

Myth, Religion, & Mother Right

selected writings of

J. J. Bachofen

with a preface by George Boas and an introduction by Joseph Campbell



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AND MOTHER RIGHT

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TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY

RALPH MANHEIM

WITH A PREFACE BY GEORGE BOAS

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Editorial Note

THIS VOLUME is a translation of *Mutterrecht und Urreligion*, a selection of the writings of J. J. Bachofen edited by Rudolf Marx and first published in 1926 by Alfred Kröner Verlag, Stuttgart. Grateful acknowledgment is made to Schwabe & Co., Basel, for permission to draw on the scholarship of *Johann Jakob Bachofen: Gesammelte Werke*, edited by Karl Meuli, for clarification and additional information. We are also indebted to Schwabe & Co. for permission to reproduce Plates I, III, and V from Volume 4 of their edition, and to Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., for permission to quote Robert Fitzgerald's translation of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Bachofen wrote at a time when the Greek and Roman gods and heroes were identified with one another more closely than they are today, and generally speaking, he used Latin forms even where we would find the Greek more appropriate. The editors felt, however, that to modify his usage in this respect would be intrusive. The reader will find the necessary equivalents in the glossarial index.

Special thanks are due to Ernest Nash for information on the location and condition of the works of art depicted in Plates I, III, and V. The late A. S. B. Glover was responsible for the compilation of the bibliography and the glossarial index, and for valuable editorial advice on the text.

Preface

THE NAME of Johann Jakob Bachofen, if mentioned at all in books of reference, is attached to a theory of social development which maintains that the first period of human history was matriarchal. And if any discussion of the theory is added, it will be to the effect that it is almost universally discredited. As a matter of fact this is only a small part of Bachofen's contribution to social philosophy, and it would be perhaps more appropriate, if labels are required, to list him among the philosophers of history rather than among either ethnologists or sociologists. For, as the studies in this volume will show, his attitude toward cultural history was not that of the empirical anthropologist or that of the annalist. His focus of interest was the inner life of human beings rather than what he called the externals of human development. He was more concerned with literature, language, architecture, and the other arts than with economic factors, military adventures, territorial expansion, the succession of rulers, population growth, and revolutions, whether in isolation from one another or all in a grand hodgepodge. His purpose in the three sets of essays which make up this volume was to discover, if possible, the universal law of history.

It is clear that the success of such a purpose depends upon certain premises about human nature being true of all human beings and not merely of Europeans. All philosophers of history require such premises, for without them they would be left with a diversified group of data whose homogeneity they would never find. A Marxist, for instance, takes as his main premise the

economic determination of all social regimes; the Augustinian, the basic dependence of man's fate upon his obedience or disobedience to the laws of God. In short, if there is a single universal law covering any collection of facts, it is intrinsic that it describe what is common to the whole collection. But since there is always the possibility of finding several common properties, the philosopher has to decide which is of the greatest importance. His decision in turn will determine the type of law—materialistic, logical, ethical, or even aesthetic—that he will uncover. And this in turn will determine the kind of fact he will seek and, naturally, the kind of interpretation he will provide for his readers.

Now if one thing is certain about all human beings, it is that they communicate their inner life in symbolic terms. No one who admits that we have an inner life believes that it is open to the scrutiny of anyone other than the person to whom it belongs. Even the naïve realist, if such a being exists outside of textbooks, grants that he cannot feel what another person is feeling, cannot dream another person's dreams, cannot put himself, as he might say, into the mind of anyone else. Our inner life is a complex of religious aspirations, fears, struggles to survive in an environment which at times is hostile and at others friendly, illusions, images, and fictions. But we do not merely worship in silence: we express our adoration of the superhuman powers in ritual and we elaborate myths to be narrated by each generation to its successor, myths that sound like explanations of natural events—such as the round of the seasons or the sudden occurrence of an earthquake or flood—or myths that are simply pictorial, allegorical, or gestures of veneration. In general these myths take the form of concrete emblems in which events or constellations of natural objects are invested with human traits. This tendency survives in what John Ruskin called the pathetic fallacy, but it may also be found in those vestiges of mythography which crop up in scientific writings when their author, taken off his guard, speaks of the simplicity of Nature or the attraction of positive and negative charges of electricity or of a cause which produced its effect. In Bachofen's time, the first half of the nineteenth century, this type of speech was deprecated, but it was part of his originality to ask what it was about human beings that led them to think, and hence to talk, in this fashion.

His answer was the ineradicable religious nature of mankind. He made a sharp contrast between what he called ideas and facts. "What cannot have happened was nonetheless thought," he said.* And he was more interested in what men have thought than in those material circumstances which gave rise to their thinking. For if we remove from history the inner life of the people about whom we are writing, we have but a small part of the story. It is undeniable that people have to eat, find or build shelters for themselves, propagate their kind, rear their children, and dispose of their dead. But if we simply observe the physical behavior of the human race in such situations, we shall have no idea of what is going on. We see a man killing game, skinning it, roasting it, and eating it, and we say that he is hungry and is trying to alleviate his hunger. But the act may not follow from any hunger at all: it may be a piece of religious ritual, a sacrifice to some god unknown to the observer. Who from a non-Christian culture would be able to understand the actions of a priest celebrating his daily Mass? So if we were to observe a bird building her nest and knew nothing about birds and their customs, we should have no more understanding of the process as a part of the biological regimen of the animal than if, knowing nothing about games, we were to watch two men who sat at opposite sides of a checker board and moved red and black disks from time to time.

Bachofen was one of those men who see a problem in what is generally accepted as unproblematic. He was a jurist and a historian of Roman law. He therefore knew that a set of symbols invested an idea which was not overtly present in them. But he encountered colleagues who were not aware of what might seem obvious. In all symbolic communication there is both the visible sign and the significance of the sign. To write the history of the law simply as a series of verbal changes would be absurd. It would be akin to listing all the appearances of the Cross and maintaining that it always meant the same thing. The history of almost any legal concept, such as homicide, reveals profound changes in man's appraisal of human life, of shifts in social organization, of reinterpretations of social classes, of—in this case—growing egalitarianism, of the emancipation of women, of modifications of

* See p. 214.

technology. But all this is taken for granted. To Bachofen it was important to discover, if possible, what accounts for these changes. What induced men to believe that it was just as serious to kill a peasant as an earl? What happened to induce men to think that it was more serious to kill a man as part of a premeditated plan than to kill him accidentally? The outer fact is that one person killed another. Somehow we have grown to take into account such vague ideas as motivation and the sanctity of all human life, but these things cannot be observed directly. One cannot *see* sanctity or the desire for revenge.

After studying what can be observed, Bachofen came to certain conclusions as to its meaning, that is, as to its congruence with religious, ethical, and aesthetic beliefs. First among his conclusions was that as society advances it liberates the human spirit from "the paralyzing fetters of a cosmic-physical view of life." † That is, man always is engaged in a struggle with physical nature, a struggle in which he may win or lose. But from the very beginnings of human society there has been a steady increase in our victories over "natural necessity." ** These optimistic words were printed in 1870. There was little then or for the next quarter century to make them seem unreasonable. Yet even if he had foreseen the calamities of our own time, or the ironical subservience to natural necessity that we have imposed upon ourselves, he would have argued that this period was simply one of those times of retrogression out of which we would emerge into greater freedom.

To pursue his search then for the meaning of history, Bachofen turned to the only documents which gave any hint of what men might have believed in the distant past. And he found them first in the tombstones of the ancient Mediterranean culture. Just as almost all the pre-Socratic philosophers saw the universe as an interplay of opposing forces, so these documents represent death as being bound up with life. We all know that both the Greeks and the Egyptians represented dying as a passage into another life, sometimes naïvely, as when they furnished the dead with artifacts that are needed on earth, or sometimes metaphorically, as when they depicted scenes of farewell. One does not say good-by to the inanimate; one throws it away when it is worn out. The fundamen-

† See p. 236. ** See p. 238.

tal duality of existence was observed in the opposition of male and female, of the active and the passive (reflected even in grammar), of heaven and earth, of the sun and the moon. Such duality could not be left unresolved. Otherwise the cosmos would break in two, and that was unthinkable if there actually was a cosmos. To emerge from this dilemma one can deny the reality of one or the other of the conflicting beings, find some third thing which will be the source of them both, or see their connection as phases of a single process which is more real than either.

It was the last of these possibilities that Bachofen found to be the belief of the ancients. At a time when abstract science was not yet formulated, men had to express their ideas in symbols which were clear to them, as the symbols of mathematics are clear to us. And such symbols remain in the form of myths. Pliny describes a picture by Socrates the painter, in which Ocnus is shown twisting a rope while, behind his back, an ass gnaws off the end which he has just twisted.^{††} This has been interpreted both as an allegory of sloth and of the vanity of human labor. But when it is assimilated to other symbols that are also paradoxical in what they represent, the conclusion seems to be that they all signify rather the passage from one state of being to its opposite. Creation then is but one end of destruction, destruction the beginning of creation. So in the famous fragment of Heraclitus, "The way up and the way down is one and the same." It is the process itself which is one; its stages are of course various.

When we have grasped this, we have a clue to the philosophy of Bachofen. Thus we must always envision oppositions in cultural history as the poles of a single process of transformation. The process itself has a single purpose, but its communication can be accomplished only by whatever material means are available. The beauty of myth and symbol lies in their synthetic power; they can combine in one presentation disparate elements which would be self-contradictory if put into a declarative sentence. In the picture of Ocnus both the beginning and the end are seen in a single glance as united. To be sure, as a picture it is composed of discrete elements, the man, the rope, the ass, and their relative positions. But as a symbol it is unified by its meaning. To put the meaning

^{††} See p. 54, n. 4.

into words is possible, if one has the words to utilize, but the story of Ocnus as a narrative will again be subject to the necessity of telling one incident after another. The symbol presents them all at once, and the work of interpretation goes on in the mind of the spectator.

Bachofen was fully aware of his difference from other historians. The idea of granting to religion first rank among the creative forces "which mold man's whole existence" is considered, he says, "indicative . . . of narrow-minded incompetence." * And yet he clung to the hypothesis, for he maintained that it alone is capable of giving us an understanding of why men struggle to free themselves from the bonds of earth, of why they have not been content to settle down and relax. At the time this was written, a few years before 1860, little if anything was known of tribes which did cease to struggle and which died rather than meet the challenge of time and change. But Bachofen was always ready to admit diversities so long as they were not basic, and there is nothing in his theory that denies that where religion has lost its power, the pace of history will slacken. Change, he agreed, is always gradual; it has its ups and downs.† We find, moreover, cycles in history in which the end of the cycle returns to its beginning. We find people all over the world who are in different stages of history, so that we cannot take a cross section of humanity at any one date and expect to find all human beings at the same developmental point.

The whole question of human development has been re-examined in recent years since the vogue of evolutionism has waned. It is no longer the fashion to think of North American Indians, Polynesians, Africans, and Eskimos as primitive in the older sense of representing a stage through which all men passed at the beginning of human history. Hence it is no refutation of Bachofen to point out that as of 1966 no people can be found which has the myths and the same symbols that have been utilized by him, though we are not asserting that this is the actual fact. The reflection is introduced here simply to point out that when anthropologists say that they can find no tribe in which there is sexual promiscuity or matriarchy, but that both are mixed up with marriage taboos and patriarchal customs, this in no way proves

* See pp. 84f. † See p. 94.

that in the history of such tribes there was no period in which promiscuity was practiced and women were predominant.

In fact, it might well be argued that if sexual relations are regulated by law and promiscuity prohibited, it is because they had previously been unregulated and promiscuity had prevailed. For one does not forbid something which no one wants to do. The elaborate incest taboos would not have been necessary if no one had the inclination to be incestuous. One could with some reason conclude that if sexual relations are regulated by law, it is because they were once unregulated. Bachofen's reason for asserting primitive promiscuity, aside from the empirical evidence among the "lower orders" and the polygamous tendencies of most males, is that the emphasis on sexual decorum in matriarchal societies can be explained only as a reaction against a state of affairs which had become intolerable. He had at his disposal a large sheaf of myths and accounts of cults which honored a predominant mother-goddess such as Demeter. By the time they were described by historians, they had already become obsolete or had been metamorphosed into secret rites of which only the initiates were cognizant. It is unlikely that anyone would deny the priority in time of such religious themes. For such emblems as the Cosmic Egg and the Earth Mother not only occur very early in cultural history but were known to be early by the ancient mythographers. In fact, their antiquity may have been their charm.

If, then, promiscuity is denied, there would be little reason for prohibiting it. And if it is prohibited, then something must replace it. What replaced it, according to Bachofen, was a society in which the mother was the dominant figure not only in the family, but also in society and the pantheon. Names passed from mothers to children and property from mothers to daughters. In an extreme form this state of affairs was called by Bachofen Amazonism. According to legend the Amazons were a people from whose society all males were excluded. If there is any historical basis for such a legend, it was, Bachofen thought, a matriarchal society in which the race was continued under the strict supervision of women. That this is not unreasonable, even though the documentary evidence is legend, is shown by the simple fact that babies survive only because of maternal care and that thus the fundamen-

tal element of any society must be a mother and her children. There are still in existence, as everyone knows, societies in which descent is traced from the mother rather than from the father, and, it has been argued, that is because, whereas paternity is frequently a matter of dispute, maternity is a matter of direct observation.

Bachofen's theory of a matriarchal society out of which modern patriarchal societies evolved was accepted pretty generally among sociologists until about the beginning of the twentieth century. It was the classic pattern for historians to follow. In his *History of Human Marriage* Westermarck attacked it as early as 1891, citing Bachofen as the principal sponsor of the thesis. But Westermarck, like his modern colleagues, looked to modern nonliterate as exemplars of what primitive societies must have been like, though this is obviously an assumption which prejudices the whole argument. Bachofen preferred to see evidence of a historical situation in legend, on the ground that legend preserves the collective memory. Since we can observe for ourselves the retention of ideas rejected by empirical science in both art and religion, we cannot in an a priori fashion deny the cogency of such reasoning, even though it is admittedly an intellectual reconstruction rather than an observed fact. But what else could it be? One can no more observe the primordial past in human institutions than one can in one's own life. One relies on memory—admittedly faulty—in the latter case and on the collective memory in the former.

The theory of the passage from hetaerism, as Bachofen called the state of sexual promiscuity, in the sense of external history, to matriarchy is perhaps not so important for an understanding of Bachofen as the evidence of man's nostalgia for the rule of women. In Western Europe at least we know that the position of women in the Homeric legends was much higher than it was in historical Athens, if by "higher" we mean more dignified, respected, authoritative. The Homeric goddesses are not all subservient to Zeus by any means, and the stories in the *Odyssey* give us such figures as Nausicaä, Circe, Calypso, and Penelope, who, though both good and evil, are not women cloistered in the inner chambers of the palace. We know furthermore that in Republican Rome, and of course later, too, wives gained more and more prominence in

family and public affairs. Christianity made its way partly because of the influence of women. And by the epoch of chivalry women were raised to a position of eminence equaled only by that of the Virgin Mary. We have often marked the level of a society by the freedom from male domination which has been gained by women, and the word "gained" is deliberate. To refuse to see this is to refuse to admit that social changes are initiated by human desires.

Whether Bachofen was stimulated by Hegel's theory of development through dialectical evolution or not—and the question must remain open in view of the prevalence of analogous ideas in his time—he agrees with Hegel that abuse leads to social development.** The insistence upon any exclusive right leads to its nullification. Thus when women were the prey of any man who wanted them, the situation was intolerable and led over to the rule of women, the abandonment of communal property and of communal parentage. Marriage was then instituted as a regulative principle. But when women took over the rule of society as well as the exclusive ownership of children and property, this gave rise to an equally intolerable situation, for especially in time of war defense required a body of warriors who could not both exercise the duties of mothers and governors and at the same time engage in warfare. The reasoning here is analogous to that of such philosophers as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, who argued on the basis of natural rights which they substantiated by assuming a state of nature as an intellectual model which would make a transition to a higher stage comprehensible. The higher stage in Bachofen's system was of course patriarchy. The three stages according to this schema are first the tellurian, in which there is motherhood without marriage, no agriculture, and apparently nothing resembling a state; then the lunar, in which there is conjugal motherhood and authentic or legitimate birth and in which agriculture is practiced in settled communities; and lastly the solar period, in which there is conjugal father right, a division of labor, and individual ownership. The mythical names which Bachofen gave to these periods will seem strange and perhaps even

** See p. 150.

superstitious to the modern reader, but they all correspond to religious beliefs, still flourishing today—if not overtly expressed in verbal formulas, at least to be found in our emotions, our art, and our symbols. But the point is that where one finds tellurian ideas, man's dependence on the earth is reflected in sexual and parental relations, in the gathering of food, and in a belief in the chthonic. Similar correspondences will be found when women are predominant between agriculture, the moon, and deities who protect and express fertility. And analogous data will be discoverable for the third, or solar, period. But none of this is intended to deny the existence of survivals, of vestiges of earlier times in subsequent times.

There are certain themes in Bachofen which have a strong similarity to those of Nietzsche. Though Bachofen's name does not appear in any of the indexes to any of Nietzsche's works, Nietzsche was a great admirer of Bachofen's colleague, Jakob Burckhardt, and Burckhardt himself was an admirer of Bachofen. Both Nietzsche and Bachofen see in struggle the source of all greatness, and both agree that every nation has a character of its own which expresses itself in its desire for power. In the mature Nietzsche the power sought is largely power over oneself, and in the words of Zarathustra, the eagle's eye is above the bull's neck. According to myth the eagle could look at the sun without blinking, and Bachofen's modern man struggling to liberate himself from the fetters of the material world had no other reason for doing so than his love of independence. It is to be noted also that in his early *Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche took over Bachofen's terms, the Dionysiac and the Apollonian, for two types of will, the creative and the contemplative, and that he also maintained that they were fused into one in the Greek tragedy before the time of Euripides. At this period of life, when he was under the influence of Schopenhauer, he had little regard for the value of individuality, for individuality was thought of as an expression of the will to live.

But later, after *The Birth of Tragedy* and his repudiation of Schopenhauer, a great difference appears in Nietzsche's philosophy and that of Bachofen. There was then a revulsion against the notion of collective souls and a disgust with any theory that would

deny the individual his rights as against those of society. Now the wills of man were seen as either masterful or servile, and of the two previous types of will the Dionysiac became preferable to the Apollonian. Freedom for the individual could never be given by society, but must be achieved in rebellion against society. At this period in his career, influenced it is generally believed by Gobineau, he turned to the Italian Renaissance for his ideal and saw a model in the figure of Cesare Borgia. Now it is the individual will, not the collective, which creates good and evil by fiat. Though the desire for power is common to both Nietzsche's and Bachofen's human being, Nietzsche is more inclined to accentuate man in combat with society rather than society as molding the man.

In spite of this important difference between the theories of Bachofen and Nietzsche, there remains an element of identity in the role assigned by both to myth. To Bachofen myth was the "exegesis of the symbol." †† Similarly in *The Birth of Tragedy* (section 10) we find that myth has for its domain the whole area of "Dionysian truth." Dionysian truth is that truth which is intuitive and as such has to be nonverbal. But just as in Bachofen the symbols of our intuitions are explicated in myth which then evolves into philosophic knowledge, so in Nietzsche myth expresses itself in tragedy and music. That is, both men realize that the human mind refuses to stop short of communication, but whereas Nietzsche with his hatred for society refuses to allow the public to contemplate the tragedy as a spectator, Bachofen sees in the gradual transformation of myth into communicable symbols the fulfillment of its potentialities. In short, for Bachofen communication is the very essence of knowledge. Knowledge is the link which binds men together. But the link is binding not merely as cognition but as religious cognition.

The individualism of the mature Nietzsche undoubtedly came from Burckhardt. He read him, he said, constantly. Burckhardt, as is well known, saw in the Italian Renaissance the rise of powerful individuals who recognized no law above their own will. Such a human condition was the highest to which man could attain. It was this which he called "culture," as opposed to those situations in

†† See p. 48.

which the state and then religion were the dominant forces. The periods preceding culture were such that the freedom of the individual was inevitably restricted and, if the individual asserted himself, he had to do so against the social order. But the tendency to anarchy inherent in any individualism was mitigated by the highly developed sense of honor, a mixture of conscience and egotism which, as Burckhardt says,* often survives after man "has lost, whether by his own fault or not, faith, love, and hope." But a sense of honor resides within an individual, and by its very nature as a mixture of egotism and conscience it cannot be conferred upon one by any external power as if it were a military decoration. Moreover, as in Hegel the "eternal man" embodies all the aspirations and ideals of a society, so for Burckhardt philosophers, poets, and statesmen become aware of the dim problems of the masses while poets express them in luminous symbols. This function of the poet unites Bachofen, Burckhardt, and Nietzsche, for all three were aware of the power of the nonscientific or, if one prefers, the nonrationalistic insights which mold a culture and transmit to its members their deepest feelings.

We have become accustomed to think of a society either as a loose collection of men and women engaged in various pursuits or, on the other hand, as an overindividual soul which in some mysterious way directs the lives of its individual components. For Bachofen neither concept is valid. He sees the human mind as thinking or feeling in certain general patterns which it is impelled to articulate. These patterns are expressed first in symbolic form and are then in turn transformed into myths. The myths in their turn are expressed in rationalistic language and become the various sciences. But as this process is going on, there remain in every society men and women who express new insight in new symbols which will someday become rationalistic systems of a novel type. Nevertheless the primordial insights and intuitions recur, though their symbolic vestments may be novel. It is one of the tasks of the philosopher, he maintains, to recapture these in their original form.

Such a point of view is clearly analogous to that of Carl Jung in

* Jakob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, tr. by S. G. C. Middlemore (New York and London, 1944), p. 263.