

**Myth as Model: The Narratives of Cronus and Jacob in  
Sylvie Germain's *Le Livre des Nuits* and *Nuit-d'Ambre*.**

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Abstract: In this essay, as part of a larger project on the role and status of myth in her writings, I shall examine the ways Sylvie Germain employs two mythical narratives – the narrative of the Titan Cronus from Greek mythology, and the story of Jacob's fight with a man (usually thought to be God, or an angel) in Genesis 32, in her first two novels, *Le Livre des Nuits* (1985) and *Nuit-d'Ambre* (1987). Taking Socrates's desire to offer censored versions of certain myths for the education of the guardians of the city (in Plato's *Republic*) as a starting point, I ask whether sanitized versions of myths would provide useful models for a reader. In Germain's novels, a character does indeed try to use the Cronus story as a model, with disastrous results. But the story of Jacob's fight with the angel, reenacted in *Nuit-d'Ambre*, results in a newfound perception that accounts for that which is usually imperceptible. As such, the novels use myth to expose the absences and the gaps within mythical narratives. Such narratives cannot thus serve as models for behaviour unless one is aware of those gaps. The novels eventually redirect the striving and struggling of their characters toward an attentive seeking of that which is hidden, an attention that is also a space for an ethical relationship with another person and with the world.

‘But even if these stories were true, they should be passed over in silence, I would think, and not told so casually to the foolish and the young’.<sup>1</sup> In this statement Plato's Socrates advocates the silencing of those mythical stories that show the gods engaged in violence, plotting against each other, or otherwise serving as poor models for those whom he imagines as guardians of his ideal city. Since the philosopher maintains that these stories *must* be false,<sup>2</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy can describe Plato's definition of the mythical mode of discourse by writing that ‘myths are fictions, and these fictions tell sacrilegious lies about the divine’<sup>3</sup> but these fictions may be seen as a model for acts and behaviours. But when Socrates proposes, a few lines

<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. by C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004), 378a.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 377e.

<sup>3</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy in ‘The Nazi Myth’, trans. by Brian Holmes, *Critical Inquiry*, 16 (1990), 291-312 (p. 297). See also: *Le Mythe nazi* (1980 ; La Tour de l'Aigue: L'Aube, 1991).

further, to suppress the more unsavory elements of the old stories, would the new versions not still be telling lies, sanctimonious ones this time, about the divine?<sup>4</sup> Would the silencing of undesirable behaviour remove it entirely from the model or would traces of it remain on the margins of perception?

In this essay, I shall examine the ways Sylvie Germain employs two mythical narratives within her first two novels, *Le Livre des Nuits* (1985) and *Nuit-d'Ambre* (1987).<sup>5</sup> Her novels show the dangers of affixing a mythical narrative to one's own story, yet in rewriting mythical tales, her own works take on mythical characteristics. The key to this seeming contradiction lies in the fact that Germain, in these novels, exposes the absences and the gaps within myths. They cannot thus serve as models for behaviour unless one is aware of those gaps. The novels eventually redirect the striving and struggling of their characters toward an attentive seeking of that which is hidden, an attention that is also a space for an ethical relationship with another person and with the world.

What Socrates offers as his first example of the sort of story that ought to be banished, or told to a very restricted few, is the history of Zeus's father Cronus.<sup>6</sup> According to Hesiod, Cronus, son of Earth (*Gaia*) and Sky (*Ouranos*), the youngest of the Titans, was 'crooked-counseled' and the 'most terrible'.<sup>7</sup> It was he who volunteered to avenge his siblings, the Cyclopes and the Hundred-handers, imprisoned within Earth by Sky, by castrating Sky with the

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<sup>4</sup> For example: 'But as for saying that a god, who is himself good, is the cause of evils, we will fight that in every way' in Plato, *Republic*, 380b.

<sup>5</sup> The second novel continues the story of the first, although Germain has stated that in fact, *Le Livre des Nuits* began life as a preface to *Nuit-d'Ambre*, establishing a genealogy – an origin myth – for the eponymous main character of the second novel. This preface exceeded its bounds and became a novel in its own right. Cf. Sylvie Germain, 'Sylvie Germain: L'obsession du mal', *Magazine littéraire*, 286 (March 1991), 64.

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 377e.

<sup>7</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, ed. and trans. by Glenn W. Most (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), ll. 18, 137, and 168 for the first quotation, and 138 for the second.

sickle that Earth brought forth for this purpose.<sup>8</sup> Warned by his father that vengeance would come, Cronus swallowed each of his own children for fear that they would eventually betray him; only Zeus, with the help of his mother, was able to escape this fate.<sup>9</sup> It is a story, then, of unspeakable violence, of characters acting out of fear and an instinct for self-preservation. No one acts with concern for any kind of entity larger than him- or herself, and certainly no one hesitates to use violence to achieve her/his ends. Clearly, it would form a poor model for the guardians of the city and just as much for the ordinary citizen, and one can understand why Socrates would wish to exclude it from his ideal city.

The two mythical narratives that I will discuss in Sylvie Germain's *Le Livre des nuits* and *Nuit-d'Ambre* are this story of Cronus devouring his offspring, and the story from the Hebrew Bible of Jacob's encounter, and battle, with a mysterious figure thought to represent the divine, recounted in Genesis 32. A common thread between these stories is the fact that they both feature characters who struggle or strain: Sky names his sons the Titans, which means 'strainers' and the being with whom Jacob wrestles renames him Israel, that is, 'one who strives with god.'<sup>10</sup>

Each of these myths has a different status in the novels: Jacob's encounter is quoted as the epigraph to *Nuit-d'Ambre*, which means it stands in the background of the entire text; also, the story is enacted at the novel's climax. The Cronus narrative is a less important plot element, though it does occur at a key juncture. The presence of these myths within the novels contributes to a certain epic tone, but these stories do not function as the sort of sanitized models or types

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., ll. 154-82. I follow Most's translation in using Earth and Sky instead of *Gaia* and *Ouranos*.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., ll. 453-506.

<sup>10</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, l. 208; Genesis 32. 28.

that Plato has Socrates advocate.<sup>11</sup> I will argue instead that Germain's fiction points to the holes in any such narrative; that is, to its inability to account for the intricacies of human experience when used as a mimetic model. The mythical name, as a marker for mythological discourse, only exists in Germain's novels with its insufficiencies exposed, the way that its silences and hesitations fail to account adequately for what it is meant to signify. As we will see, the protagonist's surname, Péniel, means 'face of God' but does not signify glory or even remembrance of a particular glorious narrative, but the back-and-forth of interpreting narratives filled with silences and gaps.

*Le Livre des Nuits* and *Nuit-d'Ambre* chronicle a family over several generations covering more than a century. The family's patriarch, though, is never referred to by name. (His given name is never stated and while his family name is obvious from the context, the narrative voice never uses it directly to name him). In the novel's first pages the narrator speaks of the family ('En ce temps-là les Péniel étaient encore des gens de l'eau-douce'),<sup>12</sup> and then mentions that individuals and families were known more by the name of their canal-plying boat than by a patronym: 'Entre gens de l'eau-douce ils s'appelaient plus volontiers du nom de leurs bateaux que de leurs propres noms. [...] Les Péniel étaient ceux d'*A la grâce de Dieu*'.<sup>13</sup> Two characters are then named – Vitalie Péniel, the matriarch, and Théodore-Faustin Péniel, her newborn son – but the patriarch is only referred to by such attributive words as 'son mari' or 'le père'.<sup>14</sup> Even in

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<sup>11</sup> Alain Goulet calls these two novels 'une saga transgénérationnelle', a word that suggests the mythical structure and style of the works: cf. *Sylvie Germain, œuvre romanesque: Un monde de cryptes et de fantômes* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> Sylvie Germain, *Le Livre des Nuits* (Paris: Gallimard, 'Folio', 1987), p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

the genealogical chart provided at the beginning of *Nuit-d'Ambre*, he is only named 'Péniel,' whereas each of his descendants is listed there by his or her given name.<sup>15</sup>

Hence, the indicator of this forefather's individuality, that which would demarcate him from his own forefathers is missing. What remains, though, is precisely a mythical name, a name that evokes Jacob's encounter with a man at the Jabbok ford, at the conclusion of which Jacob names the place 'Peniel'.<sup>16</sup> Peniel means 'face of *el*,' and '*el*' is a Hebrew word for God. In naming this place, Jacob thus inscribes his encounter with a person he sees as God, or a representative of God, into the landscape. The encounter takes the form of a struggle, for he wrestles the man from night till dawn. As the battle comes to a close (with no decisive victor – 'the man saw that he did not prevail' but he maintains enough control to put Jacob's hip out of joint), Jacob asks the man to give his name, and the man refuses.<sup>17</sup> It appears that if Jacob (now also dubbed Israel, he who strives with God) were to know the name of his interlocutor, he would gain power over him.

In choosing to name the family chronicled in her diptych *Péniel*, Germain inscribes this struggle onto the lives of her characters, as if transporting the site named by Jacob from the Ancient Near East to northeastern France. The father seems to incarnate Jacob's struggle, all the more because he bears no known name other than *Péniel*. His identity is reduced to the mythical name. Indeed, his life, or what little of it is related in the novel, is filled with struggles. He and his wife *Vitalie* are childless, each of her seven previous pregnancies having ended in stillbirth. At the term of the eighth pregnancy, he fully expects to mourn again, but when instead a son is

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<sup>15</sup> Sylvie Germain, *Nuit-d'Ambre* (Paris: Gallimard (Folio), 1989), pp. 14-15.

<sup>16</sup> Genesis 32. 24-30. The New Revised Standard Version, the translation I have consulted, uses the verse numbering from the Latin Vulgate; the French *Bible de Jérusalem*, from which Germain appears to draw her epigraph, uses the slightly different numbering of the Masoretic Text. Hence Germain gives the source of her epigraph as 'Genèse, XXXII, 25/30-32'.

<sup>17</sup> Genesis 32. 25

born full of vigor and life, Péniel is struck dumb, in a passage perhaps meant to evoke the story of John the Baptist's birth.<sup>18</sup>

Théodore-Faustin Péniel returns from the Franco-Prussian war (1870-71) badly disfigured, the work of a mounted swordsman; and he finds that his wife has not yet given birth after two years to the child they were expecting when he left. While she gives birth soon after his arrival, instead of a child, Noémie delivers a statue of salt, as though prolonged gestation had caused the developing foetus to crystallize, a monument to hope lost by the ravages of war. Though it is only salt that links this episode to that of Lot's wife, Theodore-Faustin takes this stillbirth as a sign of God's anger. After Noémie dies, and now bereft of his hyphen, Théodore Faustin renames the family boat *À la colère de Dieu*,<sup>19</sup> feeling that divine grace has been withdrawn from him and his family. Victor-Flandrin, the son that Théodore Faustin finally has by his daughter, lives through an entire century of wars that traverse the countryside or call his sons away. This series of tragedies culminates, at the beginning of *Nuit-d'Ambre*, in the death of his grandson Jean-Baptiste in a hunting accident, which in turn causes Jean-Baptiste's brother, Charles-Victor, to see himself as betrayed, not only by his parents, but by everyone.

Charles-Victor Péniel (known later in the novel as *Nuit-d'Ambre-Vent-de-Feu*) leaves his family's rural hamlet for Paris once he reaches university age. In the room he rents, he hangs a reproduction of Goya's *Saturn Devouring his Son*, one of the artist's so-called Black Paintings, and is fascinated by the narrative of Cronus (whom the Romans called Saturn):

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<sup>18</sup> When an angel announces the impending birth of his son, Zechariah is dubious, given he and his wife's advanced age – as a result of his skepticism he is made mute and must confirm Elizabeth's choice of name by scrawling his assent on a slate. Cf. Luke 1. 8-23, 59-66. See also Bénédicte Lanot, 'Images, mythes, et merveilleux chrétien dans l'œuvre de Sylvie Germain', *Roman 20-50*, 39 (June 2005), 15-23 (p. 19).

<sup>19</sup> *Le Livre des Nuits*, pp. 46-47.

Sa préférence allait au dernier-né des Titans, Cronos, son intérêt s'arrêtait avec l'avènement de Zeus qui instaura le règne des Olympiens où déjà commença à s'établir un certain principe d'ordre et de clarté auquel il répugnait.

Cronos, lui, était le Rebelle, le Fourbe, le Violent, celui qui avait castré le père trop étouffant d'un coup de faucille en silex, puis qui avait réenfoui ses frères dans le ventre grouillant de sa mère. Celui qui s'était uni à sa sœur Rhéa, dont il avait ensuite dévoré les six enfants conçus de lui.<sup>20</sup>

Nuit-d'Ambre introduces this image, whose incestuous context resonates with his own family history, into his life and this text becomes a sort of guide for him, for he begins to imagine himself acting out the role of Cronus with characters from his own life: 'Il se rêvait Cronos tranchant le sexe de Fou-d'Elle, son chien de père.'<sup>21</sup>

So, far from keeping it silent or restricting its audience, Germain takes what was a repugnant and dangerous tale to Socrates and sets it as an important narrative over the life of her character. Texts in this novel have the effect that Socrates believed them to have, too: people can see themselves in the narratives and act as though they were scripts for their lives. Though the next paragraph begins 'Mais très vite il déserta sa chambre, il oublia l'image',<sup>22</sup> the events recounted show that in fact Nuit-d'Ambre is still holding the image as a model. He meets a woman whom he first sees from behind and to whom he is attracted because her buttocks resemble those of Cronus's victim in the Goya painting. He comes to see himself as Cronus to her Demeter;<sup>23</sup> when the woman, Nelly, insists that she is more than a figure in someone else's fantasy, Nuit-d'Ambre responds with violence, striking her, raping her, and abandoning her.

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<sup>20</sup> *Nuit-d'Ambre*, p. 204. Hesiod does not make it clear whether Cronus re-imprisons his brothers or if he just neglects to free them; they are not mentioned again until Zeus frees them after defeating Cronus: cf. *Theogony*, l. 501.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>23</sup> The narrative voice, which often speaks from Nuit-d'Ambre's perspective in this section of the novel, categorically states that the victim in Goya's painting is a woman; Nuit-d'Ambre decides that it must be Demeter in *Nuit-d'Ambre*, p. 205.

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy write: '[M]yth, like the work of art that exploits it, is an instrument of *identification*.'<sup>24</sup> *Nuit-d'Ambre*, in this passage, has seen in the myth of Cronus someone whom he resembles, someone whose rebellion against a perfidious father resonates with his own sense of betrayal and desire for revenge. However, the title of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's piece as well as the results of *Nuit-d'Ambre*'s identification with Cronus leave little doubt as to the dangerous power that these myths can take, and perhaps agree, obliquely, with Socrates's desire to sanitize them. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy show how German nationalism and later Nazi ideology appropriate the means of identification, using mythologies or exploiting them to further the idea of German supremacy. Since France had long been imitating the ancients in its art and national narratives, German thinkers attempted to imitate a *different* ancient world, the mystical, ritualistic elements that the French passed over.<sup>25</sup> That is to say, they preferred the world of the Titans to the Olympian 'principe d'ordre et de clarté' that *Nuit-d'Ambre* found so repugnant.<sup>26</sup> The consequences of the adherence to these stories underline the danger of an uncritical use of mythical narratives as didactic models.

In Germain's novel, the narrative of Cronus takes a grip on the character's life, a grip that is shaken but not broken by Nelly's face. This episode also shows how the uniqueness of the face undermines totalizing narratives. *Nuit-d'Ambre* has been in a relationship with Nelly for nearly a year when she covers his eyes and asks: 'Et mes yeux, ils sont de quelle couleur? Le sais-tu au moins, dis?'<sup>27</sup> *Nuit-d'Ambre*, taken by surprise, can only hazard a guess. He says her eyes are brown, but his guess is wrong: 'Les yeux qu'elle fixait droit sur lui étaient de la couleur du ciel

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<sup>24</sup> 'The Nazi Myth', p. 298.

<sup>25</sup> 'There had been a Greece of measure and clarity, [...] and a buried Greece, nocturnal, somber, [...] in short, a mystical Greece, on which the other, not without difficulty, was raised (through the "repression" of the mystical one), but which always remained silently present right up to the final collapse' in 'The Nazi Myth', pp. 300-01.

<sup>26</sup> *Nuit-d'Ambre*, p. 204.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

que venait de traverser l'averse, exactement. Couleur d'ardoise. A croire qu'elle avait arraché deux petits morceaux du ciel entre les toits pour se les plaquer sur les yeux.<sup>28</sup> Not only does this encounter overturn the norm of the relationship – Nuit-d'Ambre having noticed Nelly for her buttocks and admitted to her that he mainly likes her for them – but, by linking Nelly's image to the unconfined, infinite sky, it also represents Nelly's attempt to liberate herself from the pre-determined, myth-inspired picture Nuit-d'Ambre had striven to fit her into. In this picture, Goya's *Saturn*, Cronus' victim is seen from behind and indeed his victim's head is already devoured. Nuit-d'Ambre's ignorance of Nelly's eye colour shows how closely he had identified her with the painting, and that there was no room for Nelly's reality within the Cronus narrative. When she reveals her eyes, she asserts their very existence, erasing Demeter's name from her life, and opening her own name to the varied inscriptions it held and which Nuit-d'Ambre's gaze denied.

At the end of the novel, after still graver consequences of Nuit-d'Ambre's blind obedience to the narratives, mythological and otherwise, that he has set upon his life, he too is visited by a nocturnal stranger with whom he wrestles. Nuit-d'Ambre resists valiantly, but is vanquished in the end:

‘Le jour va se lever, fit l'autre, il faut maintenant en finir’, et, disant cela, il empoigna d'une main les deux bras de Nuit-d'Ambre-Vent-de-Feu qu'il lui tordit derrière le dos, et de l'autre main il lui saisit la tête par les cheveux. Alors il l'embrassa sur les yeux. Nuit-d'Ambre vacilla, frappé soudain par un violent sommeil, et s'effondra doucement sur le sol.<sup>29</sup>

When Nuit-d'Ambre awakes, his mysterious visitor has vanished. Jacob's battle with the mysterious man in Genesis 32 ends with the man seeing ‘that he did not prevail’, then striking

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<sup>28</sup> *Nuit-d'Ambre*, p. 208.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 402-03.

Jacob's hip, such that he will thereafter walk with a limp.<sup>30</sup> Germain's transposition of the myth into her narrative makes it somewhat harder to decide who 'won' the battle, whereas the text of Genesis strongly implies that the man sought, and failed, to defeat Jacob, even though in both texts the mysterious opponent is able to dictate the outcome of the encounter.<sup>31</sup> *Nuit-d'Ambre* also leaves his encounter with a kind of handicap. The stranger that he encounters kisses his eyes rather than striking his hip, already suggesting a more positive outcome. Indeed, the character leaves the encounter unable to see colour, which results in an enhanced perception of the world around him. He is conscious now of the grain of things, their texture, their incompleteness:

il sentait chaque fois le grain du silence en eux comme on éprouve le grain d'un papier. Comme on caresse la peau de quelqu'un. Et il sentait cela avec une telle acuité qu'il en était bouleversé. Pareillement tout lui semblait inachevé, – paysages et visages étaient semblables à des lavis et des esquisses. Ils se montraient à lui dans un inachèvement qui les rendait tout à la fois plus fragiles et infiniment plus étonnants.<sup>32</sup>

The result, then, of the reenactment of the mythical tale of Jacob's fight with the angel is opposite to the effect of Cronus' story within the novel. Where the latter provided the source for an inflexible model that *Nuit-d'Ambre* imitated criminally, the former is one of the last acts in a process of reconciliation with the world. In other words, the encounter with the mysterious visitor turns *Nuit-d'Ambre* from a novel with mythological influences into a mythical tale in its own right, perhaps with a goal of encouraging certain behaviour among its readers. But this myth is not a sanitized version: where the Socrates we see in the *Republic* would censor the violence and treachery of the old myths, leaving model tales of good behaviour, in Germain's novel we see a tale of a child and young adult with no moral compass, but we as readers are asked to accept his reconciliation, one that comes about through an acceptance of the incompleteness of

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<sup>30</sup> Genesis 32. 25, New Revised Standard Version.

<sup>31</sup> The epigraph to *Nuit-d'Ambre* omits verse 25, the one where the man states that he is not prevailing (p. 13).

<sup>32</sup> *Nuit-d'Ambre*, pp. 404-05.

objects, from texts and artworks to human faces, landscapes, ideas, and emotions. The scriptural narrative helps to undo the Greek narrative, but one cannot see a simple triumph of one over the other, or of monotheism over polytheism. If Jacob's story plays a more significant role in the novel, its reenactment leads Nuit-d'Ambre to perceive the incompleteness in the world. This incompleteness, already announced by the inadequacy of names in the novels, suggests that even the Genesis story is full of gaps. The new myth that Germain's novel creates is just as incomplete, and thus requires its hearer to be attentive to its silences, to its gaps, to that which it leaves unsaid; for instance, the name of Jacob's interlocutor or the given name of the patriarch Péniel. It is impossible to set mythical texts as models for ethical action in a social or political setting, whether or not they be sanitized or straightened; the silences they carry make them into something far more complex than didactic narratives. Hence, the narrative summons the reader or hearer to strive to attain a perception that is conscious both of its own incompleteness and the incompleteness of its object.