

Prevarication over the Sex of Stones: Caillois and Myth (Postscript)

Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat

That era thought it had set us free: since the Enlightenment we had put an end to Aristotle's myths about women and his direct line 'from the *glans penis* to the *glandula pinealis*',¹ the obligatory obverse of the 'wandering' uterus that causes women's silly flightiness. Half a century later, when the fair sex took over men's brains in scholarly medical disputes, it needed the experience of the thanklessness of the flesh and its pleasures, alias Casanova, so 'hassled' by anatomical ecstasies, to remind believers in the 'thinking uterus' of the obvious: 'Women have a *uterus*, men have sperm, that is the sum of the difference; but if thought comes from the soul and not the body, why . . . involve the *uterus* in women rather than the sperm in men?' Hence the learned gentlemen's 'spermatic sentiments'. And here is a fine conclusion: 'Woman thinks as woman', 'man thinks as man' . . . and as the refrain says, they both dance well!² So we've learnt a lot.

In short man had thought he was the one and only, compared with a 'spare bone': he was forced to admit there were two of them. But would he be able to accept it and find the words to describe reality and its consequences? Would grammar rescue him from that error? Not unless he were to place his hopes in mental arithmetic. Only a language with cancer leans to neologism, was Karl Kraus's diagnosis. In the same vein Roger Caillois considered it a crime to use words of over three syllables. As far as that ex-fellow-traveller with André Breton and Georges Bataille was concerned, we should avoid piling up entities unnecessarily and use Occam's razor to do so, even in word construction. And refrain from counting up to two when one is enough. It was in that spirit that Caillois, who at one time was tempted by the great game, practised 'recourse to myth':³ when he was 20 the theme was central to his thought with *Le Mythe de l'homme*, especially with the mysterious and prophetic text on *La Mante religieuse*, where a life's obsessions well up. Indeed in that essay there already emerges a preoccupation whose full scope the posthumous publications would reveal with *Les Démons de midi*, *Le Mythe de la Licorne* or, in a more literary vein, *L'Aile froide*.

Copyright © ICPHS 2005

SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi, <http://dio.sagepub.com>

DOI: 10.1177/0392192105059479

Once again we turn to Karl Kraus, the Viennese cynic contemporary with the birth of psychoanalysis, who started to take an interest in it before conceiving a visceral rejection (an identical path to Caillois'): men have not yet become aware of the twofold sexual division of humanity. While Freud, following Weininger and Tausk, was discovering man's generic bisexuality, it seemed we were threatened with not even being able to count to two. In fact subsequent events confirmed Kraus's fears: a single sex, two genders, to take the theme of the American historian Thomas Laqueur (*Making Sex*, 1987). But in the history of civilizations not everyone had been given the gift of being able to count beyond two. Anthropology had taught us that, after two, more often than not there was only three. (And we can bet that if the West ever dared to go that far it was due to the Christians' Trinity.) Perhaps because he had some knowledge of ancient myths, it should be said at once that Caillois did not let himself be intimidated by those insolences of modern thought: 'Infallible sciences, suspect sciences', he said of their arrogant claims to rule everything, forgetting the mythical element inherent in every intellectual endeavour. So it was in that mythological space that Caillois' path was set from his early youth, at least his questioning and certain aspects of his research (see *Approches de l'imaginaire*). Tempted to smell falsehood when things were wrapped up in words, he first of all and above all went to look at stones, their silence, their writing and their signs, what modern myths no longer dare to suggest.

And so to those who might be surprised to see this issue on the figures in myth and gender placed under the banner of the poet of *Pierres* or *Récurrences dérobées*, I can only refer them to his mineral 'mythology', with that 'stone that has children', or the Chinese *hiong-hoang* stone that 'turns girls into boys'. In short, if we have a Chinese soul attuned to the ins and outs of *yin* and *yang*, we know there are 'male stones' and 'female stones'. It is striking to see how much space the topic occupies from the start of the collection. But the themes adopted are far from being *chinoiseries*. In a vein made famous by Pliny the Elder then Marbode and Albert the Great, Caillois moves back and forth over classical antiquity in search of 'stones that procreate'. There again all stones have a sex, normally small and friable for females, hard for males. (We might have suspected as much.) But he discovers still better things: 'The *diphye*', which is 'hermaphrodite, white and black, crossed in the middle by a band that separates the two colours and sexes'. For the rest a *Banquet of Monoliths* would almost need to be written, for not content with having a sex stones also have customs, enthusiasms and inclinations. (Among them some unnatural ones.) There are the stone Diotimas and no doubt their Aristophaneses: 'On the slopes of Mount Hemus and Rhodope are *philadelphic* stones . . . which represent human beings. Are they separate? You have only to say their name for them to be immediately reunited. Thrasylus the Mendesian swears it is so.' But there is also the stone that helps men to bear castration and the one that 'protects from abuse' nubile girls. In short, in the mythology of stones, of which Roger Caillois became a lifetime promoter, stones have a sex and talk about sex as often as Diderot's characters.⁴ In this way, without saying so, he picks up themes that enchanted, in the first sense of the word, turn-of-the-century literature with its evocations of the 'cult of the black stone' and its 'hermaphrodite stones' that are to be found even in the work of Caillois' 'female (enemy) brother' Marguerite Yourcenar, in her alchemical

escapades in *L'Œuvre au noir*.⁵ (Maybe we should see in that the effect of a mutual sympathy with Gustave Moreau's work).

In the end nothing is surprising in this anatomy or comparative physiology of minerals. We should remember that they had their place in *Cases d'un échiquier*, which aspired to re-establish knowledge on the principle of Mendeleev's table of elements. All the boxes exist, we just have to find the elements to fill them. (Anyone who cannot count beyond two can even enjoy it: you just have to fill in the missing boxes.) So Caillois' 'mythographic' approach is more positivist than that of Lévi-Strauss's 'mythologicals', even if it owes more to Saint-John Perse in the elegance of its style, its prophetic aspirations and its variations. But if Caillois is here more like the 'mythologist' (which he illustrated, for example, in *La Mante religieuse* or *Les Démons de midi*), there is another aspect of the work, notably in his fictions and his work as a writer of memoirs, which links him more directly with both sex and stone via the winding path – the shortest path in God's eyes, according to the Portuguese proverb – of myth. (With the baroque exuberance added one thinks of the mythobiographical work of a Claude Louis-Combet.)

Towards the end of his life it was in fact mythology – both mineral and sexual – that Caillois called on in order to examine himself. In 'Récit du délogé',⁶ which is the odyssey of a 'depersonalization', he introduces a variation on a theme dear to him, 'legendary psychasthenia', which had previously been touched on in *Le Mythe et l'homme*. Coming up to 50 the narrator, who has already realized that we occupy each corner of our bodies with unequal density, feels various parts of himself becoming independent, while strange excrescences, probably of flesh, appear and wander about incognito within his anatomy. But everything changes on the day when the 'toffee' he thought had disappeared turns into a stone: 'I soon found it again, like a slightly swollen pebble (it had grown) in my lower abdomen, just above the top of my penis. It was a warm stone, smooth and long, light.' In turn the stone becomes 'porous clay' and a 'pebble' or even a 'shellfish', for 'the creature was alive'. Then the narrator feels a certain disappointment: 'what a ridiculous parasitism'! And adds: 'I would willingly have accepted a stone. In fact I had already adapted to it'; to tell the truth he felt an 'obscure proprietorial pleasure'. The discovery is an excuse for delving into himself, a veritable anamnesia where quite soon sex re-emerges with its false hopes and genuine disappointments. A visit to a prostitute, with an instant erection followed by premature ejaculation without pleasure, makes the narrator a crazy Tiresias, closer to Raymond Guérin's characters than classical mythology: but the link between sex and stone touched on above leads to what could not have been expected but occurs, even if it is in negative mode. Absence of orgasmic happiness brings this observation: 'Quite clearly I wasn't impotent. But for a while I was convinced I was frigid.'⁷ At the crucial time, man is but a carpenter beside Mary, 'beside a god' Lou Andreas-Salomé had murmured earlier in *Eros*.⁸ At a moment of dismal failure man is an impotent woman: in other words with a passive transsexualism he is frigid. Then, even though he will continue to court his partner, he will undergo the impossible experience of becoming a woman (cf. Auguste Comte and the 'white goddess'), because at bottom 'reproductive generosity, the need, the wish to procreate' is lacking. So it is no surprise that the pebble resolutely turns into a 'shellfish': there is no need to be a little more than vaguely acquainted with Freudianism in order to

understand the meaning of the symbol, particularly in connection with procreation. Without analytical crudeness we conclude that the explicit presence in the man of shell-like female genitals near the male penis, as if mocking it or sucking it in, suggests a life being transformed. After giving up on sex the pebble/shellfish causes the libido in its wider forms of expression to die off. But this abandonment is an apotheosis. The man, or rather the 'human envelope', is never more than a way of concealing the 'shellfish' inside him: one day it lets itself fall into the sea. 'It is not certain that it was consumed by crabs. It must have dissolved in the salt water. It was a shadow, a vain image that no one supported any longer; that I had deserted.' It is only then that true orgasm comes in a strangely connoted language: the 'breath of the world, or rather a first oscillation that is not yet breath, no longer has one of its sources in me . . . The nonchalant swaying reaches me, pretending to be a caress or flattery, but gently makes me feel its yoke, as it does to any seaweed on any shore where the motion dies away without disappearing.' We think of the 'perennial motion' of the world dear to Montaigne. As an initiate of the 'fraternity' of things, the hope of the man absorbed into a seashell is to be part of a 'rising current that is ascending the chain of beings' and in his turn to 'lodge' 'in a human's lower abdomen': the man is soluble in the shellfish. And it is our curiously nihilistic and (Gnostic) Christian hope to have done with a 'trickster life that makes us believe in death'. The same refrain can be found in *La Mante religieuse*, whose precise subtitle is 'Research on nature and the meaning of myth' (1937): 'Copulation is . . . , in some degree, a loss of immortality.' But a clarification is added: the transition from high tide to low water – the marine metaphor is the same – produces a feeling of relative nothingness. From that period too Caillois, referring to psychiatric studies on inhibition, had linked impotence to apprehension about the penis being sucked in by the vagina and loss of vital strength. Thus petrification, which he made a personal matter and an obstinate ambition, with its absorption into the motionless that does not procreate, is part of a mythology of sex inscribed in the deepest levels of his work. And if the farewell of *Fleuve Alphée* (1978), with the image of the river flowing back to its source, seems to pick up for a while the trope of the 'liquefaction' of reality dear to Claudel, it also expresses a re-absorption 'into a narrow unfathomable abyss, a tiny crack in a rock or the minute whirlpool stirring at the pond bottom: a reverse spring that sucks in': the 'impulsion to detumescence' to which the man who has resolutely become accustomed to 'imitating stones' is brought. In the beginning there was stone, in the end stone remains. In this parenthesis the space for sex and myths unfolds.

Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat
Paris

Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. As Bernard Mandeville's suggestive expression puts it (first quarter of the 18th century).
2. Casanova (1999: 175).
3. On Caillois and myth the main texts are Caillois (1972), which reprints the 1937 texts and updates

them, and Caillois (1950): at the Collège de Sociologie Caillois got interested in myth. Among the posthumous, previously unpublished material there are Caillois (1991a) and Caillois (1991b). I might also refer to the volume of 'Cahiers de Chronos' devoted to Roger Caillois (Paris, La Différence, 1991), which consists of various 'mythological' essays in the tradition of Dumézil. Here the discussion is deliberately limited to the topic of sexuality in its mineral aspects; Caillois' mythical thought deals with political matters as well as urban design, ancient myths and kinship, and often inter-relates with the thinking of people like Monnerot, Dumézil, Lévi-Strauss or Walter Benjamin (with his fine text on 'Paris, a modern myth').

4. Caillois (1971: 12, 13, 17, 20ff).
5. See Ladjali (2002: 372ff.) on the 'hermaphrodite pebble' and the philosopher's stone.
6. Caillois (1970), from which all the following quotations are taken.
7. The topic is already touched on in Caillois (1989), a text composed in 1938 which was withdrawn from the printer at the last moment and did not see the light of day till 1989.
8. Andreas-Salomé (1979).

References

- Andreas-Salomé, Lou (1979) *Die Erotik: vier Aufsätze* (1910), mit einem Nachwort von Ernst Pfeiffer. München: Matthes und Seitz.
- Caillois, Roger (1950) *L'Homme et le sacré*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Caillois, Roger (1970) 'Récit du délogé', in *Cases d'un échiquier*, pp. 308-31. Paris: Gallimard.
- Caillois, Roger (1971) *Pierres*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Caillois, Roger (1972) *Le Mythe et l'homme* (1937). Paris: Gallimard.
- Caillois, Roger (1989) *L'Aile froide*. Saint-Clément: Fata Morgana.
- Caillois, Roger (1991a) *Le Mythe de la Licorne*. Fontfroide-le-Haut: Fata Morgana.
- Caillois, Roger (1991b) *Les Démons de midi*. Fontfroide-le-Haut: Fata Morgana.
- Casanova, Giacomo (1999) *Lana Caprina. Une controverse médicale sur l'utérus pensant à l'Université de Bologne en 1771-1772*, ed. P. Mangal. Paris: Honoré Champion.
- Ladjali, Cécile (2002) 'Androgynie et hermaphrodite dans le texte décadent', PhD dissertation, Paris.