OVID METAMORPHOSED

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VINTAGE

Heloise's eyes, hearing her own song back through Heloise's words. All she wanted from Heloise, from anybody else, was the loving picture of her own splendour. That – herself – she longed for. That was her need. And it was absolute. Her eyes were lost – unseeing, so fascinated was she by what she was trying to grasp of herself, caught in the trap of her own beauty. And yet she needed Heloise. She needed them all, every one of them. She needed them to see herself, reflected, as she wanted to be. She was as much their captive as they were hers. And it was suddenly obvious why she could not stand the Beast, any Beast. The Beast had to turn into a Prince, but a Prince that would be the means for herself to know she was Beauty, a Prince that was nothing more than the mirror he had given her. That was the only use he could be.

Looking into the absolute need of Miranda's eyes, unseen by Miranda's eyes, Heloise was flooded by compassion.

'Miranda, I do love you,' she said.

Miranda smiled a vague, a weary smile. It did not matter that she could not hear what Heloise was saying.

Arachne

A.S. Byatt

Some gods take on more reality as you grow older. You are caught up in, brush against, their original power in odd times and places. Ibsen remarked that the Greek gods went on living, whilst the Egyptian gods were dead as dry stones. Ezra Pound saw Aphrodite. Roberto Calasso says, as though it is a matter of common experience, that we can see that they are alive. Where? he was asked. In art galleries, he said. In the language.

When I was a small child, I was given books of Greek myths to read, sitting at the back of the class, after I had finished my set work, too fast. In those days, there was no question of belief. There were stories, and I used their accounts of gods and goddesses to diminish the importance of the Bible stories, which I was expected to believe, and recognised as the same sort of stories as the Greek, and the Norse, myths, only less attractive, less powerful, less real. They were all stories. Larger and more exciting than life (even though we were in the throes of a world war and my father was in the air in the Mediterranean) but stories.

So I arranged the gods in order of 'my favourites' as we did with colours, or film-stars. My favourite Greek goddess was Athene. The other important ones were all capricious and cruel. Hera, Aphrodite, Artemis, dangerous and beautiful. Athene was wise, just, independent, a half-seen helpful guiding presence to

heroes like Perseus and the wandering Odysseus. She wore the dead snake-headed female monster as a buckler. Paris should have chosen her, but it was clear that he never would. She shouldn't have been undressed. Her armour, her helmet, were part of her dignity. Her virginity (a concept I didn't understand at all) was self-sufficiency. Better than the intertwined mother-and-daughter pair, Demeter and Persephone.

When we walked to school in the early morning the hedges were full of woven circles of light, sparkling and glistening with water-drops. They were, in their regularity of radius, their geometric intricacy, like the presence of some quite other reality, briefly manifest.

Michael Chinery, the entomologist, records that as a schoolboy he collected the webs draped on the hedges in slender loops made from privet twigs. He made, from layers of the webs, with the dew caught in them, 'a primitive sort of mirror'. A really good loop could be used, he writes, to bounce a ping-pong ball, an occupation which taught him about the elasticity of spider-silk.

Ovid's story of Athene and Arachne follows a long, convoluted tale-telling on Mount Helicon, in which the goddess is the audience for the Muses' narration of the revolt of Typhon, the rape of Proserpina, the metamorphosis of Cyane into falling water, and Arethusa into a subterranean river. The Muses, who address Athene as a greater artist than themselves, finally recount the challenge of the arrogant Pierides to their own harmonious supremacy in song, and the metamorphosis of the sisters into chattering magpies. This challenge puts Athene in mind of the Lydian girl, Arachne, who has claimed to be her equal in the art of spinning and weaving wool. The girl, Ovid tells us first of all, was motherless and low-born and ordinary.

Her father, Idmon, was a dyer, who dyed her wool with the purple dye of the murex. Her husband was of no importance, and she lived in a village. Ovid emphasises her ordinariness. She came from nowhere, but her skill was astounding. The nymphs of the vineyards left their sunny slopes to watch her, and the water nymphs rose dripping to see her at work.

One of the glories of Ovid's story-telling is his precision. His skill is to make his readers feel in their fingers, at the roots of their hair, the bodies and creatures his imagination inhabits. First, we have Arachne's commonness; next her skill. He describes her winding the rough yarn into a ball, teasing the wool in her fingers, drawing out the fleecy threads, fine as clouds, longer, longer, twirling the spindle with a practised thumb, embroidering with her needle. It is clear, the narrator says, that she must have been taught by Pallas. But Arachne denies this. Her skill is hers, grown in her, her own. Let the goddess show what she can do. If she were to lose, said Arachne (whose skill was all she had) then they could take anything, everything, it wouldn't matter.

Athene is associated with both the human artists in the *Metamorphoses* who are punished for hubris, for arrogance, for overweening delight in their skill. It was Athene who invented the flute, which Marsyas the satyr found where she had discarded it. She took a dislike to it, some authors say, because playing it distorted the gravity, the balance, of the player's face. Marsyas challenged the Lord of the Muses, the sun god Apollo and his lyre. Like Arachne, he risked everything. It was agreed that the victor would do whatever he pleased to the loser. The Muses were the judges. Apollo won, inevitably. He hung the faun from a tree, and flayed him alive. Raphael and Titian

painted his agony, the beads of blood, the bursting flesh under the pelt. Michelangelo's St Bartholomew dangles his flayed skin from his fingertips; the folded, hanging face is Michelangelo's own. Flaying was seen as a way of releasing the spirit from the flesh, pure art from the earth. Dante in Paradise prayed to Apollo to break into his breast, to breathe in him as he did when he tore the faun, Marsyas, '*della vagina delle membre sue*', from the sheath of his skin.

Arachne's fate was less terrible, more earthy.

It is believed that Velázquez painted Las Hilanderas (The Spinners) *in about 1656, at the time when he painted* Las Meniñas. *In the foreground, five women are working, one at a spinning wheel, one carding, one winding a great ball of thread from a skein slung on a frame, one lifting or putting down a basket, one holding aside a scarlet curtain to cast light on the spinning. They are peaceful, intent working women, barefoot, with their sleeves rolled up to show strong, handsome, slender arms. The spinner, an older woman, has a finely-painted fine veil thrown round her head and shoulders. The girl with the ball of thread, seen from the back, has a blouse that reveals the nape of her neck and a shoulder-blade, a pretty ear and a delicate cheek. The floor is scattered with fragments of fleece; a fleece hangs bunched on a dark wall; a cat sleeps between the spinners' feet. Their clothes are dyed in dark reds and blues. They are working women, not allegorised Fates.*

Behind them, two high steps mount to a brightly-lit inner room. Within the door three fashionable ladies, in flowing silks, gold, blue and rose, silvery, are looking at a tapestry hung on a wall. The tapestry has a rich complicated floral border, with glinting gold threads. In it, winged putti can be seen descending through a blue sky shot with a tracery of clouds. At the bottom right-hand corner, half-obscured by the rich skirts of the blue-silk lady with her back to the onlooker, is a white bull on whose back is a bravura flurry of flesh and flying flame-coloured cloth, mounting in a tourbillon of motionless airy speed.

In front of the tapestry are two figures, who at first appear to be part of it. On the left, below and behind the gold-silk fine lady (who for some reason is next to a leaning cello), seen from behind, is a somewhat doll-like female figure, wearing a large helmet and a buckler (her lower half is behind the cello), raising a sketched naked arm, in menace or remonstrance. In the centre of the painting, in some sense, in the centre of the inner room, between the helmeted puppet and the bull, wearing an awkwardly constructed toga, olive, flame over a white blouse, is another female figure holding out one arm, low, demonstrating the tapestry perhaps, showing it to the onlookers. She is so far away her face is featureless, almost. The light, coming into both parts of the space from an invisible left window, is a visible shaft of brightness, which passes across the flat tapestry, the soft puppet-women, the shimmer of silk, to illuminate the strong arm and shoulders, the white blouse, the delicate skin, of the foreground woman with the ball of thread. The light catches in the threads, making their fineness visible, their transparence present.

For a long time, this painting was described as a genre painting. Velázquez was engaged in the planning and decorating of the royal apartments; he would have had occasion to visit the tapestry works of Santa Isabel in Madrid. One critic describes it as a painting of 'the quite meaningless events of daily life in a workshop . . . he painted what was there, without giving it any meaning'.

Later, the painting was identified as the fable of Arachne.

Pallas Athene chose to confront Arachne disguised as a decrepit old woman, with a false grey wig and trembling limbs. She appealed to the young woman's sense of respect for age and experience, and, playing the wise crone, suggested that it would be prudent to defer to the goddess. This dissimulation provoked in the young woman a fit of genuine, human petulance and nastiness. She told the old woman to save her suggestions for her daughter-in-law – or for her daughter – who, she sneered, were obliged to listen.

She insulted her. The problem, she said, was that the old creature was senile, and weak in the head. Anyway, she added, the goddess should come herself, if she was disturbed. The goddess was avoiding the contest.

Upon which, Athene revealed herself.

Ovid describes, not the divine glory, but the human flush in the girl's cheeks, which came, and faded, like the crimson in the dawn sky. With stolid courage and driven ambition, she persisted. She would be measured against the goddess. She would, she was certain, triumph. She knew what she could do.

After a moment of passion, Ovid likes to involve his readers in the detail of things, structures, bodies. He describes the setting up of the looms, the stretching of the warp, the threading of the woof, the darting shuttles, the notched teeth of the hammering slay. The notched teeth, in Latin, are *insecti dentes* – *insecti*, meaning 'cut into', jagged. He describes goddess and girl delighting in their work, their garments caught up so that they can move easily. He describes the beauty of the dyed threads, which, like the girl's flush of blood, he compares to the sky. Rich Tyrian purples, and all the shades, gradually, indistinguishably changing, like the huge stain of the rainbow after a storm, when a thousand colours shimmer on the wide curve in the air, and the eye cannot demarcate the transition from one tint to the next, though the rich edges shine clearly crimson, or violet. The artists weave into the rainbow bright shoots of cloth of gold.

The tapestries are narratives, old tales, shaped in threads of light and shade, bright and dark, glittering and subtle.

Needlework of all kinds is a woman's art. For that reason, perhaps, I hated it as a child. I remember trying to hem a

dreadful bright purple apron in needlework lessons. I couldn't make the thread go forward. It went over and over producing lumps, bumps and knots, with no progression, stained with my blood, red and brown on grey-white (there was no purple thread – there was a war on). My grandmother, who was a dressmaker, and my aunt, who was an infant teacher, tried to interest me in embroidery in long winter evenings under flickering paraffin lamps. Chain stitch, satin stitch, feather stitch. My aunt used to teach the little boys in her class to sew, as well as the little girls; sometimes their mothers objected. I never lifted my nose far enough from the bloody point and the snarled threads, to see the pattern I was making, or following, for we embroidered on 'transfers', someone else's shadowed form of flowers and leaves in ghostly blue lines, ironed on to the linen we worked. The embroidery silks came in little skeins, intensely coloured – lemon yellow, buttercup, old gold, mustard, shading into orange and bronze. My grandmother also had huge balls of variegated silks, dyed in every shade of purple, from silvery-shadowed to deepest Tyrian, from violet to mauve to flaunting iris. She could, as I could not, make huge raised furls of solid satin-stitching, whorls of petals whose colours were dappled and shot with light and shadow, not like real flowers, but with an original shifting brilliance.

When I was at the end of my schooling, I was beginning to see that the gods were more real and dangerous than I had supposed as a small girl, reading my story-books. When I read *Aeneid VI*, where the golden bough shines on the shores of the underworld, and the Sibyl writhes in her cave, I felt a shiver down my spine which was recognition of power. When I read Racine's *Phèdre*, where Venus drives her claws and fangs into the human woman's flesh, when the woman dies in a fury of sun and blood and heat and terror with the gods in her veins and in the pitiless clear skies, I felt I had come into a more real,

invisible world, where things were bright, not tedious, terrible, not humdrum. I had a glimpse of the strip of clarity between the prison gates.

On the eve of the exams, when all this was singing in my own blood, my headmistress, a sweet-spoken silver-haired woman, rose up to admonish the clever and encourage the gentle. She had, she said, written books and made tablecloths, and each was good in its kind, but tablecloths were more honest, and better, and gave more pleasure. She was proud, she said, of her tablecloths. They were useful. The implication was, that Racine was not.

Much later still, out of my own excessive distress over this pronouncement, I made a story, *Racine and the Tablecloth*. It was written partly to defend Racine and the gods in the blood against the schoolteachers who were encouraging my ambitious daughter to 'be a gardener, if she wanted to'. She didn't. She wanted to learn enough French to read Racine and go to university, but they wanted to persuade her that ambition was bad, competition was bad, French was for railway stations, human beings were for mild usefulness.

The story, however, unlike my eighteen-year-old self, was not against tablecloths. One of the minor delights of feminist re-thinkings, at that time, was an interest in female arts, the work of the needle, the quilt, the garment. Chaucer's and Spenser's fairy palaces are hung with tapestries that become alive, stitched trees that open into magic forests, hidden creatures who vanish over soft horizons, castles whose doors can be opened. Deeper than that, the movement, the intricate knotting and joining and change in tension and direction of a thread, became the image I had in my own mind of the things I wrote; you might have an expanse of rosy and flaming lights, you might have a tree of crimson and golden apples, but always you had the thread that persisted, connected, continued.

Into my story of my wrath and despair over Racine's blood and sunlight, I wove an image of my great-aunt Thirza, who was photographed when she was over eighty, in her house in Stoke-on-Trent, amongst her exquisitely bright tablecloths and cushions, embroidered on ivory satin, of the kind sold for wedding dresses. She was a mythical figure, my great-aunt Thirza. 'She had blonde hair so long she could sit on it,' my aunt would always say. I believe that as well as following the linear shadowed 'transfers' (like neo-Platonic 'forms') she sometimes invented her own fruit and flowers, boughs and garlands. I have several of the cushions still. The silks are still bright. In my story my great-aunt Thirza stood for my ordinary origins, and her own bright work, for women making things in snatched time. But she was not allied with my levelling, lady-like headmistress, who haunts my dreams still, the nay-sayer, the antagonist, the fairy godmother who turned gold threads back into dull straw.

Ovid describes the woven scenes in detail. Pallas Athene weaves the forms of civic and divine order, the hills of ancient Athens, and the quarrel over the naming of the city. On that occasion, she was opposed to Poseidon and both gods gave gifts to the city. Ovid follows the tradition in which Poseidon strikes the rough cliff with his trident, and causes a great salt spring to gush out. Other writers (including Pérez de Moya whose *Philosophia Secreta* was in Velázquez's library) say that after the blow a white horse sprang from the rock. Ovid's Athene does not weave the horse. She weaves the twelve gods, on their twelve high thrones full of exalted gravity and grace. She knows their faces, and depicts them, including Jupiter in majesty. She depicts herself, too, upright, armed, with shield, spear and helmet. She shows her own gift to the city – the olive tree,

also springing from the rock, silvery-green and thickset with the delectable fruit. The lords of life are amazed at the lovely plant. Athene weaves in the figure of Victory, crowning her for her gift, naming the city Athens. She is the bringer of rooted peace and plenty.

In the four corners of her web, symmetrically, she weaves four scenes of human presumption and punishment. These, like Ovid's poem, in which they are images within images, show metamorphoses. They are addressed to Arachne; they portend pain and terror. There are Rhodope and Haemus, once mortal challengers, now high, bleak mountains. There is the Pygmaean queen, changed by Juno into a crane, and Antigone, another victim of Juno's anger, white-feathered, clapping a rattling bill, an ungainly stork. And there is Cinyras, lying on the white marble steps of a temple, weeping, it appears, for his daughters, whose cold limbs have been transmuted into the steps on which he lies.

Round this work, which is about power, and judgement, Athene weaves a border of olive branches, her own peaceful tree.

Velázquez is the great court painter. No one has bettered his icons of power and divine right, Hapsburgs on high delicate, mythical horses, princesses rigid in the stiff huge silk frames of their panniered dresses and fantastic crimped and ribboned hair. His princes and princesses are human beings and representatives of majesty and piety: the living man is the symbol of himself. Critics using books of emblems and iconology have read Las Hilanderas *as a painting in honour of nobility, since this is the meaning of the cello in Ripa's* Iconologia. *Others have read the silken static ladies as other arts – Music, Architecture, if Arachne is Painting. What strikes the onlooker most about them is the fluent skill, the lightness and brightness, with which Velázquez has rendered the shimmer and transparency of the stuff of which their dresses are made,*

the stuff whose elements are being spun together by the working women in the foreground.

I find it hard to see how this painting, cello or no cello, can be about nobility. The court ladies are mild and disinterested; the drama, the meaning of the painting is in the foreground, and on the back wall, in the sea and sky of the tapestry.

And Arachne's tapestry? She too wove tales of shape-shifting and metamorphosis. Hers were not tales of impertinent women, but of erotomanic gods, full of randy energy, infiltrating the world of the creatures, even of metals, to trick, to impregnate defenceless girls. Here is Europa, rushed away into the ocean by the silky white bull; Asterie, struggling in talons; Leda, pinned down by a battering pinion. Here is grave Jove slipping from form to form – eagle, swan, bull, satyr, human shepherd, spotted snake, shower of gold, rearing cone of pure flame. Here is Neptune – bull, ram, horse, great bird, bounding dolphin. Apollo as shepherd, as hawk, as golden lion; Bacchus using grapes as a tease; Saturn in horse-form, engendering the centaur. All is deception. Ovid's writing here is full of glee and movement, wickedness and writhing. There is more in Arachne's tapestry than there would be space for in any work of shuttle and wool, more forms, more human bodies, more rape, more birth, a plenitude of flux. Round her border, Ovid tells us, Arachne wove flowers and twining ivy.

Arachne's tapestry is Ovid's poem, a rush of beings, a rush of animal, vegetable and mineral constantly coming into shape and constantly undone and re-forming.

In Athene's tapestry, the work is divided into clear spaces, each with its content. It can be visualised, like a church window, thrones, faces, hills, sky, trident and

water, spear and olive; the human punishments are at the corners, and smaller.

Neither Pallas Athene, nor Envy himself, Ovid writes, could find a flaw in Arachne's work.

The golden-haired goddess was enraged by the woman's success. She tore up the beautiful web. She pulled apart the briefly visible image of divine deceits, rapes and violation. Still furious, she turned on the mortal woman, still holding her wooden shuttle, and beat her on the head with it, three or four blows.

The tapestry in Las Hilanderas *represents the Rape of Europa. It represents, to be precise, Titian's painting of the Rape of Europa, which was in the Spanish royal collection when Velázquez was in charge of the decoration of the Escorial. The king also owned a copy of Titian's painting by Rubens. Velázquez has increased the space of sky and cloud, compared to Titian's luminous stormy sea-coast and sunset colours. His expanse of painted pale blue, representing silk, representing air, gives a trompe-l'oeil vista of open space at the back of his painted space. His flying cupids are more ethereal, less fleshly than Titian's. Velázquez was the painter whose company Rubens sought when he was working in Spain; it is thought Velázquez may have watched him make his copies of Titian, including* The Rape of Europa. *Velázquez's tribute to both painters is thus an act both of homage and competition. He has painted the Titian, the Rubens, but converted the surface to woven silk, with ripples of creasing, a heavy border, with folds, and rays of light from a real, not an illusory window traversing from the high left hand to the flurry of coral skirts on the bull-back. (Though all the light is an illusion, of which Velázquez is the maker.)*

In his library, besides Ovid, he had Pérez de Moya's Philosophia Secreta, *a compendium of myths and legends, moralised. Pérez de Moya's account of the duel between Arachne and Minerva argues that 'This metamorphosis is given to us to show that no matter how skilled*

anyone may be in any art, there may come, later, another who will outdo him, adding new things, as happens in all branches of knowledge, for as Aristotle says, Time is a great co-worker, and through time, the arts are changed and enhanced.'

This appears, at least, to suggest that Arachne won the contest. 'Vengeance,' he says, changed her into a spider.

Velázquez was in a line, a thread, of emulation, of reworking, from Ovid to Titian to Rubens. He added the painting of light on textiles. He added the spinners.

It is a shock to realise that perhaps Arachne won. That was not the way we learned it as children. I have never heard it suggested that Marsyas played better than Apollo. Only that his skill was nature, and Apollo's was art. Ovid gave Arachne all the lively images. He gave her his own style, as Velázquez gave her Titian's skill and his own, whilst his doll-like goddess puts up a puppet-arm.

Italo Calvino, in his brilliant essay on Ovid and Universal Contiguity, argues that we not only cannot, but must not try to come down on either side in the contest. Is Ovid, he asks, on the side of Athene or Arachne? He answers,

'Neither the one nor the other. In the vast catalogue of myths that the entire poem in fact is, the myth of Athene and Arachne may in its turn contain two smaller catalogues, aimed in opposing ideological directions: one to induce holy terror, the other to incite people to irreverence and moral relativity. Anyone who inferred from this that the poem should be read in the first way (since Arachne's challenge is cruelly punished) or in the second (since the poetic rendering favours the guilty victim) would be making a mistake.' The *Metamorphoses*, says Calvino, contain all the tales, the images, the renderings. The nature of myth is not to be resolved into one meaning or another. It is a fluid, endlessly interconnected web.

Most people think Athene simply pointed at Arachne, and said, 'For your presumption, become a spider.' This is not so, according to Ovid. The act of transformation was partly merciful. Arachne, Ovid tells us, could not endure being beaten on the head by a goddess, and put a rope round her proud, pretty neck, to hang herself. When Athene saw her hanging there, she was filled with pity, lifted her and told her to live – but to go on hanging from a thread, she and her descendants, for ever. And she sprinkled the girl with Hecate's herb.

And once again, Ovid's precise imagination inhabits a painfully changing body. Arachne's poisoned hair fell off, he says and with her hair her nose, and her ears. Her head withered and shrank; her body diminished and diminished; only her fingers remained, fringing her belly as fine legs. And from that remaining belly she spins still, the long spider-threads, the silk. She practises her old art, making webs, weaving the intricate threads.

Velázquez probably knew Philostratos' *Eikones*. These are (probably) second-century Athenian descriptions of paintings, either seen or imagined, either exercises in ekphrastic description or inventions of visual forms in the brain. One of these is called the Webs. It opens with a description of Penelope, tending her weaving, endlessly unpicked and reworked. You can hear the shuttle, says Philostratos, you can see Penelope's tears, like melting snow. This is human pathos, but the true praise, the enthusiasm for the art-work, is given to the painter's skill with the spiders and their webs. The painter has shown the fine threads, and the spinners. The writer knows his spiders. He praises both orb-webs and funnel-webs, 'a quadruple thread, like an anchoring cable, fixed to the corners of the web, from which its fine tissues hang in

concentric circles, held together by radii. The workers run along the threads to repair them where they are stretched or torn.'

He describes the painted beasts themselves, too, 'bristled and blotched, as in nature, presenting to the eye an aspect both menacing and savage'. He describes the flies caught in the shining traps and devoured by the spinners – 'one is held by a leg, one by the tip of the wing – one has its head already eaten away'. He praises the painter for accuracy of observation, and for delicacy and mastery of fine brushwork – consider, he says, the way in which the finest threads have been rendered.

Las Hilanderas, *as a painting, is not in good condition. Its colours are darkened and stained. It has been enlarged, around the central image. But it can be seen to be a painting about light, about the rendering of light as it catches and makes visible threads so fine that they are made of pure light, shimmering silk tissues with the light running in bright darts and shoots on the gloss. The spinning-wheel is a whirr of moving radii; the thread held in her ball and skein by the pretty worker is quite different in quality from the translucent veiling around the head of the spinning women, and different from the gauzy draperies over the fashionable ladies' satins. Light catches strands of hair differently again, and the soft thick pelt of the solid cat.*

Las Hilanderas *resembles Velázquez's* Christ in the House of Martha and Mary. *Both have a foreground full of solid human working women, and a scene of mythic, or spiritual 'meaning' sketched in an alcove, or an embrasure. Mary, who has chosen the better part, the contemplative life, sits at the Master's feet, as Athene and Arachne stand before the woven scene, ambiguously in and out of the work of art, the frame, a picture on a wall, or real characters in the same, or an exemplary tale, neither art nor life, but hovering, as myths and visions do, between two worlds.*

What is painted with love, in both pictures, is the working women. The angry, sulky, resentful cook with her pestle, an embodiment of Martha's indignation at being cumbered with much serving. The spinners, full of movement, deploying their skill, using their bodies unselfconsciously. In both cases, the painting is about the way light catches objects in the world. The source of light in Christ in the House of Martha and Mary *is not the Lord, in his armchair, but the fish and eggs, the garlic roots, glittering, gleaming, shining with cream and silver and white.* Las Hilanderas *is mapped by circles and radiant radii, light catching threads, a spinning-wheel, the struts of a ladder, the circle of white thread in the woman's glistening hair. The painting is about vision and skill. Velázquez is painting not only the Fable of Arachne, and the Rape of Europa, but light at its work, the eye discerning the forms of light, the skill of the human artist who with a fine brush and an exquisite touch makes maps and delineates the visible and invisible world at the point where they touch.*

I began my first novel with a description of air visible in heat, of light on a lawn. I described warm currents snaking in visible rivers across the grass, and the light flung between the shorn blades of grass 'like crossed threads of spun glass, silver, green and white'. The choice of image was instinctive; I now think that there is something in visible forms of light, threads, currents, or the dust-motes turning in a beam from a window, which very early arouses our aesthetic sense. There is such a beam, or column, descending diagonally across *The Rape of Europa* in *Las Hilanderas*. I do not know why it is so moving. I associate it with the Platonic forms of perfection, the transcendent order whose shapes we discern in the solid world, and draw, or paint, or build. I believed, until I checked to write this piece, that I had finished my lawn with a description of the network of bright wet threads left by the 'aerial dispersal of spiderlings'. I remember discovering the phrase and being

delighted by its precision and beauty. Either it was elsewhere, or it was an editorial sacrifice. Spider's webs, like sea-shells, like leaf-skeletons, are sudden visual reminders of a geometric regularity inherent in the mess and excess of the world. The orb-webs are Fibonacci spirals, like some snail-shells, like sunflower seeds, like the growth of branches from trunk and twigs from branches. They move us; we call them beautiful. I invented a character who preserved his sanity by mapping the world with geometrical webs and connections, making mud safe, and bulking tree-trunks regular and lovely. I think I became interested in painting because I was interested in the mapping of the visibility of light.

Spider's webs are also, of course, traps, for flies, dusty festoons on the bristles of brooms, tatters of the uninhabited.

Some real spiders

Spiders are predatory, carnivorous arthropods. They belong to the group Chelicerata, which includes the king crabs (Merostoma) and the Arachnida, which includes, besides spiders, harvestmen, scorpions, pseudoscorpions, ticks and mites. There are over 40,000 known spider species, and more are constantly discovered. Spiders proper belong to the order Araneae; they have eight legs and venomous fangs (chelicerae). They have varying numbers (between three and six) of silk-spinning glands attached to spinnerets. Only the orb-web spiders produce the viscid silk, or glue, which attaches their threads. Other uses of spider-silk are drag-lines and life-lines, ballooning on air currents, wrapping prey, cocooning eggs. Cribellate spiders make cribellate silk which they brush and fluff, with microscopic teeth on their hind legs (the calamistrum),

into microscopic loops, which they deploy in ribbons, or hackle-bands, to entangle hapless flying things. Spiders have been on the earth for at least 400 million years, and were spinning silk to our knowledge at least 300 million years ago. They range from bird-eaters to tiny money-spiders. They drink their prey, after breaking down its tissues with venom. They can be devoted mothers, tending eggs and spiderlings, leaving their own bodies as the final meal for their emerging offspring. Some eat their mates; some cohabit amiably. Some jump, some spit, some wait, fingering their threads, in the base of burrows. Jean-Henri Fabre enticed tarantulas with a jumping ear of barley and I have seen a Brazilian Indian do the same with a twig for a dark monster in the jungle. They moult repeatedly, taking hours, or days, emerging pale and soft, taking colour again slowly.

They can be very beautiful, complicated creatures. They can resemble leaves, seeds, pebbles, ghosts, stained with rose, with russet, with slate-grey, with moss-green; they can appear to be laughing masks (*Zilla diodia*), or hanging bats, jet beads, or crackled porcelain. *Cyclosa oculata* has an octopus-like fin and a pair of eyes like a gravely-staring goddess. *Argiope iomennichi* is an orb-web spider striped in creamy-yellow, wavering black and dark gold. The Araneidae spin webs with a lattice at the hub, no hole, and a signal-line connecting the orb of silk to the creature's hidden retreat. They can decorate their lovely traps with bands of silk across the diameter.

Literary spiders

Sir Thomas Browne observed the mathematical regularity of the spinners in *The Garden of Cyrus, or the Quincunx*. Discussing the

'Rhomboidall decussations' of perspective painters and lapidaries, he writes, 'But this is no law unto the woof of the neat *Retiarie* Spider, which seems to weave without transversion, and by the union of right lines to make out a continued surface, which is beyond the common art of Textury, and may still nettle *Minerva* the Goddesse of that mystery. And he that shall hatch the little seeds, either found in small webs, or white round Egges, carried under the bellies of some Spiders, and behold how at their first production in boxes, they will presently fill the same with their webbs, may observe the early and untaught finger of nature, and how they are natively provided with a stock, sufficient for such Texture.'

And Jonathan Edwards, the eighteenth-century American divine, at the age of eleven observed for himself, with delicate diagrams and precise mathematical measurements, the aerial dispersal, or ballooning, of spiders.

'In very calm and serene days in the forementioned time of year [the latter end of August and beginning of September], standing at some distance behind the end of an house or some other opake body, so as just to hide the disk of the sun and keep off his dazzling rays, and looking closely along by the side of it, I have seen a vast multitude of little shining webs, and glistening strings, brightly reflecting the sunbeams, and some of them of great length, and of such a height, that one would think they were tacked to the vault of the heavens, and would be burnt like tow in the sun, and make a very beautiful, pleasing, as well as surprising appearance. It is wonderful at what a distance, these webs may be plainly seen. Some that are at a great distance appear (it cannot be less than) several thousand times as big as they ought.

'But that which is most astonishing, is, that very often appears at the end of these webs, spiders sailing in the air with them;

which I have often beheld with wonderment and pleasure, and showed to others.'

Wonderment, pleasure, precision. Edwards observed the silk production and calculated the gravity of the tiny fliers. He observed that they always flew towards the sea, and supposed ('for it is unreasonable to suppose that they have sense enough to stop themselves when they come near the sea') that 'at the end of the year they are swept away into the sea, and buried in the ocean, and leave nothing behind them but their eggs, for a new stock next year'.

Jonathan Swift saw spiders darkly as self-involved, dirty and poisonous. His spider, in *The Battle of the Books*, represents the overweening Moderns, whilst his wholesome bee, ranging widely, represented the liberal Ancients. The allegorical spider praises himself as 'a domestic animal . . . This large castle, (to show my improvements in the mathematics) is all built with my own hands, and the materials extracted altogether out of my own person.' The bee retorts that it is a question 'whether is the nobler being of the two, that which, by a lazy contemplation of four inches round, by an overweening pride, feeding and engendering on itself, turns all into excrement and venom, producing nothing at all but flybane and a cobweb; or that which, by a universal range, with long search, much study, true judgement and distinction of things, brings home honey and wax'.

Swift's spiders are allegorised humans. Whereas his contemporary, Alexander Pope, was shiveringly sensitive to the possibilities of inhuman sensibilities in other creatures. Why has not Man a microscopic eye, he enquired, and answered himself, For this plain reason, Man is not a Fly. We are constructed neither to see mites, nor,

tremblingly alive all o'er
To smart and agonise at every pore.
Or, quick effluvia darting through the brain
Die of a rose, in aromatic pain.

His sensuous imagination briefly inhabited the 'green myriads in the peopled grass' and noted the spinners at work:

The spider's touch, how exquisitely fine!
Feels at each thread, and lives along the line.

Real spiders

Real spiders may have two, four, six or eight eyes. Some cave-living spiders have no eyes at all. Most have eight eyes, arranged in two or three rows, in patterns varying with their families. These are not compound eyes, like the flies, not faceted, but with a simple lens, and retina. Mostly they have poor sight, with the exception of the hunting spiders. Jumping spiders have large central eyes that can see sharp images as far as twelve inches away. Ogre-faced or gladiator spiders have huge eyes that can gather and concentrate light, so that they can work, and chase, at night. Most spiders, however, rely on scent and vibrations to construct the world they perceive.

Literary spiders

The most startling and most beautiful literary spiders I know were made by Emily Dickinson, student of Jonathan Edwards, poet of genius. Oddly, though she was a woman, and she

praised her spiders as artists, they were all, improbably, male in her terms. Some of her spiders are not much more than whimsy:

> The spider as an Artist
> Has never been employed
> Though his surpassing Merit
> Is freely certified
>
> By every Broom and Bridget
> Throughout a Christian Land –
> Neglected Son of Genius
> I take thee by the Hand.

Or

> The Spider holds a Silver Ball
> In unperceived Hands –
> And dancing softly to Himself
> His Yarn of Pearl – unwinds –
>
> He plies from Nought to Nought –
> In unsubstantial Trade –
> Supplants our Tapestries with His –
> In half the period –
>
> An Hour to rear supreme
> His Continents of Light –
> Then dangle from the Housewife's Broom
> His Boundaries – forgot –

Circumference was one of Dickinson's favourite words, and she delighted in changes of scale and focus. She could describe a visitation of a spider (it has been suggested that she was describing a visit to the water-closet) as though it was a vision of eternity crossing time:

> Alone and in a Circumstance
> Reluctant to be told
> A spider on my reticence
> Assiduously crawled
>
> And so much more at Home than I
> Immediately grew
> I felt myself a visitor
> And hurriedly withdrew
>
> Revisiting my late abode
> With articles of claim
> I found it quietly assumed
> As a Gymnasium
> Where Tax asleep and Title off
> The inmates of the Air
> Perpetual presumption took
> As each were special Heir –
> If any strike me on the street
> I can return the Blow
> If any take my property
> According to the Law
> The Statute is my Learned friend
> But what redress can be
> For an offense nor here nor there
> So not in Equity –
> That Larceny of time and mind
> The marrow of the Day
> By spider, or forbid it Lord
> That I should specify.

Here the creature is the demonic, the visitant, who disrupts the daily and the domestic. Spiders cohabit with us, trailing their other reality through and across our rooms and thoughts. Emily

Dickinson's most gnomic spider makes an eternal circle. It is still male.

A Spider sewed at Night
Without a Light
Upon an Arc of White

If Ruff it was of Dame
Or Shroud of Gnome
Himself himself inform.

Of Immortality
His Strategy
Was Physiognomy.

That is, the spider's geometry is the shape of the circle, the face of the infinite. Not the woman, but the spinner, is the Immortal.

In *Possession* I invented a woman poet who wrote about spiders, and her spider was both Swift's ugly beast and Dickinson's architect of order. Christabel's poem was called 'Ariachne's Broken Woof' after the beautiful textual crux in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, where the betrayed hero cries out that an indivisible creature has split apart like sky and earth:

And yet the spacious breadth of this division
Admits no orifice for a point as subtle
As Ariachne's broken woof to enter.

A spider-thread? The thread with which Ariadne led her lover from the maze which housed the monster? The two become one.

Christabel's spider.

From so blotched and cramped a creature
Painfully teased out
With ugly fingers, filaments of wonder
Bright snares about
Lost buzzing things, an order fine and bright
Geometry threading water, catching light.

Women are still weaving light and shifting shapes into tapestries. In 1998, I saw an exhibition of work by Danish women who had made images of earth and sky, creatures and presences, Northern Arachnes. The materials were old and new – silk and wool, but also glittering plastic strings and threads, feathers and slivers of wood. Kari Guddal dyed more than 300 tonnes of wool on flax to make a shimmer of blue silver light in a cleft of earth browns and deep darkness. Lisbeth Graem, in sisal, flax and wool, turned a red sky off Bergen into a woven red cloud inhabited by mysterious vanishing shapes, women or vases. Grete Balle, in 'The snow like a wall against the sky' woven in sumach, paper yarn, flax and silk, turned an expanse of snow on a mountainside of granite and schist into a shimmering flat contour, surrounded by blues, pine greens and a hint of sand and terracotta. These are the changing appearances of air and earth and light woven into a threaded surface, described by the lovely words 'haute lisse'. Then there is Hanne Skyum's 'Skumringsflut', Dusk Flight, repeated, scattered flying silhouettes of ducks, in shadowy sand-grey fawns and muted creams – abstract shapes of flight, stretched, tumbling, outspread, flickering, bunched, effort and floating of wings, on the most extraordinary groundcolour, blood-dark, brown-black, at once richly solid and deeply receding as weaving can be, simultaneously. All these images owe something to modern technology as well as to ancient visions – the duck forms are the result of repeated photographic records, the mountains are computer-

constructed. Skyum's imagination inhabits the hunched flap, the soar of wings as Ovid's did.

Annette Graae's 'Daemoner' are four tall figures, shadowy but bright, with sharp mask-eyes. They are both very modern figures, moving elegant bodies in modern clothes, and ancient haunting spirits, glittering at the edge of consciousness. They are dancers, they are imps. One is red, one blue, one black and one white and silver. All are threatening, faintly dangerous, and attractively lively. Their variable shimmer is made of many materials. The white daemon is woven of parcel-string, fruit-tree netting, strips of material from old frocks, and traditional yarns like flax, silk and viscose, with silvery lycra. The black daemon has strips of velvet from an old dress woven into flax, silk and lycra. The red daemon is bright with Thai silk, strips of cloth, velvet, bast-yarn and flax, and the blue one is parcel-string, flax yarn and viscose yarn. Graae says she wanted the texture of the work to be brittle. The creatures are metamorphoses of other forms, other shapes, other ways of holding matter together. Graae says her daemons are both bad and good, Latin demons and Greek daemons. They are part of the Ovidian earth, leaning against bars in modern cities, poised to change, or vanish.

Real spiders

And can we use the spider-silk, so tenuous, so strong? In the eighteenth century a Monsieur Bon made gloves and stockings from it. It was not commercially practical. Réaumur estimated that 663,552 spiders (he did not specify the species) would be needed to spin a single pound of silk. We do use the fine silk of the black widow spider to divide the field of view in some optical gadgets.

Some tropical fishermen use the webs of the golden orb-web spider (*Nephila*) as nets. These spiders, says Michael Chinery, to whom I am indebted for this and much other information, produce 700 metres of silk per creature, and their silk has indeed been used to make tapestries. And in the *New Scientist*, in the week when I wrote this piece, it was reported that in Quebec researchers plan to make biosteel from spider-silk spun by goats. This beautiful, strong fibre would be biodegradable, and strong enough to stop bullets. Spider-silk is a rock-solid protein, spun into a whisper-thin thread, hardened as the threads tauten into a crystalline cable. Natural silk, the scientists have found, is stronger and more elastic than high-tensile steel, or the Kevlar used in body-armour. Using bacteria to produce the protein made only snarls and insoluble knots. But mammals secrete milk as spiders secrete silk – in skin-like, epethelial cells, held in a space, or lumen, where shear stresses on the protein are minimised.

There was the goddess, with the snake-haired woman on her shield, who turned men to stone, and sea-weed to coral, and the magic aegis on her breast. She could appear in a beam of sunlight, or move from invisibility to visibility in a sigh in the leaves, a shiver in the air. And here, at the other end of the scale, is spider-silk, a protein, nurtured, like Jove, by goat's milk, held in a space, or lumen, to make the durable crystals of an invulnerable chain-mail. What we see is a clue only to the force, and the beauty, and the order and the complexity, of what we don't see. Gods, or spider-silk.