ESSAY ON EROTIC ELEMENTS
IN ETRUSCAN AND ROMAN ART

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Though the well-known anagram "ROMA-AMOR" has been chosen as the title of this volume, it is not our intention to present the reader with an account of the seamy side of "the grandeur that was Rome"; this is not meant to be a historical study.

Nor is it our aim, in these few pages, to cover exhaustively the subject of "sex-life in Rome", many aspects of which will remain outside the scope of this publication.

Our aim is to try to interpret—or rather to foster an understanding of—certain Etruscan and Roman paintings and sculptures, which Dr. Louis Nagel has had photographed and reproduced in their entirety, in many cases for the first time.

These illustrations, of unrivalled quality, could never have been assembled without the kind collaboration of our eminent colleagues Professor Amedeo Maiuri, Superintendent of Antiquities (Naples); Professor Attilio Stazio, Director of the National Museum of Naples; Professor Giovanni Oscar Onorato, of Pompeii; Avv. Renzo Rosano (Rome); Dr. Luciano Merlo (Rome), and Messrs. Gilbert Charles-Picard (Institut d'Art, Paris); Georges Le Rider (Department of Medallions, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris); Amable Audin (Museum of Gallo-Roman Civilization, Lyons); V. Lassalle, (Museums of Nîmes); Jean Maurice Rouquette (Museums of Arles); Joannès Ruf (Museums of Vienne); Louis Armand-Calliat (Museum of Châlon-sur-Saône).

Both author and publisher are happy to have this opportunity of thanking them publicly.

Besides strictly Roman works, we have included among our illustrations some Greek or Greek-inspired works, both originals and copies, discovered in Italy. Not only do they demonstrate the influence of Greek grace and poetry on Italian taste, they also help us to gain a better appreciation of the originality of the Roman temperament, whose forcefulness and vigour are, we feel, fittingly evoked by the very sound of the two words "ROMA-AMOR".

J. M.
The days of *braghettoni* are past; even without plaster seashells and figleaves, the nakedness of the antique statuary displayed in museums is no longer considered a danger to public morality. Nor is it now thought necessary, when presenting and discussing art in an educational work intended for an adult public, to mutilate or camouflage the pictures. *A fortiori*, scientific publications no longer find themselves compelled to ignore objects which, because of their purpose, their form or their decoration, are "indecent". In clay and plaster, bronze and marble, in vases, lamps, sculptures, frescoes and mosaics, the Greeks, Etruscans and Romans have handed down to us a rich store of erotic, hermaphroditic and priapic imagery. To ignore it would be to deprive ourselves of information—much of it valuable—on the methods and techniques of the craftsmen of the past, to neglect an important aspect of the "classical" civilizations, namely, the way in which the apparently gratuitous obscenity of certain objects in reality reflects popular superstitions or religious beliefs, and to impoverish our knowledge of the arts by passing over some of the most subtly accomplished works that freedom of artistic inspiration and expression ever produced.

This album is devoted to Etruscan and Graeco-Roman or Roman works. Most people have a low opinion of the morality of the Romans. That *lupanar* is a Latin word is all too well known; Latin, more
than any other language, is notorious for its "frankness"; even without having read them, almost everybody knows that Ovid wrote an *Art of Love*, and that Juvenal’s *Satires* give an unvarnished picture of the vices of the society of his time; the *Satyricon* of Petronius, in translations at popular prices, is almost as great a best-seller as any pseudo-historical novel about Rome in its period of decadence, and for the same doubtful reasons; Tiberius and Nero are better known to the man in the street for their depravities than for their statecraft; everybody knows the saying that “Caesar’s wife is above suspicion”, and remembers that Messalina, wife of the Emperor Claudius, used to pick up casual lovers during nocturnal expeditions to the brothel district of Suburra, from which she returned “lascivious, non satiata”. This belief in the debauched and orgiastic life of the ancient Romans is reflected in the whispered fame of certain mosaics, the so-called revelations of the “secret museums” of Naples and elsewhere, and the wooden panels on various archaeological sites throughout Italy, indicating rather than concealing the presence of pictures “forbidden” to chaste eyes.

There is scarcely a visitor to Pompeii who has not been led by a lewdly winking guide to the famous panels, which—when a tip has passed hands—are raised just long enough to allow the barest glimpse of an erotic painting or a phallic statuette. Imagination does the rest; few people realize that the showcases of the Antiquarium contain items which are just as “interesting” and no less “suggestive”. Below, the reader will find excellent reproductions in colour photography of some of the most typical of these works so long considered “unsuitable”. In presenting them, we are perhaps spoiling the time-honoured transaction of the excavation sites, but nobody need be scandalized! Beside the suggestiveness of some modern films and the subtle sensuality of certain passages in literature, the love scenes painted on the walls of the wealthy Campanian houses are as a rule relatively innocuous. The directness of the gestures portrayed and the crudity of the forms are offensive only in the old 18th- and 19th-century outline drawings; when they are shown in full colour, their artistic value is restored and they can be seen as products of a great tradition whose masterpieces were intended to appeal to the intelligence rather than the animal passions, to the mind rather than the senses. That this is so is proved by the way in which medallions, mouldings on pottery, and terra-cotta lamps repeat, in stylized form, the same “obscene” themes taken from a common source.
Here we have something rather different from mere coarseness. Once it is understood that the phallic motifs carved and painted on the walls of ancient houses or depicted in mosaic on the floors have nothing in common with modern wall scribblings, we shall be less likely to confuse them with graffiti, homosexual or otherwise (these existed in ancient times as they do today). The erotic imagery in the private houses and also—we must emphasize this—in the tombs and sanctuaries of antiquity had quite a different purpose. The desire of certain aesthetes and sceptics to lead a life of refined sensuality in a suitable setting explains it only in part—we must also take into account the sense of the uncertainty of man’s fate and his anxiety before the riddles of life and death, fertility and propagation, to which Eleusinism and Dionysism, and later the Egyptian and oriental religions, owed their success. The place of the hieros gamos in these religions is well known. The purely human erotic compositions which alternate on the Campanian frescoes with portrayals of the amorous escapades of gods and heroes, as well as of the characters of the Dionysian mysteries, would appear to have a higher purpose than that of parody or profanation; the initiate taking part in rites imitating the revels of nymphs and satyrs knew that there was a divine element in the mysterious alchemy of human love.
It is inaccurate to say—even though it may seem a natural observation on the part of the visitor confronted with the phallic ornaments and grotesque statuettes found in the excavations—that the Romans were obsessed with sex. What they were really obsessed with was the idea of "magic", and anyone who has lived, however briefly, in one of the Mediterranean countries knows how much the fear of bad luck, of the evil eye, persists among the inhabitants. The taxi-driver who extends an open palm in the direction of someone who has almost caused an accident, the peasant who spits on a child’s cradle, the workman who suddenly plunges his hand into his trousers-pocket or "makes horns" with his forefinger and little finger before crossing himself when a funeral passes—all are believers in the jettatura, the kako mati, that is, in what the Ancients understood by magic. Such superstition persists in the fear of the evil influence of certain words or sights and, above all, of certain people—of some detail of their clothing, the colour of their eyes, or simply their mere presence. The danger is all the greater and more worrying in that the person embodying the evil influence may be unaware of it, may even be a friend or a relative.

There is in Theagenes and Chariclea, a late 3rd-century Greek novel (and, it seems, one of Racine’s secret indulgences when he was a student at Port Royal), a very curious passage. Chariclea is stricken with a strange listlessness, and her father is worried. "Calasiris told her not to be surprised if, after taking
part in a procession before such a large crowd, she had attracted the evil eye.” When she expresses her astonishment that such a learned man should believe, like the common people, in the magic power of the eyes, he goes on: “This is what happens. The air around us penetrates into our very being through the eyes, the nose, the mouth, and the other openings of the body and carries its external characteristics with it. It leaves the germs of the passions with which it is charged in those who receive it. Thus if someone looks on a beautiful object with eyes of envy, the surrounding air is charged with malignity and breathes bitterness over others. This air is so rarefied that it penetrates the very marrow of the bones and thus spreads the sickness of envy—in another word, bewitches. It is not surprising that some people bewitch even their dear ones and those whom they wish well. The envy that works in them is a natural phenomenon and they are impelled to act not by their will, but by their very nature.”

It would be a mistake to imagine that the pseudo-scientific explanation furnished by the Egyptian in the novel would be unacceptable to the serious-minded. Almost the same argument can be found in Plutarch’s Table Talk in which there is a discussion on “those who are said to bewitch with their eyes”. Plutarch believed in the evil eye: “We know of people”, he writes, “who can seriously harm small children by staring at them, because the temperature of their bodies... is thus corrupted and changed for the worse.” Plutarch admitted the tradition that the ancient inhabitants of the Pontus, the Thibians, “were deadly and pestilential not only to small children but also to grown men because those who were touched by their look or their breath or their words became listless and sick”. The physical reason, he thought, could be found in the “fluxions and flowings” which constantly proceed from the body, all the more so when the body is “heated and moved”: and “it seems that this can be done as much by the eyes as by any other means; for sight, being a light and mobile sense, can radiate tremendous power when the spirit that guides it is full of passion, so that man, through his sight, creates and undergoes a number of important influences, and receives, from the things he sees, considerable pleasure or displeasure.”

Sight is “quick and light” in its power to convey contagion from one person to another. The clearest proof of this is to be found in love “which has its source and origin in sight, so that a love-stricken person melts and flows away in contemplating the beauty of the one he loves, as though he were entering into her”. Just as physical sickness and passions can contaminate others, so can the passions of the mind
or soul: "Don't you know that the soul, when it is moved by affection, may also move and affect the body? The thought of amorous dalliance arouses man's nature... and a man's seed is more likely to take and to beget a child when he is with a woman he loves." But feelings such as avarice or jealousy also have an effect on the body, and "envy, which is no less subtle in penetrating the soul, fills the body with a bad and baneful influence". When those infected with a vice of this sort turn their eyes on others, their looks are like poisoned darts: if those they look at "are injured or hurt, there is nothing strange about this and nothing from which we should withhold belief". It should be noted that the effect of such looks is independent of the will of those who give them: once the passions have filled the soul with evil habits, the latter assume the force of nature; they exercise their influence even against the nearest and dearest of those in whom they are established. As soon as such people are roused, "they act not as they wish, but as they are driven and directed".

We find Democritus quoted in support of this theory of evil "emanations" from the eyes of certain people, which suggests that, as early as the 5th century B.C., philosophers were trying to explain the effects of the evil eye, and confirms the antiquity of a belief which the masses were certainly not inclined to doubt.

It was vital to arm oneself against the constant and insidious danger of invidia, of magic. But how could the evil look be deflected and rendered harmless? For this purpose there were magic formulae, gestures and amulets. The usual method was straightforward: to "insult" the evil eye, or to render it harmless by laughter. It might be countered with a gesture of contempt, such as spitting; its evil influence could be turned against itself (it was thought that the possessor of the evil eye could "bewitch" himself if he met his own look reflected in a mirror or in the waters of a stream); but a still more effective method was to face it with the image of something shocking and grotesque and send it packing. Thus, there are a great many scatological amulets and pendants showing the rear view of a deformed figure squatting with thighs apart, cassim cacans, the buttocks revealed by the pulled-up tunic; there is also a series of nightmare images which originated in Egypt (the country of sorcerers and witchcraft par excellence)—hideous gnomes contorting themselves into grotesque positions, and peculiar creatures contemplating a giant penis which rises between their legs and on which they seem to be sitting astride. Italians living
in the East, or having business connexions there, had learnt of the liberating and protective power, as phylacteries, of these grotesque figures, which are sometimes termed harpocratic, but whose popularity very quickly spread far beyond the Nile valley.

Obscenity—crude, outright obscenity that made one laugh and look away—was a powerful defence against the evil eye: anything concerning sex and copulation, anything representing the male or female sexual organs. The extended middle finger (known as the *digitus infamis* or *impudicus*) had phallic connotations: the gesture of thrusting it out while keeping the other fingers closed was thus apotropaic. It is probable that the gesture of "the horns", still used in Italy today, has a similar origin; the index and little fingers are easier to raise and hold straight, and the doubling of the symbol reinforces its effectiveness. The gesture of the "*fica*", or "fig", is also very old. It consists in inserting the tip of the thumb between the index and middle fingers, while keeping the hand clenched; originally it must certainly have represented the penetration of the phallus into the female organ, or feminine erection. I myself favour the latter interpretation, and the grimace in which the tip of the tongue is thrust between closed lips may once have had the same meaning, whether or not it was accompanied by spitting in the way I have seen it in Greece. *Sykon* in Greek, corresponding to the Latin *fica*, signifies the *membrum muliebre*, and amulets showing on one side a closed hand making the gesture of the *fica* often show the glans penis on the other. I am inclined to believe that the purpose of these objects was to couple the male apotropaion with the female apotropaion, or rather its symbol, just as in certain mosaics intended to ward off harm drawings of the phallus are accompanied by the broken triangle design symbolising the female organ.

As gestures offered only transitory protection against a known danger, it was safer to be armed against the constant and insidious danger of the evil eye in a more permanent fashion by suitable amulets whose shape and appearance would provide unfailing protection at all times. The gesture of the *fica* and the defiant gesture of the phallus were therefore reproduced in bone, ivory, stone or metal in pendants to be worn on the person—round the neck, for example, or on the belt—in the same way as the sacred statuettes, animal images, coloured pearls, etc., that were considered as remedies against sickness and evil spells. Many of the phallic symbols excavated (realistic reproductions of the phallus, combinations
of the phallus and the fica, or polyphallic combinations) are pierced by holes or attached to chains. The bulla worn by a child was often marked with a phallic symbol, and we learn from Macrobius that a victorious general, during a triumphal procession, would often wear a bulla with the "remedia quae crederent adversus invidiam valentissima", while a large image of a phallus was slung under his chariot. In fact, the greater a person's success, the more he was threatened by invidia and had recourse to what Pliny termed "the physician against envy", namely, Fascinus the phallus. "Fortuna gloriae carnifex": chance is the butcher of glory, and jealous looks are directed most venomously against those who are thought—or think themselves—to be happy. Only the supernatural powers attributed to the "Great Protector" could brave the formidable perils of success.

The phallus was not only the usual protector of life and limb, and thus of all those following a dangerous calling, such as soldiers and gladiators. It was also supposed to guard property, furniture, and chattels. In the triclinium, the table supports consisted of hermaphroditic images with the sex organs exposed, and the bases were in the form of ithyphallic genii; this was to keep food placed on the tables from going bad or harming the eater. In the cubiculum, phallus-shaped lamps with tinkling pendants exorcised the evil spirits that prowl by night. Such "obscene" objects protected the house in a wider sense; apotropaic motifs proliferated throughout the interior, repeating those on the outside of the building. The latter—painted or sculptured, or inset in relief in the masonry—were frequently found near the door and often consisted of phallic images endowed with wings or paws, apparently ready to chase any malevolent intruder. On some houses or shops, they were accompanied by inscriptions, such as the famous Hic habitat Felicitas on a bakery at Pompeii. The walls of many towns in Italy bore protective phallic symbols, and the custom spread to Africa and many other provinces of the Roman Empire. This shows how widely the symbol was considered to protect the welfare and prosperity both of individuals and communities.

One more form of this protective imagery must be mentioned: the floor mosaics in which the phallus and vulva, often—particularly the former—used as decorative motifs, are depicted in a way that combines the realism necessary for the working of the charm with a linear stylization appropriate to the medium. In Italy, in North Africa, and in the East, there exists a wide variety of such compositions. I have already
referred to the mosaic at Sousse which has the motif of a phallus and two vulvae arranged symmetrically and linked together by a jet from the phallus towards one of the vulvae. The phallus is often portrayed as a sort of fish with the glans as the fish's head; two phalluses, crossed or facing and joined together at the base, look at first sight like a geometric design or a pattern of interlacing bands. On a closer look, however, the motif is obvious and its protective purpose is sometimes stressed by the inclusion of an eye in opposition to the "fish", or a brief but revealing inscription: sometimes an order to the evil spirit to flee (ERPE), or a formula of welcome to visiting friends whom the symbol would also protect (KAI COI, KAI CY in Greek, and tibi in Latin).

It should be abundantly clear from the foregoing that it would be a great mistake to think that every ancient house with a phallic symbol on the wall must have been a brothel; to think that two linked phalluses on the threshold of a building indicate that it was a house of assignation for homosexuals; to imagine lustful orgies at the sight of the "curious" decorations on some of the walls. More often than not, these assemblages of obscene imagery with their insistence on the male and female sexual organs (which, it must be borne in mind, were known in Latin as the pudenda, the "shameful parts") are not a sign of perverted exhibitionism, but rather one of superstition, being charms against invidia, witchcraft, the evil eye.

It is less clear why sexual imagery should have been considered the most effective protection against magic. In Plutarch's discussion of witchcraft quoted above, it will be noted that the psycho-physiological mechanism of sex plays a large part. This aspect of common experience is assuredly the one that most haunts and disturbs the popular imagination, which considers that what is primarily threatened by the evil eye is the integrity of the sexual powers. In every age and clime, magicians and sorcerers have been frequented mainly by people anxious to attract, regain, or retain the carnal affections of others, to have children, or to harm their enemies sexually. The "good-luck" charms most in demand are love charms, and the most elementary form of invidia is sexual jealousy. A link between the most commonly feared aspect of "magic" and the most popular antidote to it is at least highly probable; in Latin, the same word—fascinum—is used both for the evil eye and for the protective phallus.
Finally, to the extent that superstition is a degraded form of religious belief, we must take into account the part played by phallism in the religious cults of Italy from earliest times.
The Graeco-Roman bas-reliefs of the kind traditionally known as "picturesque" and the analogous paintings of idyllic scenes usually show, here and there in the landscape, a rustic image consisting of a tree-trunk with a carved, bearded head, and, halfway up the stump, an enormous erect penis thrust forward by the curve of the wood: not only protective magic for the fields and plots, but also—as many epigrams confirm—the image of a god.

"Goatherd, turn into the path where the oaktrees grow; there you will find a statue recently carved from the wood of a figtree, without legs—the bark still remains—and without ears, but with a genital organ capable of accomplishing the labours of Cypris. Round him is a sacred enclosure... Pray to the charming Priapus... And may the god lend a favourable ear to your prayer."

_Pseudo-Theocritus_

Priapus, whose original place of worship was Lampsacus, was a latecomer to Roman religion. His cult was first adopted by Greece, where his functions were similar to those of the Arcadian Hermes; this partly explains the hermaic form of the images with the arms reduced to two short stumps and the legs in one piece, the only well-defined parts of the body being the face and the penis. This is his traditional appearance, and even the more human portrayals of the god in certain works of art never fail to indicate
his ithyphallic character, either by showing him with the cloth of his robe stretched tight by the erect penis, or with his garment rolled up over his belly in the gesture of anasyrosis. The hints in early writings of the existence of a much more ancient Italic phallic god make the favourable reception given to the Priapic cult in Italy all the more understandable.

The name of this earlier god has come down to us in the forms Mutinus Titinus or Tutinus, and Mutunus Titunus. Whichever form is correct, the etymology of the first part of the name is obvious, the root being muto, mutonium = male organ. There has been some disagreement among scholars concerning the root of Titinus, Titunus, or Tutinus, certain of them considering it as coming from another ancient word for virility, while others think it is derived from the name of the Titii or Titinii, the god being originally a tribal one. What is certain, however, is the great antiquity of the god Mutinus and his phallic character. A temple, dating back to the earliest days of Rome, was dedicated to him at Velia, and women clad in the toga praetexta came there to offer sacrifices. These were doubtless betrothed girls coming in their maiden garments to carry out some prenuptial rite. According to another tradition, brides had to sit on the god’s phallus, thus offering him their virginity; this was supposed to make them fertile and ward off evil spirits threatening the marriage-bed. This custom fell into disuse in the classical period and, in the time of Augustus, the temple was transformed into public baths. By then, Mutinus had been replaced by Priapus, but the memory of the old practices still persisted at the time of the Fathers of the Church, for they are mentioned by St. Augustine. Pliny also mentions a phallic god, whom he calls Fascinus, and who may have been attended by Vestals. Many legends of miraculous conception connect the phallus with the vestal flame, and may be of remote Etruscan origin.

In Italy as in Greece, there were—not surprisingly—definite links between sexuality and the cult of fertility gods, of whom Liber was the most celebrated. During the Liberalia festivities, a chariot carrying a phallus was driven in procession over the country roads, and later through the town. At Lavinium, after obscene speeches, a phallus was erected on the Forum and crowned with great pomp pro eventibus seminum by a matron who requested the god to provide a good harvest; there is good reason to believe that this pagan form of Rogations was Latin in origin. Faunus, too, seems to have been a very ancient Roman god, whose cult was celebrated on or near the Palatine hill. The protector of flocks and shepherds,
he became—under Greek influence—identified with Pan, though the Lupercalia seem to date from well before this assimilation. There was a definite erotic element in the part of the Lupercalia in which the naked Luperci ran round the Palatine beating the women they met with thongs torn from the skin of a newly sacrificed goat. This flagellation was said to render women fertile and it is not surprising that sexual orgies accompanied the practice—so much so that Augustus attempted to make it more seemly by barring it to those under the age of puberty and by stationing uniformed horsemen along the route. Even before Orphic, Eleusinian and Dionysian rites were introduced into the Roman world, there was obviously a strong sexual element in the fertility rites practised in Italy.

The influence of the Egyptian and eastern religions could obviously only strengthen the importance of sexual symbolism for those wishing to penetrate the mysteries relating to the periodic regeneration of nature, the propagation of flocks, the continuity of human life, the rhythm of the universe, and the attainment of a better life after death. In the Egyptian rites, Min, Bes, Horus, Sokar and Hathor were—whether in human or animal form—definitely sexual; the mysteries of Isis retraced her quest for the torn fragments of Osiris’ body up to the discovery of his sexual organ which still retained its potency. Cybele, the “Great Mother”, whose symbolic black stone was brought from Pessinus by the Senate in 204 B.C. and to whom a temple was built on the Palatine hill, held within herself the forces of nature, which she rendered fertile; at her side, Attis—who castrated himself in a fit of madness—led a new life for which his devotees prepared themselves by cruel orgies. The Dea Syria of the Janiculus—again a goddess of propagation and fertility—brought with her the memory of the giant phalluses set up in her temple at Hierapolis; in Italy, the Ephesian Artemis retained her many-bosomed breastplate. Initiation rites, communion rites, and real or simulated sexual congress played an important part in the ceremonies of these more or less sanctioned cults. Illustrating the ideal of inexhaustible sexual potency, the pledge of continued subsistence, a happier life in this world for the believer, and a higher life beyond death for the initiate, they favoured a type of imagery that the superstitious masses saw as an immediate magic remedy against dangers they could not or dared not define.

The idea of a relationship between love and death, between sex and the tomb, must have been known in Italy considerably earlier. It is highly probable that the Roman bulla was inherited from the Etruscans,
the amulet worn by Roman generals in victory parades being previously part of the dress of the Etruscan kings. The custom of sculpting phalluses on walls also seems to have been borrowed from the Etruscans, whose burial monuments associated the symbol of the phallus with the idea of death. Whether this custom of religious origin was brought back from the East by the Etruscans, or whether they took it over when they were already settled in Italy, it is interesting to find phallic emblems on Etruscan tombs in Anatolia and particularly in Phrygia, from the prehellenic period onwards. The pointed pillars and the cippi with rounded ends which they placed on tombs may be considered as stylized phalluses; the same may be said of the decorations on the lids of certain burial urns. It is not absolutely sure that the stone phallus on a square base preserved at Pola belonged to a tomb, but there can be no doubt about the burial monument at Albano and the Porsenna monument at Clusium. A phallus marks the entrance to a tomb at Castel d’Asso and it is worth noting that, while both ancient Sicily and Etruria seem to have known the custom of erecting phallic stones in front of tombs, it was practised in Greece very rarely and at a relatively late period. There, it was the time-honoured custom to erect only herms at burial places; in Roman times, the portrait type of funerary herm developed, but the Priapic image was always rare.

Phallic images, often in great number, were deposited in tombs alongside the dead. They are found in Italian tombs from the first Iron Age onwards; one Lucanian tomb contained more than twenty of them. However, these objects are of less significance for an understanding of ancient religions than the form of the symbol erected on the tomb; often they were merely amulets worn by the deceased in his lifetime, and there are parallels for the practice of placing them in tombs, even in Greece. The phallic symbol erected on the tomb is quite another matter. It is easy to say that it is simply a form of tombstone designating a place of burial to the passer-by—the hermaic pillar in Greece originated in this way—but it is not so easy to explain why the symbol of male sexuality was chosen. We cannot agree with Wilamowitz’s hypothesis that the phallus indicated the graves of males, since there is no corresponding symbol to mark the graves of women, as there logically ought to be in this case. Should we consider it as an apotropaion—a means of protecting the grave against the powers of evil or possible desecration? Or was it intended to protect the living against the dark powers lurking in the bowels of the earth, to prevent the dead from returning eagerly to the light of day—an idea that filled the Ancients generally with terror?
This explanation does not strike me as altogether satisfactory and, anachronistic as the idea may seem, I am inclined to consider the funerary phallus as a symbol of life renewed in spite of, or rather through, death.

*Mortis et vitai locus:* while this definition of the tomb as a place both of life and of death appears in a relatively late inscription, I agree with Herter as to its significance. Obviously it fits more conveniently into the framework of the religions of salvation, Dionysian and otherwise, whose adherents were promised, after death, a new life rendered happy by their initiation into the mysteries. Far older, however, is the idea of the infinite fecundity of the earth-mother; hence the hope, in the hearts of men, not only of achieving survival through their posterity, but also of drawing new and vital energy from the earth and enjoying restored sexual vigour in the tomb. It cannot be said for certain that the Etruscans held this belief, but the nature of their burial monuments certainly makes it seem likely. In the majority of the great archaic and classical tombs there is nothing that symbolizes grief or loss. In the burial chambers with their ceilings sloping two ways, false beams and simulated architectural features, the brightly coloured paintings are instinct with life, and abundant life at that. In fantastic gardens, the plants spring forth as with a single impulse in stylized loops and scrolls, their leafy branches budding and flowering in a dream of spring. Before the hunters’ slings, birds flee with rustling wings of red or blue; dolphins gambol in the waves; horses paw the ground, impatient to be off; wild beasts—powerful males, or females with heavy udders—greedily tear their prey.

Against this background of vibrant, quivering nature, overflowing with vigour as at the dawn of creation, man is portrayed in athletic competition, playing or dancing, or in the intoxication of the feast. Muscular men with thick beards and hair accompanied by tender women in coquettish, many-coloured robes drink deep from life with all the ardour of youth and rude health as from the heady wine presented to them by the boyish cup-bearer. They dive, they hunt, they fish, they ride on horseback or drive in speeding chariots, they compete in races or in fights, they make merry to the rhythm of the rattle, their pulses beat faster to the piercing notes of the double flute, they regale one another with tales of the exploits of ancient heroes or thrill to the spectacle of brutal sports. Yet, if cruelty plays a part in their pleasures, if blood flows in the duel of the Phersu and his adversary, the roughness of their tastes testifies to an
arrogant vitality from which the fear of death appears to be absent. The day would come when a sudden chill would descend upon the Etruscan feasters as the sky behind them became overcast, when the mocking laughter of Charon would hush the sound of music, when the devils of Avernus would show their terrifying faces; fantastic nightmare visions would one day body forth the misadventures of the soul beyond the gates of Hell. But in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., nothing, it seems, as yet disturbed the confident expectation of finding in the tomb a life similar to that of this world, only richer and fuller, more hectic and crammed with sensation, giving the soul that freedom that the living can only imagine without being able to achieve, the heightened and quasi-orgiastic life of complete regeneration.

It may perhaps be objected that the Etruscan tomb-paintings are merely intensified representations of the funeral games and ceremonies, their magical or religious purpose being to allow the deceased to "participate", and that they do not necessarily imply a regeneration through death. A last banquet, a last pleasure, set—for ever, it was hoped—on the walls of the tomb, yet providing no answer to the riddle of the closed door (which in the Tomb of the Auguries is symmetrically framed by two men, each with one hand on his head and the other outstretched): this may be the sole significance of the paintings. They have more than once been compared with the decorations in the Egyptian mastabas which, by portraying the work of the peasants and craftsmen on the lands of the deceased, by showing his well-stocked table, his favourite amusements, his luxurious life and the honours he enjoyed, aimed at ensuring him the same comfort, the same food and the same pleasures after death. However, I am not certain that the two cases are similar. First of all, the "realism" of the Egyptian tomb-paintings and the "realism" of the Etruscan tomb-paintings are rather different. The natural background of the Etruscan paintings is not the usual workaday landscape; it is an enchanted garden, in fact a paradise, and is the setting for activities that are at one remove from everyday life, for festivities in which the drinking, the dancing and the diversions, though imitating reality, do so in intensified and idealized form, with no trace of monotonous ritual. Again, the impression is often not that the pulse of life ends up in the burial chamber, but that it emanates from it.

On the back wall, at the spot where the Tomb of the Auguries depicts a closed door, the Tomb of the Lionesses has a painting of a large, garlanded goblet with a lyre-player and a flautist on either side; just
above, there is a small rectangular niche which was doubtless intended to hold the urn containing the ashes of the deceased. This juxtaposition, as Pallottino emphasized, must have been deliberate. However, I do not think it possible to interpret the goblet as the cinerary urn itself, for the very simple reason that a long ladle hangs just beside it, behind the flautist; in my opinion, it portrays not the "urn of the dead" but the "goblet of death", the source of the intoxication that inspires the dancer wearing a tutulus on the left and the capering couple on the right and spreads to the figures depicted all along the sides of the chamber. There are cases, it is true, where the bier is given prominence in the paintings; in the Tomb of the Dead, the deceased is depicted lying on it with a woman leaning over his body; but is she mourning or summoning forth the dead? The decorations of the so-called Tomb of the Bier suggest to me the second hypothesis, since this time the bier is empty, as though the dead man had left it to lie on one of the neighbouring couches beside a friend or mistress. Moreover, a number of the Etruscan urns and sarcophagi show the deceased propped on one elbow as at a banquet, rather than lying on his deathbed. A female figure, sometimes winged, is often shown seated at the bottom of the *kline*, as elsewhere the wife is shown seated at the feet of the husband: this is, I am prepared to admit, a *lasa*, a guardian spirit of the dead; but is it not also the spouse of the realm beyond the grave with whom the deceased will reawaken to the joys of love in a new existence enlivened with perpetual feasting, dancing and spirited athletic contests?

The paintings in certain archaic tombs and the reliefs on the burial urns of Chiusi suggest the fun and high spirits of a wedding feast rather than the solemnity of a funeral, and the idea of love is ever-present. At the head of the bier in the so-called Tomb of the Bier, there are—has sufficient attention been paid to this point?—two pillows on which are placed two objects whose nature has not yet been explained: white cones, each with a spiral line running round it and a wreath of leaves encircling the base. This twofold symbol is reminiscent of the couples moulded in high relief on the large terra-cotta sarcophagi of Cerveteri. Do these represent earthly spouses united in death after living together to old age? My personal view is that these images, usually thought of as expressing a tender melancholy, are in reality deeply sensual. Moreover, the images on the sarcophagus lids in the Boston collection are certainly not cold recumbent figures and their common shroud is really only a sheet. The bier thus became not only a banqueting couch but a marriage-bed. In the paintings in archaic tombs as in the reliefs of the Chiusi
urns, the attitudes of the feasters are often suggestive, and in the Tomb of the Chariots at Tarquinia, the "boisterous children" beneath the benches of the onlookers at the athletic contest are indulging in pastimes whose innocence appears to be highly doubtful. Finally, if—at least in earlier times—there was no link between eroticism and death in the burial customs of the Etruscans and if the idea of death in their religious beliefs was not more or less associated with the hope of a renewal of sexual powers, I do not see how the extraordinary frieze on the back wall of the first chamber in the Tomb of the Bulls can be explained.

The reader is doubtless familiar with the principal picture in this tomb, which dates from a little after the middle of the sixth century B.C. It represents an episode in the Trojan War—Achilles ambushing Troilus, the youngest son of Priam, as he comes to the fountain to water his horses. It is less well known that, up above, plainly visible in the part where there is a recumbent bull on the left and a charging bull on the right, there are two erotic groups of violent bestiality. It is scarcely likely that the practices depicted were ever part of the funeral games, and the two scenes can hardly be considered as gratuitous flights of fancy on the part of the painter commissioned to decorate the tomb. Nor can the presence of the bulls—of which the one on the right has enormous genitals—be purely fortuitous. In my opinion, it is highly probable that these scenes had a mystical significance.
The brutality of the pictures in the Tarquinian tomb, the position of the partners, who are distinguished by the white or brownish-red colour of their bodies, and the significant proximity of the bulls combine to draw a parallel between human and animal sexuality. Half men and half beasts, the satyrs and Sileni in the Dionysian mysteries have the lustiness of stallions, and the Greeks did not hesitate to show them attacking goats or donkeys, or imitating among themselves the sex play of animals. The fact that vase paintings frequently show Dionysus among this shameless crew should make us wary of denying a religious origin to this type of picture, whose themes—modelled in high relief—were to be so popular among the Romans. These include in particular the assaults of Satyrs against Nymphs or hermaphrodites, and of Pan against Aphrodite—the same amorous and bawdy escapades that the hellenistic sculptors liked to portray in marble in their celebrated symplegmatata, maintaining at least the fiction of the mythological anecdote. Quite another thing, it must be admitted, are the scenes portrayed on the sides or medallions of Attic drinking-cups. In these, equivocal youths exchanging caresses and gifts, and banquets enlivened by the presence of hetaerae, young cup-bearers moving naked between the couches, and provocative flute-players in transparent veils are depicted as matter-of-factly as the drinker whose forehead needs the support of a charitable hand, or as the couples flushed by wine who give themselves over unrestrainedly to the pleasures of love at a symposium.
It is quite clear from the number of vases bearing such paintings exported from Greece to Italy in the fifth century B.C. that the frequently outrageous licentiousness of this type of decorative art appealed to the Etruscans just as much as to the Greeks. The success of the painted and moulded vases depicting erotic themes that were subsequently produced in the Greek world in Hellenistic times was repeated by the many similar series manufactured in the Roman world. Bracket and lamp medallions used the same type of design, and the only truly Roman features of these objects were the Latin inscriptions conjugating the verbs *chalo* or *futuo* in various persons, and the weapons sometimes carried by the "gladiators of love". Thus, Apuleius, when he presents his heroes at their pleasures, mingles Greek reminiscences with warlike allusions.

"Have pity on me", I said, "and come quickly to my rescue. As you see I'm well armed and ready for the merciless battle to which you challenged me, the sort of battle in which no herald can intervene to part the combatants. Since the first of Cupid's sharp arrows lodged in my heart this morning, I have been standing to arms all day, and now my bow is strung so tight that I'm afraid something will snap..."

And Fotis, after being compared to Venus rising from the waves—"the flushed hand with which she pretended to screen her mount of Venus showed that she was well aware of the resemblance"—exhorts her lover in these terms:

"Now fight... And you must fight hard because I shall not retreat one inch, nor turn my back on you. Come on face to face if you're a man, strike home, do your very worst! Take me by storm, kill me, and die in the breach. No quarter given or accepted."

Then, concludes the narrator:

"She climbed into bed, flung one leg over me as I lay on my back, and crouching down like a wrestler, assaulted me with rapid plungings of her thighs and passionate wrigglings of her supple hips. My head swam. It was as though the apple-bough of love had bent down over me and I was gorging myself with the fruit until I could gorge no more; and at last with overpowered senses and dripping limbs Fotis and I fell into a simultaneous clinch, gasping out our lives."

*(Trs. Robert Graves)*

The bracket and lamp medallions are as a rule mediocre, both technically and aesthetically. Despite some curious details, they will not bear comparison with the paintings ornamenting the brothel discov-
ered at Pompeii shortly after 1860 in the excavations conducted by Fiorelli (the outrageousness of these pictures immediately led to the exclusion of visitors from the excavation sites, and at the same time ensured their fame). There could be no doubt that the newly excavated building was a place of prostitution; this was indicated not only by the subjects of the wall paintings and by the phallus above the door, but also by the lay-out of the premises and by the graffiti. Situated at the corner of two streets in Zone VII, the building contained a series of small rooms opening on to a vestibule. The chief feature of the interior was a rectangular mass of masonry—a stone bed, whose chilly hardness was once mitigated by piled-up cushions. Inscriptions scratched on the walls commemorated the performances witnessed by this bed, and immortalized the names of the prostitutes and many of their clients. A few phrases from the Satyricon can conjure up an idea of the former animation of this district by night, of its dark streets, of its touts and aging bawds with revellers and drunks in tow, of its brothel signs and naked prostitutes. Under the stimulus of a few lines from Juvenal, Messalina—using the assumed name of Lysica—may be imagined standing on the threshold of a similar room, her naked breasts upheld by a golden net, exposing the belly that had once borne Britannicus, welcoming prospective customers with caresses, and claiming payment for her services.

The very name of “meretrices” given to the Roman prostitutes would seem to deny them any claim to the indulgence of posterity. There is no question of considering them as priestesses of a cult of love. The Greek prostitutes were called “hetaerae” and this term, meaning “companions”, is not altogether without dignity. They were also known as “hierodoules” (a term preserved in modern Greek) and the word has a certain nobility about it, evoking as it does the idea of ritual prostitution, of participation in the service of Aphrodite, a revered and venerated goddess. It is well known that the courtesans of Corinth demanded payment for their favours, and high payment at that—“Non licet omnibus adire Corinthum!”—but the vulgar name “meretrices” puts altogether too much stress on the commercial side of prostitution. Philosophers might be surprised to see the statue of Phryne alongside the royal statues in the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi, “a golden courtesan among golden monarchs”, but this display of wealth on the part of a woman whose modelling for Praxiteles was not the sole source of her riches at least contained an element of piety. The avowed greed of the Roman prostitutes, on the other hand, had always something sordid about it. By definition, the meretrices (quae corpore merent) “coined”
their bodies. Tolerated by the ancient Romans as a means of preserving family honour at a time when divorce was frowned upon, they seem to have used their role of safeguarding the apparent fidelity of husbands and the freedom of bachelors in order to amass the greatest possible amount of money by importuning and robbing their clients, fiercely competing for them with their male counterparts, and causing them to dissipate both health and wealth.

As presented in the Satyricon, these female prostitutes were insatiable, vicious women, who had been in the profession since childhood and took a perverse delight in corrupting children.

Pannychis is only seven or eight years old? But what does that matter?
“May Juno strike me dead!”—Quartilla says—“if I can ever remember being a virgin. When I was a little girl, I played ducks and drakes with the little boys; as I got bigger, I applied myself to bigger boys, until I reached my present age—whence I think the proverb arose, she’ll bear the bull that bore the calf.”
She is excited by Giton’s youth. “Tomorrow,” she laughed, “this will make a fine antipasto for my lechery. But today’s entrée stuffed me so full, I couldn’t swallow even this little tidbit now.”

(Trs. William Arrowsmith)

Among the repulsive qualities attributed to these sex-mad women by Petronius and Juvenal is a taste for bestiality. This is also alluded to by Apuleius in the passage in which Lucius, transformed into a donkey, is seized on by a woman.

“Ah, ah, I have you safe now, my little dove, my little birdie”... She pressed me closer and closer to her and met my challenge to the full. I tried to back away, but she resisted every attempt to spare her, twining her arms tight around my back, until I wondered whether after all I was capable of serving her as she wished.”

(Trs. Robert Graves)

A literary flight of fancy? Let us hope so, though there is a definitely realistic series of medallions that shows women offering themselves to prancing quadrupeds. Certainly, as far as men were concerned, the “she-wolves” of the Satyricon are veritable vampires tirelessly pursuing their victims, rousing them with drink, lascivious performances and generally outrageous lewdness, exhausting every means of reviving their flagging virility—whipping, friction, drugs—and then taunting them for their inadequacy.
To understand why the frenzied eroticism described by Petronius goes to such extremes, it is necessary to examine his work a little closer. The shrews of the Satyricon are not, in fact, meretrices attached to a brothel or plying their trade independently; they are devotees of Priapus. It all starts in Chapter XV when Encolpius, Ascytos and Giton, who are avoiding the main streets because they have good reason for wishing to remain inconspicuous, come at nightfall to a deserted spot where they encounter two veiled, rather well-dressed women. They start following them and end up at a small, unusually noisy temple. They are imprudent enough to go in. A crowd of women brandishing Priapic phalluses in the manner of Bacchantes rush at them, yelling wildly. They escape, but are tracked down by Quartilla, who informs them that they have committed a heinous crime by being present at rites that no man may witness unpunished.

"Moreover, I believe that your terrible crime was done in youthful ignorance. But all night afterwards, I tossed in terror, shivering so horribly that I felt an attack of malaria coming on. So I asked for a cure in my dreams, and was commanded by a vision to track you down and cure my malaria by a certain stratagem. But it is not the cure that troubles me most... I am afraid that in your youthful indiscretion you may be led to reveal the things you saw in the chapel of Priapus and divulge our mysteries to the world... I beseech you not to make a mockery of our nocturnal rites or reveal a secret so jealously guarded over the centuries, a secret which scarcely a thousand men have ever known."

(Trz. William Arrowsmith)

The wild obscenity of what follows is explained by the fact that it is the night of the "vigil of Priapus" (Chapter XXI).

After the long episode of Trimalchio’s banquet with its superb social satire, the name of Priapus keeps recurring. Aboard the boat on which Encolpius and his companions are fleeing abroad, Lycas is warned of their presence by a dream in which Priapus says to him: "You are looking for Encolpius—well, I have led him aboard your boat" (Chapter CIV). Later on, in the encounter of Encolpius-Polyenes with Circe, the young man is stricken with impotence despite the lady’s provocative charms, and all the usual means of stimulation fail. Chrysis, the servant, sends for a foul sorceress whose spells and invocations to Priapus are temporarily effective (Chapter CXXXI); after another failure, Encolpius himself addresses a long prayer in verse to the god (Chapter CXXXXII), and finally Oenothea, the priestess of
Priapus, who lives in a howel where the sacred geese wander at will, succeeds in restoring Encolpius’ virility by unspeakable practices (Chapters CXXXVIII-CXL). To a certain extent, the Satyricon is simply a comic account of Priapus’ vengeance on a group of dissolute homosexuals who have stumbled upon the secrets of his cult, and is not meant to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, the outrageous caricature is based on a foundation of truth, as Juvenal’s vehement indignation shows:

"The secrets of the Goddess nam’d the Good
Are even by boys and barbers understood:
Where the rank matrons, dancing to the pipe,
Jig with their bums, and are for action ripe;
With music rais’d, they spread abroad their hair;
And toss their heads like an enamour’d mare:
Laufella lays her garland by, and proves
The mimic lechery of many loves.
Rank’d with the lady, the cheap sinner lies;
For here not blood, but virtue gives the prize.
Nothing is feign’d in this venereal strife;
’Tis downright lust, and acted to the life.
So full, so fierce, so vigorous, and so strong.
That, looking on, would make old Nestor young.
Impatient of delay, a general sound,
An universal groan of lust goes round;
For then, and only then, the Sex sincere is found.
Now is the time of action; now begin,
They cry, and let the lusty lovers in.
The whoresons are asleep; then bring the slaves
And watermen, a race of strong-back’d knaves.
I wish, at least, our sacred rites were free
From these pollutions of obscenity..."

(Trs. Dryden)

Juvenal’s harsh satire and Petronius’ sardonic caricature are intended to castigate both the high living of the rich and the debauchery of the poor, as well as the widespread superstition of a period of moral laxity, proliferating in new religions that offered a dubious excuse for vice. “Our district is so full of protective divinities that it is easier to meet a god there than to meet a man,” Quartilla remarks. The most trivial physical mishaps are attributed to witchcraft in a city “where women are cunning enough to bring the moon down to earth”. Magic is ubiquitous, references to the mysteries are on every tongue—hypocritically so, as in the case of Philomena, “a most respectable lady” when she entrusts her children to the care of Eumolpus, so that they may benefit from his wisdom (that is, inherit his fortune).
This holy man wastes no time in initiating Philomena’s very pretty daughter into the “Pygesiacan mysteries”.

“But he had told everyone that he was gouty and cursed with a bad liver, and unless he maintained this fiction, he ran the risk of giving the whole show away. So, in order to sustain his story, he ordered the girl to sit down on his lap and test for herself at close quarters the full extent of that ‘uprightness and largesse and conspicuous humanity’. Then he told Corax to slip under the bed, plant his hands firmly on the floor, and stroke the cadence for him by heaving with his buttocks. Corax carried out his order to perfection: a low, smooth stroke, every thrust so timed that it coincided exactly with the girl’s expert twisting and writhing. Then, as the lesson neared its conclusion, Eumolpus shrieked to Corax to quicken the tempo. Corax promptly obeyed, humping away like mad, while Eumolpus swung there in mid-air, bouncing and swaying back and forth between the servant and the girl, for all the world like a human seesaw.”

(Tr. William Arrowsmith)

The nature of the pygesiaca sacra is all too clear.

While the prayer to Isis, Queen of Heaven, and the story of Cupid and Psyche in Apuleius are deeply felt, not all Romans could grasp the spirit of the eastern religions or continue to believe wholeheartedly in the traditional religion. For them, sensuality per se, however wild and varied in its expression, was obviously not an adequate substitute. Under Juvenal’s cold eye, the Priapic mysteries are reduced to mere obscenity and hocus-pocus; as for the brothel at Pompeii, the stone bed and the pathetic basket of charred beans and onions discovered by the excavators tell their own story. But there still remain the paintings which, for all their indecency, bear witness to an attitude of mind that, no longer seeking a mystic element in sexuality, nevertheless transcends mere pornography and succeeds in expressing love as art.
Perhaps I may compare these paintings to a poem in the Latin Anthology, fittingly called *Indemnity*.

"May I be allowed to love, even if I am not allowed to possess. Let others take their pleasure, I shan’t prevent them or be jealous: for it is self-torture to be jealous of those who are happy. Venus crowns the flame of those she favours; but Cupid, who gives us desire, refuses us possession. Let others gather kisses, lightly biting rosy lips; let them glue their mouths to foreheads, youthful cheeks, and eyes that shine like jewels; better still, when lithe bodies are united on a soft couch, when Venus presses breast on breast, when the unbridled instinct of desire urges them to push apart the thighs of a panting woman and she moans and utters little cries, I am quite content that they should caress her curves, that they should hold her tight, that they should trace and retrace gentle furrows in the fields of Venus, that they should plant their thyrus in Cupid’s little garden, that with rolling eyes they should ride on to the end of the course when they and Venus alike must pause for want of breath, and that the white dew should fall. Let those who bask in Venus’ favour do all this; but—vain enjoyment—let me at least be allowed to love if I am not allowed to possess."

Beside the frequently nauseating realism of the *Satyricon*, the charm of this poem is as surprising as the proximity of the frescoes to the hard reality of the prostitute’s bed. Its sensuality and that of the paintings are equally frank; but the nostalgic repetition of the line "*Amare liceat si potiri non liceat*" adds another dimension, just as the painter’s brushwork and use of colour put the frescoes on a different
plane. The author used expressions that were common poetic currency, just as the erotic painters undoubtedly copied older themes. Petronius' poem is subtitled "Ex Menandro"—"After Menander"—and the erotic paintings at Pompeii were very probably based on Greek originals.

This is scarcely surprising. Once a religious interpretation of sexuality had been rejected, it was necessary to go back to the Greeks to find an exalted philosophy of love. Only they could provide a more seductive aesthetic of love than the Alexandrian writers did, and nowhere was love more movingly portrayed than in their paintings. It was easy to say: "Scorn foreign morals, they are a snare and a delusion! No-one in the world lives more decently than a Roman citizen. Yes, I'd rather have a single Cato than three hundred Socrates." But it was impossible not to feel the appeal of a sophisticated, witty, pleasant and easy-going civilization, of a people that in its moment of defeat so thoroughly vanquished its conqueror. It was easy to scoff at the Graeculi; yet their quick intelligence, their unfailing eloquence, their tireless ingenuity, their knowledge of the human soul, and the instinctive certainty and restraint of their taste gave them overwhelming superiority in so many fields. Eumolpus, the decayed and dissolute man of letters, pays tribute to the Greeks whenever he speaks of poetry or art; Encolpius himself, as he loiters idly in a gallery, is fascinated by the paintings which happen to be Greek.

"There were several by Zeuxis, still untouched by the injury of time, and two or three sketches by Protogenes, so vivid and true to life that I touched them with almost a shudder of admiration. There was also a piece by Appelles, the one the Greeks call the 'One-legged Goddess', before which I knelt with a feeling of almost religious veneration. The human figures were all executed with such striking naturalness and exquisite delicacy that it seemed as though the artist had painted their souls as well. In one of them the eagle was ravishing the shepherd of Ida away to heaven; another showed Hylas, splendid in his innocence, rejecting the advances of the passionate Naiad. Further on, I saw Apollo cursing his hands for the murder of Hyacinth and wresting his unstrung lyre with the blossoms of the newborn flowers. But surrounded by these images of painted lovers, I cried out in lonely anguish, 'So even the gods in heaven are touched by love!'"

(Trz. William Arrowsmith)

The influence of Greek ways on the life and domestic luxuries of the wealthy inhabitants of Pompeii is well known. Just as the most sought-after courtesans were Greek, so there is little doubt that the
erotic paintings discovered there—both those in the brothels and the very similar ones in the private houses—were commissioned from Greek or Greek-style artists, skilled at portraying human love with a dignity worthy of the fabled loves of gods and heroes, perhaps to illustrate passages from Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria*.

Despite their undoubted raciness, these pictures are art—and, moreover, art derived from a great and inspired tradition.

From the steatopygic statues of prehistory, the cycladic idols with their sex indicated by an engraved triangle, and the primitive, mainly phallic herms to the magnificent achievements of Phidias, Greek art had represented a progressive victory of the spirit, reaching its climax in its superb humanized gods and sublime godlike humans, only distinguishable one from the other by the presence or absence of external indications of divinity. To express the divine, the early masters of classicism had chosen the most perfect human form and transcended humanity through beauty. Soon, however, the need was felt—even on the religious level—to endow the gods with a less abstract majesty, and the 4th century B.C., the century of Praxiteles, began to put greater emphasis on feeling: the benevolent powers to whom man addressed his touching prayers offered, like figures in a dream, the mystery of their smiles and the poetry of their equivocal grace; shown at first partially, then completely, in the nude, Aphrodite bodied forth the promise of her disturbing charms; Hermes carrying the infant Dionysus to the Nymphs of Nysa became the comforting symbol of salvation through initiation. The inspiration was still religious and the transposition deliberate, but the living model became increasingly more recognizable as time went on. The tribute paid to the divine spark that inspires the thinker and the philosopher was gradually developing into something less spiritual.

Hellenistic art, born in an epoch of scepticism and uncertainty, in fact witnessed a shift of emphasis from the spirit, the idea, to the form, the conception of beauty becoming increasingly sensual and the conception of greatness increasingly emphatic. The original parable was lost, and only the anecdote remained. There was no longer any higher reality beyond the outward and visible form, or any experience of the divine beyond the direct experience of human nature.
Traditional mythology became no more than a collection of romantic little stories, often amusing and crammed with amorous escapades. Nobody bothered about the possible symbolism of the stories of gods and goddesses coming down to earth to carry off not only nympha, but also humans of either sex. Nobody asked whether or not the immortality thus bestowed on some humans was a sign of grace, or whether their abduction was to be taken literally or symbolically. Interest was centred rather on the sexual appetite of the Olympians and their indifference to the gender of the person abducted, and their escapades provoked smiles rather than awe. The naïve decoration of the early vases had given way to the more intellectual symbolism of the fourth century B.C., but after that artists used the legends of gods and heroes simply as a pretext for amusing or scandalous works which are important principally for their ingenuity and technical skill.

Compared with the old mythology, poetry, drama and philosophy provided only scanty material for art: the Pothos of Scopas, even the Muses themselves, offered extremely limited possibilities. In contrast, the ever more womanly Aphrodite and the ever more childlike Eros were incarnations of beauty and love; the figures of the Dionysian mysteries—increasingly equated with rural deities—were conceived more and more in the image of the countryfolk themselves, or of the dreams that haunted their imagination. In Alexandrian art, the cycles dealing with Dionysus and with Aphrodite grew more specifically naturalistic. The hermaphrodite was considered to be not so much an embodiment of the two abstract principles of nature as an amalgam of sexual desires, while the "Southern Demon", who is shown—on a plaster medallion from Bagram and a relief now in the Froehner collection—in the act of visiting a Silenus lying under a tree, has only the wings and the bird’s claws of the Siren. Otherwise she is altogether human, and the way she crouches over the "sleeper" has its counterpart in various non-mythological frescoes at Pompeii. This tableau avoids pornography by its dreamlike mingling of the real and unreal, and at the same time helps to explain the apparent excesses of the Pompeian paintings, which could claim kinship, if not with a religious belief, at least with an aesthetic tradition, by portraying in human terms acts that the gods themselves and their companions did not disdain.

On this account, the erotic paintings of Pompeii are less scandalous and degraded than they might seem, and their presence even in private houses is more understandable. Their subject is not the sordid
intercourse of prostitutes and their clients, but men and women, in the enchantment of their beauty and the instinctive freedom of the senses, mutually sharing the intoxication of the gods.

"The pleasure of love is brief and loathsome, and disgust follows the act of Venus. Let us not therefore rush into it like animals in heat, blindly and precipitously. Rather let us make it an endless festival, and linger in one another's arms, covering each other with kisses. Only in this way shall we avoid fatigue and shame. Having enjoyed our love-making, we shall continue to enjoy it, and shall go on enjoying it for a long time to come. Its pleasures will not grow less and will be perpetually renewed."  

*Petronius*

It appears that quotations from Ovid’s *Art of Love* have been found written up on the walls of Pompeii. It is certainly a text that helps towards an understanding of the erotic frescoes there. The *Art of Love* is not a handbook on the physiology of sex or on what is nowadays known as ‘sex education’. It is something quite different—a manual of seduction, in which the emphasis is laid on psychology, and which is intended to turn the man or women who follows its instructions into a god or a goddess for the person desired. This aim is underlined by a wealth of mythological reference. Scorning recourse to brute force or haggling, it shows how to achieve complete possession, the conquest of the soul and heart as well as of the body. Carefully avoiding coarseness and vulgarity, it conceives of love as an art whose ultimate aim is shared pleasure, both intense and prolonged, in the discreet intimacy of the bedroom.

"Give me enjoyment, when the willing dame  
Glows with desires, and burns with equal flame.  
I love to hear the soft, transporting joys,  
The frequent sighs, the tender murmuring voice:  
To see her eyes with vary'd pleasures move,  
And all the nymph confess the pow'r of love."  

*(T. Dryden)*

This treatise is of course completely amoral, and much of Ovid’s advice to the lovelorn may well be considered reprehensible: bribery of servants, fine words, flattery, false promises, coquetry, artful traps, dissimulation, and self-interested attentions—every sort of stratagem is permitted, indeed recommended. But the delicacy of the analysis, the elegance of the form, the aesthetic taste displayed by the precepts on clothing, speech, behaviour in public, suitable discretion and the care of the body, the artistic sen-
sibility shown by the remarks on the voice, on deportment and on culture, which is the indispensable complement of beauty, give the work a disturbing charm. Even the most indecent passages disarm our indignation by their delicacy of expression.

"One conscious bed receives the happy pair...
Thus Hector did Andromache delight,
Hector, in love victorious, as in fight.
When weary from the field Achilles came,
Thus with delays he rais'd Briseis' flame.
Ah, could those arms, those fatal hands delight!
Inspire kind thoughts, and raise thy appetite!
Could'st thou, fond maid, be charm'd with his embrace,
Stain'd with the blood of half thy royal race?
Nor yet with speed the fleeting pleasures waste,
Still moderate your love's impetuous haste:
The bashful virgin, though appearing coy,
Detains your hand, and hints the proper'd joy.
Then view her eyes with humid lustre bright,
Sparkling with rage, and trembling with delight:
Her kind complaints, her melting accents hear,
The eye she charms, and wounds the listening ear.
Desert not then the clasping nymph's embrace,
But with her love maintain an equal pace:
Raise to her heights the transports of your soul,
And fly united to the happy goal."

(Trs. Dryden)

Despite its playful tone, there is a certain touching seriousness in Ovid's description of that peak of mutual bliss whose attainment is the goal advocated in his teaching. Though he was an unbeliever and a libertine, Ovid would never admit that a free man could let his instincts drag him down to the level of a mere animal. In his opinion, a man's body was governed by his intelligence, which must control its pleasure and suffering alike. Moreover, unlike the animals, man had a subtle sense of balance and harmony fostered by the practice of the arts. To savour pleasure as fully as possible, while respecting one's sense of harmony, might very well be postulated as a fundamental rule of Ovid's humanism. Shame is innate, and the triumph of love is a victory over shame; yet this victory must be achieved without any offence against beauty. And, indeed, even when speaking of the sexual act itself, Ovid is careful not to neglect its aesthetic side.
"There are a thousand ways of tasting the pleasures of Venus, the simplest and least tiring being for the woman to recline on her right side... Every woman should know the position that suits her best. If she has a particularly good figure she should lie on her back, but if her back is particularly pretty she should lie face downwards. If there are creases on your stomach, do like the Parthian who turns his back as he fights... But there is one thing I forgot: do not let the light stream through every window of your bedroom; there are some parts of your body which will gain from not being seen in broad daylight."

Is this scrupulous and deliberate refinement altogether compatible in practice with full physical satisfaction? That is quite another question, and at the end of the *Art of Love* there is a disturbing apology for the simulation of such satisfaction. Ovid was perhaps too intellectual and cool-headed ever to achieve in any of his frequent conquests that absolute bliss which he nevertheless considered to be within the scope of human possibility. At any rate, his book was considered dangerous even in his own times and was in fact one of the reasons for his exile in the year 8 A.D. Even though he had taken the precaution of emphasizing that he had only unmarried women in mind, his advocacy of free, light-hearted love was obviously incompatible with the programme of religious and moral reform undertaken by the Emperor Augustus. His urbane guide to sensuality, written for an elite, might very well be misunderstood as a blatant invitation to debauchery.

To my mind, the case of the erotic frescoes at Pompeii is very similar. The sensual imagery of the painter, as of the poet, is apt to touch a secret chord in the heart and not necessarily a depraved one: a heightened sense of the charms of the human body and the pleasures of the flesh is frequently accompanied by a heightened sense of mortality, of the problems of life and death. Certainly the *tabellae* showing lovers in various positions may be simply artificial sexual stimuli, and Ovid alludes to them when, in speaking of the woman of thirty-five, he notes that "age and practice do alike improve" and that "pictur'd postures [cannot] instruct you more". Similarly another poet, as he awaits his mistress, observes:

"If only I could see her now putting her supple arms round my neck and leaning back to offer me her snowy body; if only I could see her imitating one after another all the positions shown in the pictures and clinging to my bed; if only I could see her unblushingly daring all, and—even more abandoned than myself—bouncing tirelessly on the cushions."
However, I doubt if this was the sole intention of the erotic works of art at Pompeii, where there is a famous mosaic showing a skeleton carrying a jug of wine in either hand. "Carpe diem... Ergo vivamus, dum licet esse, bene..." The idea of death heightens the frenzy of living; conversely the portrayal of pleasure turns the mind towards the riddle of man's mortality, and it was in Pompeii that the mystic frescoes of the Villa Item were discovered.
Since its discovery in 1909, there have been so many commentaries on this group that it scarcely seems necessary to consider it at any length in these pages. But what a strange mixture it is of realism and fantasy, of human grossness and spirituality!

In the tablinum of the suburban villa, twenty-nine almost life-size figures, which seem to stand out in front of the rich red of the wall-panels, endlessly enact the successive stages of the Dionysian initiation. On a throne apart, the domina presides over the ceremony. First comes the prologue: a richly bedecked girl, her head covered with the nuptial veil, listens to a naked child reading from a volumen which has just been handed to him by the woman initiate seated at his side. An assistant walks past crowned with laurels, carrying a round tray and a leafy branch; she approaches the table at which—a little farther to the right—there are three other women. One of them, a priestess with her back turned to the spectator, seems about to hide a mysterious object under a cloth in a basket handed her by a serving woman. Another serving woman on the right is pouring a libation over the object in question. Then, the human figures are suddenly joined by those of the mystery: inspired, a Silenus strikes the strings of his lyre with a plectrum; a satyr prepares his pipes; and a female faun suckles a kid. A terrified woman runs past, her veil blown about her head. On the neighbouring panel, an old, ivy-crowned Silenus holds a cup to the
lips of a young satyr, while another satyr holds up a theatrical mask behind him. But it is hardly this that has caused the woman to flee in terror, nor is it the tableau in which Dionysus leans tenderly against Ariadne as they exchange preliminary caresses. Next comes a more sinister group in which a kneeling, bare-footed woman, wearing a simple, clinging tunic, her mantle fallen to her thighs, is starting to unwrap the mysterious basket, which contains an enormous phallus. Two draped figures stand behind her. In front of her, a black-winged female Genius, bracing her slim, virginal form, brandishes a long, thin whip with which she is about to lash the back of a kneeling girl. The latter is leaning against the legs of a seated assistant, whose hand is laid gently on the sufferer's head. Turned towards this group is a dark-clad woman holding a thyrsus; her delicate face is framed by sober bands, and she seems to be counting the strokes. Nearby is a whirling, cymbal-clashing dancer with back turned and hands held high; her superb nudity and her gestures are in striking contrast to the austerity of the previous figure. Farther on,
the pace slackens with the remaining group—a pretty woman dressing her hair, accompanied by a servant and two Cupids, one of whom is holding up a looking-glass.

Judged as a whole (without taking into account the corners of the room and the intervening doors), the fresco is magnificent. From the technical standpoint, its balanced composition, the colour harmony and the scale of the figures make it one of the most remarkable surviving masterpieces of ancient painting. Its meaning is not, perhaps, always perfectly clear, but the problems it raises are fascinating.

All the evidence points to its being a portrayal of a Dionysian initiation, realistic episodes being intermingled with visionary ones, or rather with apparitions from another world. The drama is, as it were, being played out on two levels. The realistic element is considerable. Many of the faces are obviously
portraits. First of all, there is the domina, the mistress of the house, presiding over a ceremony that must have actually been held at least once in her own home; in Hellenistic times it was already the custom to have one's portrait in some part of the house. Her rather heavy, indolent beauty and solemn elegance are probably individual traits, and her very attitude is that of someone sitting for a portrait. Then comes the initiator, an essential figure in the proceedings. She is treated with unflattering realism; her simple clothes and plain hairstyle match her rather unpleasant face with its dark-ringned eyes and sullen mouth. Indifferent to appearances, she listens to the reading of the sacred formulae with an absent-minded look, lost in a secret dream. The laurel-crowned women, all of whom take an active part in the ritual, also appear to be portraits; at any rate the profiles and half-turned faces are exceptionally well defined, and the clothes extremely realistic. Note, for example, how the seated priestess has tied her veil so as not to be impeded in her movements. Whether painted from life or not, the dark-robed bearer of the thyrsus in the flagellation group is striking in her sombre grace. The shadowed eyelids and the tousled, sweaty hair of the woman who is being whipped are depicted with ruthless realism.

But what about the Sileni and satyrs, the pair of deities and the black-winged angel? They are certainly not dressed-up actors, and the only theatrical mask in the scene is the one held up by a satyr. These fantastic creatures, in whom the animal and human are united, their grotesque or awesome features reflecting in turn musical ecstasy, childlike tenderness, solemn knowledge, spontaneous instinct, or inflexible severity, are the actual figures of the mystery accompanying the god, and their invisible, yet real and decisive, presence gives meaning to the scene. Thus the liquid of the libation becomes the life-giving drink drawn by the kid from the breast of the faun as well as the eternally intoxicating brew with which the satyrs quench their thirst, while the phallus in the wicker basket becomes the symbol of all fertility and the promise of the hierogamy suggested by the lovers Dionysus and Ariadne. The material reality of the rites and the higher reality of the symbols converge in the flagellation group: the black-winged figure with the whip has no part in humanity, whereas the scourged girl is suffering flesh and blood. In fact, she has to suffer physically so that the pleasures of the marriage-bed will come to her purified body as the first fruits of unutterable delights that neither age nor time can harm. The last picture of the frieze is often neglected as being merely a commonplace scene from the Gynaecaeum, inserted to fill up space. I am not sure, however, that this interpretation is correct, for the presence of the
Cupids may well signify that the initiate's toilet is a veritable toilet of Venus, so that the embraces for which she is preparing will also be divine in the true sense of the word.

Maiuri has ascertained that the frescoes in the Villa Item were painted in the time of Augustus. Juvenal's *Satires* date from the reign of the Antonines, which was somewhat later, yet the passage quoted above, in which Juvenal castigates the obscene frenzy that seized the devotees of the Good Goddess, seems to me to be indirectly justified by these paintings. The human participants in this initiation ceremony are—with the exception of the child reading out the ritual—exclusively women. What are they doing? First of all, they are carrying out mysterious lustrations and secret manipulations of a hidden object which may be assumed to be obscene. Farther on, one of them has let her mantle slip from her shoulders, and dressed in a clinging transparent tunic, is feverishly uncovering the image of an erect male organ and practically prostrating herself before it. Then—even worse—there are the two sadistic figures avidly looking on while an immature girl is being tortured; they have stripped her to the thighs and forced her to submit, in a humiliating attitude, to a whipping which bruises her delicate flesh and makes her fresh young body quiver. Finally, there is the stark-naked dancer, the sound of whose cymbals drowns the sobs of the unhappy girl and whose shameless antics foreshadow a general orgy. It is thus quite understandable that, in the eyes of a non-believer, a ceremony of this kind degenerating into mass frenzy should appear to be nothing more than a gathering of hysterical sex-mad women. It is no wonder that the cults restricted to women—whether the Orpheo-Dionysian mysteries, the Priapic mysteries, or the mysteries of the Good Goddess—should have acquired such a bad reputation in Rome.

Yet today it is difficult not to be moved by the strange sensuous quality of these frescoes, not to be struck by the disturbing face of the initiator, the distraught gaze of the fleeing woman. Above all, who could fail to be fascinated by the voluptuous bodies of the woman brandishing the whip, the suffering girl, and the dancer, by the proudly out-thrust breasts, the trembling delicate shoulders, and the harmonious movement of the hips—three hallmarks of feminine grace, all magnificently depicted. There is no doubt that the paintings in the Villa of the Mysteries occupy a special place in the history of erotic art, even if one ignores the young beauty raising her round, bracelet d arms to dress her hair, and the Dionysus-Ariadne group. Aesthetically, the latter group is far from being the best, yet there is no doubt
that the god—leaning back on the knees of his companion, his body given over voluptuously to caresses, his eyes half-closed—is by far the most suggestive figure on the frieze. If he is to be taken as symbolizing the pleasures to which the initiates aspire, then these are pretty lascivious and down to earth. Yet, no sooner have we noticed the realism of the crushed garment that has slipped down so that it covers only one knee, or observed the detail of the bare right foot, than the loosened sandal placed conspicuously in front of Ariadne’s chair makes us once more aware of the symbolic element: Dido in the Aeneid, when she decides to leave the world of the living, approaches the altar of the gods of Hades unum exuta pedem vinclis.

In fact, the handsome youth depicted here could not be taken for a mortal; his pleasures belong to another world, and the carnal joys of this world are but a pale shadow of them. The erotic ecstasy that awaits the initiated will have the penetrating sweetness of the musical ecstasy that inspires Silenus, the richness and purity of the milk that fattens the flocks, and the intoxicating power of the magical brew with which the satyrs preserve their lusty youth. Silenus, the satyrs and the flocks are somehow immediately familiar to us; the kid with its delicate horns is surely one we have seen on the slopes of Vesuvius; and we have certainly met the stout musician and the young countryfolk at some village fair. Or rather we feel we have met them, for it is clearly impossible that we should have done so in reality. We have had their presence revealed to us in spirit, and the spirit, transcending and purifying experience, also enables the act of physical love to reveal a truth to which the senses are blind.

In the art and literature of ancient Italy, eroticism played a part that can be too easily and hastily dismissed as obscene. We must make the effort of approaching these texts and pictures in the spirit of antiquity. Yet, if we fail to find in them a philosophy comparable to those of Greece and India and if the Latin authors themselves sometimes anticipate the Christian moralists in their condemnation of them, the genius of Rome should nevertheless be honoured for having found an art in eroticism, and occasionally something more—a mystique.
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