmar Bergman

Works Cited

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