

SEXUAL



PERSONAE

ART AND DECADENCE

FROM NEFERTITI

TO EMILY DICKINSON

CAMILLE PAGLIA

"A REMARKABLE BOOK, AT ONCE OUTRAGEOUS AND COMPELLING, FANATICAL AND BRILLIANT...ONE MUST BE AWED BY [PAGLIA'S] VAST ENERGY, ERUDITION AND WIT."—WASHINGTON POST BOOK WORLD

Sexual Personae

Art and Decadence from
Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson

C A M I L L E P A G L I A



Vintage Books

A Division of Random House, Inc.

New York

First Vintage Books Edition, September 1991

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Published with assistance from the foundation established in memory of Amasa Stone Mather of the Class of 1907, Yale College.

The author gratefully acknowledges permission to use the following material: "Sex and Violence, or Nature and Art," by Camille Paglia, first appeared (in a somewhat different form) in *Western Humanities Review*, Vol. XLII, No. 1 (Spring 1988). "The Apollonian Androgyne and the *Faerie Queene*," by Camille Paglia (here revised), is reprinted with permission from *English Literary Renaissance* 9.1 (1979), 42–63. "Oscar Wilde and the English Epicene," by Camille Paglia, appeared in a somewhat different form in *Raritan*, Vol. IV, No. 3 (Winter 1985). Poems 656, 1027, and 1711, by Emily Dickinson, are reprinted by permission of the publishers and the Trustees of Amherst College from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Copyright 1951, © 1955, 1979, 1983 by The President and Fellows of Harvard College.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Paglia, Camille, 1947–

Sexual personae: art and decadence from Nefertiti to
Emily Dickinson/Camille Paglia. — 1st Vintage Books ed.

p. cm.

Reprint. Originally published: New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-679-73579-8 (pbk.)

1. Literature, Modern—19th century—History and criticism. 2. Literature, Modern—History and criticism. 3. Decadence (Literary movement) 4. Paganism in literature. 5. Sex in literature. 6. Paganism in art. 7. Romanticism. 8. Sex in art. 9. Arts. I. Title.

[PN751.P34 1991]

809' 03—dc20

91-50024

CIP

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CAMILLE PAGLIA'S

Sexual Personae

"Surging with startling ideas...in style, genre, and ideology, the book blasts every trend."

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"Paglia makes more outrageous claims in her first 20 pages than most academics dare in a lifetime."

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"*Sexual Personae* is an erotic history of Western literature and visual art; written in a style both erotic and aggressive, it's the sort of criticism Sontag prophesied but didn't produce. Surely the time is right for such a book....It's witty, pointed, aphoristic, swift and usually attractively aware of its own status as hypercivilized artifice....Paglia's first objective is provocation: She's out to seduce or inspire.... At her epigrammatic best, [she] relays her pleasure in perception and discovery, relays her remarkable energy of mind....splendid and exhilarating...a brilliant book."

—*The Nation*

for my grandmothers

and my aunt

Vincenza Colapietro

Alfonsina Paglia

Lenora Antonelli

Preface

Sexual Personae seeks to demonstrate the unity and continuity of western culture—something that has inspired little belief since the period before World War I. The book accepts the canonical western tradition and rejects the modernist idea that culture has collapsed into meaningless fragments. I argue that Judeo-Christianity never did defeat paganism, which still flourishes in art, eroticism, astrology, and pop culture.

The first volume of *Sexual Personae* examines antiquity, the Renaissance, and Romanticism from the late eighteenth century to 1900. I demonstrate that Romanticism turns almost immediately into Decadence, which I find throughout major nineteenth-century authors, even Emily Dickinson. The second volume will show how movies, television, sports, and rock music embody all the pagan themes of classical antiquity. My approach throughout the book combines disciplines: literature, art history, psychology, and religion.

What is art? How and why does an artist create? The amorality, aggression, sadism, voyeurism, and pornography in great art have been ignored or glossed over by most academic critics. I fill in the space between artist and art work with metaphors drawn from the Cambridge School of Anthropology. My largest ambition is to fuse Frazer with Freud.

What is sex? What is nature? I see sex and nature as brutal pagan forces. My stress on the truth in sexual stereotypes and on the biologic basis of sex differences is sure to cause controversy. I reaffirm and celebrate woman's ancient mystery and glamour. I see the mother as an overwhelming force who condemns men to lifelong sexual anxiety, from which they escape through rationalism and physical achievement.

I show how much of western life, art, and thought is ruled by personality, which the book traces through recurrent types or personae ("masks"). My title was inspired by Ingmar Bergman's cruel, dreamy masterpiece, *Persona* (1966). My method is a form of sensationalism: I try to flesh out intellect with emotion and to induce a wide range of emotion from the reader. I want to show meaning arising from simple everyday things—cats, grocery stores, bridges, chance encounters—and thereby to liberate criticism and interpretation from their imprisonment in classroom and library.

Acknowledgments

Harold Bloom has been a tremendous source of encouragement and practical help throughout this project. I am very grateful for his warm hospitality to my ideas.

Milton Kessler hugely influenced the way I read and teach literature. I am grateful for the early support of my work by Geoffrey Hartman, Richard Ellmann, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Richard Tristman, and Alvin Feinman.

My parents, Pasquale and Lydia Paglia, and sister Lenora have provided unflagging spiritual and material support for all my endeavors. Thanks to my extended family: Albert and Angelina Mastrogiacomo, Bruno and Jane Colapietro, Sister Rita Mastrogiacomo, Wanda Hudak, Rico and Jennie DiPietro, and Numa Pompilius.

Friends who heroically gave of their time and effort to advise me on the manuscript are Robert L. Caserio, Bruce Benderson, Heidi Jon Schmidt, James Fessenden, and Kent Christensen. Friends who generously nurtured me over the long haul are Helen Vermeychuk, Elizabeth Davis, Stephen Feld, Ann Jamison, Kristen Lippincott, and Lisa Chedekel.

I would also like to thank Ronald R. Macdonald, John DeWitt, Carmelia Metosh, Kristoffer Jacobson, Gregory Vermeychuk, Rachel Wizner, Margaret W. Ferguson, R. D. Skillings, Jeannette LeBlanc, Jeanne Bloom, Stephen Jarratt, Linda Ferris, Robert A. Goldstein, Carole C. Leher, Cammy Sanes, Frances Fanelli, and Sarah S. Fought.

I am grateful to Ellen Graham, the sponsoring editor, and Judith Calvert, the manuscript editor, for their expert contributions to my book. Financial support was received from the Fels Facilities Fund of Bennington College, the Faculty Research Project Grants of Philadelphia College of the Performing Arts, and the President's Completion Grants of the University of the Arts. Earlier versions of Chapters One, Six, and Twenty-One appeared in *Western Humanities Review*, *English Literary Renaissance*, and *Raritan*.

Contents

	List of Illustrations / ix
	Preface / xiii
	Acknowledgments / xiv
Chapter 1	Sex and Violence, or Nature and Art / 1
Chapter 2	The Birth of the Western Eye / 40
Chapter 3	Apollo and Dionysus / 72
Chapter 4	Pagan Beauty / 99
Chapter 5	Renaissance Form: Italian Art / 140
Chapter 6	Spenser and Apollo: <i>The Faerie Queene</i> / 170
Chapter 7	Shakespeare and Dionysus: <i>As You Like It</i> and <i>Antony and Cleopatra</i> / 194
Chapter 8	Return of the Great Mother: Rousseau vs. Sade / 230
Chapter 9	Amazons, Mothers, Ghosts: Goethe to Gothic / 248
Chapter 10	Sex Bound and Unbound: Blake / 270
Chapter 11	Marriage to Mother Nature: Wordsworth / 300
Chapter 12	The Daemon as Lesbian Vampire: Coleridge / 317
Chapter 13	Speed and Space: Byron / 347
Chapter 14	Light and Heat: Shelley and Keats / 365
Chapter 15	Cults of Sex and Beauty: Balzac / 389
Chapter 16	Cults of Sex and Beauty: Gautier, Baudelaire, and Huysmans / 408
Chapter 17	Romantic Shadows: Emily Brontë / 439
Chapter 18	Romantic Shadows: Swinburne and Pater / 460
Chapter 19	Apollo Daemonized: Decadent Art / 489

- Chapter 20 The Beautiful Boy as Destroyer: Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* / 512
- Chapter 21 The English Epicene: Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* / 531
- Chapter 22 American Decadents: Poe, Hawthorne, Melville / 572
- Chapter 23 American Decadents: Emerson, Whitman, James / 598
- Chapter 24 Amherst's Madame de Sade: Emily Dickinson / 623
- Notes / 675
- Index / 701

Illustrations

1. *Perseus Cutting Off the Head of Medusa*. Museo Nazionale, Palermo (Alinari/Art Resource). / 48
2. *Venus of Willendorf*. Limestone. Museum of Natural History, Vienna (Alinari/Art Resource). / 55
3. *Chephren*. Green diorite. Egyptian Museum, Cairo (Alinari/Art Resource). / 58
4. *Stele of the Overseer of Magazine of Amon, Nib-Amun, and His Wife, Huy*. Limestone. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of James Douglas, 1890 (90.6.131). / 63
5. *Cat Goddess with One Gold Earring*. Bronze. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Purchase 1958, Fund from Various Donors. / 65
6. *Nefertiti*. Painted limestone with plaster additions. Copy (Marburg/Art Resource). / 67
7. *Nefertiti*. Painted limestone with plaster additions. State Museums, Berlin (Marburg/Art Resource). / 68
8. *Apollo*, from the Temple of Zeus, Olympia. Olympia Museum (Alinari/Art Resource). / 75
9. *Ephesian Artemis*. Marble and bronze. Museo nuovo dei Conservatori, Rome (Alinari/Art Resource). / 76
10. *Athena Parthenos* (Alinari/Art Resource). / 82
11. *Dionysus and Maenads*. Glyptothek, Munich. / 90
12. *Kouros*. Island marble. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Fletcher Fund, 1932 (32.11.1). / 111
13. *The Kritios Boy*. Acropolis Museum, Athens (Alison Frantz). / 112
14. *Byzantine Saints*. Mosaic. Cathedral of Cefalù, Sicily (Alinari/Art Resource). / 113
15. Sandro Botticelli, *St. Sebastian*. State Museums, Berlin (Marburg/Art Resource). / 114
16. *The Benevento Boy*. Louvre, Paris (Marburg/Art Resource). / 119

17. *Antinous*. Museo Nazionale, Naples (Alinari/Art Resource). / 120
18. Benvenuto Cellini, *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*. Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence (Alinari/Art Resource). / 145
19. Donatello, *David*. Bargello, Florence (Alinari/Art Resource). / 147
20. Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*. Uffizi, Florence (Alinari/Art Resource). / 151
21. Sandro Botticelli, *Primavera*. Uffizi, Florence (Alinari/Art Resource). / 152
22. Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*. Louvre, Paris (Alinari/Art Resource). / 154
23. Leonardo da Vinci, *Virgin and Child with St. Anne*. Louvre, Paris (Alinari/Art Resource). / 155
24. Michelangelo, *Cumaeen Sibyl*. Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome (Alinari/Art Resource). / 161
25. Michelangelo, *Night*. Medici Chapel, Church of San Lorenzo, Florence (Alinari/Art Resource). / 162
26. Michelangelo, *Giuliano de' Medici*. Medici Chapel, Church of San Lorenzo, Florence (Alinari/Art Resource). / 164
27. Michelangelo, *Dying Slave*. Louvre, Paris (Giraudon/Art Resource). / 166
28. *Homogeneous Tilting Armour*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Bashford Dean Memorial Collection, Gift of Helen Farnestock Hubbard, 1929, in Memory of Her Father, Harris C. Farnestock (29.154.1). / 174
29. *Greek Helmet*. Bronze. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1919 (19.192.35). / 175
30. Sandro Botticelli, *Venus and Mars*. National Gallery, London (The Trustees of the National Gallery of Art, London). / 188
31. William Blake, *God Creating Adam*. The Tate Gallery, London. / 275
32. William Blake, *Infant Joy*, from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. The British Museum, London (Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum). / 277
33. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *The Turkish Bath*. Louvre, Paris (Cliché des Musées Nationaux, Paris). / 278

34. Thomas Phillips, *Lord Byron*. Newstead Abbey, Nottingham City Museums. / 360
35. *Elvis Presley* in the film *Speedway*. Museum of Modern Art, New York/Film Stills Archive. / 361
36. Eugène Delacroix, *Death of Sardanapalus*. Louvre, Paris (Cliché des Musées Nationaux, Paris). / 398
37. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Lady Lilith*. Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, Samuel and Mary R. Bancroft Memorial Collection. / 492
38. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Astarte Syriaca*. Manchester City Art Galleries. / 494
39. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Bower Meadow*. Manchester City Art Galleries. / 495
40. Sir Edward Burne-Jones, *The Briar Wood*. Briar Rose Series. Buscot Park, The Faringdon Collection Trust (Photograph: Courtauld Institute of Art, London). / 498
41. Sir Edward Burne-Jones, *The Doom Fulfilled*. Southampton City Art Gallery, U.K. / 499
42. Gustave Moreau, *Helen at the Scaean Gate*. Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris (Cliché des Musées Nationaux, Paris). / 500
43. Gustave Moreau, *Jupiter and Semele*. Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris (Cliché des Musées Nationaux, Paris). / 502
44. Franz von Stuck, *Sin*. Neue Pinakothek, Munich. / 503
45. Aubrey Beardsley, *The Ascension of St. Rose of Lima*. / 509
46. Aubrey Beardsley, *Portrait of Himself*, from *The Yellow Book*, Volume 3. / 510
47. Aubrey Beardsley, *The Climax*, from *Salomé*. / 564

1

Sex and Violence, or Nature and Art

In the beginning was nature. The background from which and against which our ideas of God were formed, nature remains the supreme moral problem. We cannot hope to understand sex and gender until we clarify our attitude toward nature. Sex is a subset to nature. Sex is the natural in man.

Society is an artificial construction, a defense against nature's power. Without society, we would be storm-tossed on the barbarous sea that is nature. Society is a system of inherited forms reducing our humiliating passivity to nature. We may alter these forms, slowly or suddenly, but no change in society will change nature. Human beings are not nature's favorites. We are merely one of a multitude of species upon which nature indiscriminately exerts its force. Nature has a master agenda we can only dimly know.

Human life began in flight and fear. Religion rose from rituals of propitiation, spells to lull the punishing elements. To this day, communities are few in regions scorched by heat or shackled by ice. Civilized man conceals from himself the extent of his subordination to nature. The grandeur of culture, the consolation of religion absorb his attention and win his faith. But let nature shrug, and all is in ruin. Fire, flood, lightning, tornado, hurricane, volcano, earthquake—anywhere at any time. Disaster falls upon the good and bad. Civilized life requires a state of illusion. The idea of the ultimate benevolence of nature and God is the most potent of man's survival mechanisms. Without it, culture would revert to fear and despair.

Sexuality and eroticism are the intricate intersection of nature and culture. Feminists grossly oversimplify the problem of sex when they reduce it to a matter of social convention: readjust society, eliminate sexual inequality, purify sex roles, and happiness and harmony will

reign. Here feminism, like all liberal movements of the past two hundred years, is heir to Rousseau. *The Social Contract* (1762) begins: "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." Pitting benign Romantic nature against corrupt society, Rousseau produced the progressivist strain in nineteenth-century culture, for which social reform was the means to achieve paradise on earth. The bubble of these hopes was burst by the catastrophes of two world wars. But Rousseauism was reborn in the postwar generation of the Sixties, from which contemporary feminism developed.

Rousseau rejects original sin, Christianity's pessimistic view of man born unclean, with a propensity for evil. Rousseau's idea, derived from Locke, of man's innate goodness led to social environmentalism, now the dominant ethic of American human services, penal codes, and behaviorist therapies. It assumes that aggression, violence, and crime come from social deprivation—a poor neighborhood, a bad home. Thus feminism blames rape on pornography and, by a smug circularity of reasoning, interprets outbreaks of sadism as a backlash to itself. But rape and sadism have been evident throughout history and, at some moment, in all cultures.

This book takes the point of view of Sade, the most unread major writer in western literature. Sade's work is a comprehensive satiric critique of Rousseau, written in the decade after the first failed Rousseauist experiment, the French Revolution, which ended not in political paradise but in the hell of the Reign of Terror. Sade follows Hobbes rather than Locke. Aggression comes from nature; it is what Nietzsche is to call the will-to-power. For Sade, getting back to nature (the Romantic imperative that still permeates our culture from sex counseling to cereal commercials) would be to give free rein to violence and lust. I agree. Society is not the criminal but the force which keeps crime in check. When social controls weaken, man's innate cruelty bursts forth. The rapist is created not by bad social influences but by a failure of social conditioning. Feminists, seeking to drive power relations out of sex, have set themselves against nature. Sex is power. Identity is power. In western culture, there are no nonexploitative relationships. Everyone has killed in order to live. Nature's universal law of creation from destruction operates in mind as in matter. As Freud, Nietzsche's heir, asserts, identity is conflict. Each generation drives its plow over the bones of the dead.

Modern liberalism suffers unresolved contradictions. It exalts individualism and freedom and, on its radical wing, condemns social orders as oppressive. On the other hand, it expects government to provide

materially for all, a feat manageable only by an expansion of authority and a swollen bureaucracy. In other words, liberalism defines government as tyrant father but demands it behave as nurturant mother. Feminism has inherited these contradictions. It sees every hierarchy as repressive, a social fiction; every negative about woman is a male lie designed to keep her in her place. Feminism has exceeded its proper mission of seeking political equality for women and has ended by rejecting contingency, that is, human limitation by nature or fate.

Sexual freedom, sexual liberation. A modern delusion. We are hierarchical animals. Sweep one hierarchy away, and another will take its place, perhaps less palatable than the first. There are hierarchies in nature and alternate hierarchies in society. In nature, brute force is the law, a survival of the fittest. In society, there are protections for the weak. Society is our frail barrier against nature. When the prestige of state and religion is low, men are free, but they find freedom intolerable and seek new ways to enslave themselves, through drugs or depression. My theory is that whenever sexual freedom is sought or achieved, sadomasochism will not be far behind. Romanticism always turns into decadence. Nature is a hard taskmaster. It is the hammer and the anvil, crushing individuality. Perfect freedom would be to die by earth, air, water, and fire.

Sex is a far darker power than feminism has admitted. Behaviorist sex therapies believe guiltless, no-fault sex is possible. But sex has always been girt round with taboo, irrespective of culture. Sex is the point of contact between man and nature, where morality and good intentions fall to primitive urges. I called it an intersection. This intersection is the uncanny crossroads of Hecate, where all things return in the night. Eroticism is a realm stalked by ghosts. It is the place beyond the pale, both cursed and enchanted.

This book shows how much in culture goes against our best wishes. Integration of man's body and mind is a profound problem that is not about to be solved by recreational sex or an expansion of women's civil rights. Incarnation, the limitation of mind by matter, is an outrage to imagination. Equally outrageous is gender, which we have not chosen but which nature has imposed upon us. Our physicality is torment, our body the tree of nature on which Blake sees us crucified.

Sex is daemonic. This term, current in Romantic studies of the past twenty-five years, derives from the Greek *daimon*, meaning a spirit of lower divinity than the Olympian gods (hence my pronunciation "dai-monic"). The outcast Oedipus becomes a daemon at Colonus. The word came to mean a man's guardian shadow. Christianity turned the dae-

monic into the demonic. The Greek daemons were not evil—or rather they were both good and evil, like nature itself, in which they dwelled. Freud's unconscious is a daemonic realm. In the day we are social creatures, but at night we descend to the dream world where nature reigns, where there is no law but sex, cruelty, and metamorphosis. Day itself is invaded by daemonic night. Moment by moment, night flickers in the imagination, in eroticism, subverting our strivings for virtue and order, giving an uncanny aura to objects and persons, revealed to us through the eyes of the artist.

The ghost-ridden character of sex is implicit in Freud's brilliant theory of "family romance." We each have an incestuous constellation of sexual personae that we carry from childhood to the grave and that determines whom and how we love or hate. Every encounter with friend or foe, every clash with or submission to authority bears the perverse traces of family romance. Love is a crowded theater, for as Harold Bloom remarks, "We can never embrace (sexually or otherwise) a single person, but embrace the whole of her or his family romance."¹ We still know next to nothing of the mystery of cathexis, the investment of libido in certain people or things. The element of free will in sex and emotion is slight. As poets know, falling in love is irrational.

Like art, sex is fraught with symbols. Family romance means that adult sex is always representation, ritualistic acting out of vanished realities. A perfectly humane eroticism may be impossible. Somewhere in every family romance is hostility and aggression, the homicidal wishes of the unconscious. Children are monsters of unbridled egotism and will, for they spring directly from nature, hostile intimations of immorality. We carry that daemonic will within us forever. Most people conceal it with acquired ethical precepts and meet it only in their dreams, which they hastily forget upon waking. The will-to-power is innate, but the sexual scripts of family romance are learned. Human beings are the only creatures in whom consciousness is so entangled with animal instinct. In western culture, there can never be a purely physical or anxiety-free sexual encounter. Every attraction, every pattern of touch, every orgasm is shaped by psychic shadows.

The search for freedom through sex is doomed to failure. In sex, compulsion and ancient Necessity rule. The sexual personae of family romance are obliterated by the tidal force of regression, the backwards movement toward primeval dissolution, which Ferenczi identifies with ocean. An orgasm is a domination, a surrender, or a breaking through. Nature is no respecter of human identity. This is why so many men turn away or flee after sex, for they have sensed the annihilation of the

daemonic. Western love is a displacement of cosmic realities. It is a defense mechanism rationalizing forces ungoverned and ungovernable. Like early religion, it is a device enabling us to control our primal fear.

Sex cannot be understood because nature cannot be understood. Science is a method of logical analysis of nature's operations. It has lessened human anxiety about the cosmos by demonstrating the materiality of nature's forces, and their frequent predictability. But science is always playing catch-up ball. Nature breaks its own rules whenever it wants. Science cannot avert a single thunderbolt. Western science is a product of the Apollonian mind: its hope is that by naming and classification, by the cold light of intellect, archaic night can be pushed back and defeated.

Name and person are part of the west's quest for form. The west insists on the discrete identity of objects. To name is to know; to know is to control. I will demonstrate that the west's greatness arises from this delusional certitude. Far Eastern culture has never striven against nature in this way. Compliance, not confrontation is its rule. Buddhist meditation seeks the unity and harmony of reality. Twentieth-century physics, going full circle back to Heracleitus, postulates that all matter is in motion. In other words, there is no thing, only energy. But this perception has not been imaginatively absorbed, for it cancels the west's intellectual and moral assumptions.

The westerner knows by seeing. Perceptual relations are at the heart of our culture, and they have produced our titanic contributions to art. Walking in nature, we see, identify, name, *recognize*. This recognition is our apotropaion, that is, our warding off of fear. Recognition is ritual cognition, a repetition-compulsion. We say that nature is beautiful. But this aesthetic judgment, which not all peoples have shared, is another defense formation, woefully inadequate for encompassing nature's totality. What is pretty in nature is confined to the thin skin of the globe upon which we huddle. Scratch that skin, and nature's daemonic ugliness will erupt.

Our focus on the pretty is an Apollonian strategy. The leaves and flowers, the birds, the hills are a patchwork pattern by which we map the known. What the west represses in its view of nature is the chthonian, which means "of the earth"—but earth's bowels, not its surface. Jane Harrison uses the term for pre-Olympian Greek religion, and I adopt it as a substitute for Dionysian, which has become contaminated with vulgar pleasantries. The Dionysian is no picnic. It is the chthonian realities which Apollo evades, the blind grinding of subterranean force,