



LOVING 2

Bruno Lemoine

Translated from French by Colin Keaveney

“Tell them that I love my wife.”

Richard Loving

–...

And, of course, other borders will emerge, other kings, other gods and other laws. Bustling cities will become cemeteries once epidemics have laid mankind low. Dispersed peoples will speak the languages of civilisations that have disappeared in the wake of fiery cataclysms and torrential floods. Libraries will be looted, statues and monuments will be brought down by revolutions that will usher in either a new and longed-for world or an era of terrible suffering. Maps will be redrawn because of climatic changes unforeseen by prophets, or due to invasions that will be celebrated in chronicles and stories. The numbers used by mathematicians, as well as calendars, will give way to other mathematical systems, other ways of organising time. Species, man-made or otherwise, will evolve and decline; man himself will evolve and decline, and his entire body and physical appearance will evolve and decline accordingly...

It was evening and my master was sitting in his office contemplating a strange sculpture of an apparently naked anthropoid being located a few feet away from him: a head, two arms, only two legs, attached to a torso with several breasts.

– You were reading, master?

The fluid that flowed through us had been suffused with a soft, pink and golden hue by the light of the day; its flow had experienced little in the way of agitation, just enough to impart a slight redness to the skin of some among us.

– You are late...

I pretended not to have heard him. The anthropoid sculpture opposite my master was beginning to make me feel uncomfortable...

– What are you looking at, master?

– Do you mean the statue in my office? he asked.

– Yes.

– What do you see, Narciso? Can you tell me what kind of body the artist was trying to depict?

– I don't know... a monster, perhaps.

– A monster? Are you sure? Well, if it's a monster, what sort of monster is it?

– I don't know, master.

– No, Narciso, replied my master, it is not a monster. What you see before you is an ancient Greek goddess that an archaeologist friend of mine came by and gave to me today. She is very beautiful, isn't she?

– Beautiful? I said, astonished.

I began to have serious doubts about his taste in art.

– Yes, you are looking at the goddess Artemis.

– And you are saying that people considered this Artemis to be beautiful?

My master noticed my faces frowning in disgust and began to laugh.

– My archaeologist friend found her off the Atlantic coast, at a place where, four thousand years ago, there existed a country called France. Its inhabitants had become accustomed to collecting the remains of the past, including those of Greek Civilisation.

– So, it's not one of their goddesses?

– No. The inhabitants of France had been without gods or goddesses for a long time, as far as we know.

– And they enjoyed having such a statue in their homes!

– What do you find so distasteful about this statue, Narciso? he asked me.

So sure was I that no one could possibly admire such a work that I was convinced that my master was making fun of me. And, anyway, could one even speak of this as a "work"?

– Well, I said, a little sheepishly, it's obvious...

– What is obvious, Narciso? Tell me.

– Well, in most cases our sculptors create bodies with several limbs, for example. This one has only four, and the whole thing is far too symmetrical to be pleasing. Besides, the goddess has only one face, and her eyes, mouth and nose are equidistant from one another, as if a small child had decided to carve one of her faces, without even discussing it with his parents.

My master appeared dismayed by what I had said.

– What do you know about the people who lived four thousand years ago, Narciso, he asked me.

– Nothing, I said.

The question struck me as absurd. Why would I be interested in people who lived thousands of years ago?

– Nothing?

– At least I know enough to be able to tell that such a portrayal of a human being could not possibly be found pleasing, neither today nor in their time. The only thing that might be considered remotely interesting and different in this case are the multiple bosoms ringing Artemis's torso.

– You mean her breasts? This remark irritated me:

– Yes, her multiple breasts, her bosoms... Why would anyone choose to have breasts like that...? You're not going to tell me that back then people didn't choose their bodies!

– Yes, I am, my master said scornfully. At that time, no one chose their body as we do. It would not even have occurred to anyone that they might be able to choose, that would have been beyond comprehension. What on earth did you learn at school!

I suddenly felt confused. My lack of knowledge about matters that seemed obvious to him had made him quite angry. In the space of a few seconds, I had become an ignoramus in his eyes. This level of ignorance seemed almost unthinkable to him.

– They didn't choose? I asked, genuinely astonished.

– Nobody chose, nobody! The only thing that appeared monstrous to people back then was precisely what you find beautiful. Women, whether Greek goddesses or not, had only two breasts. The reason why Artemis had such generous breasts is that she was the goddess of the fecundity.

My master stared at me for a long moment, then asked.

– You also probably think that the gods made you in their image, don't you?

I tried to imagine what our ancestors and their culture were like. What was it like to live for women and men who were not able to shape this or that organ on their body as they wished, according to the needs of the day or to suit the circumstances? How could such a biological phenomenon possibly have existed: a being, a creature incapable of being – that had never been! – protean... just like a stone or a tree, or even certain types of birds flying over the ultrafluid waters? Many animals around us still lived in this way. They were creatures with an extremely simple metabolism,

whose genetic and molecular tissue was much more sluggish, less evanescent, lively and intelligent than ours. The evolution of these species seemed to have come to a halt, or else it took centuries to be noticeable. We had learned to regard them as nothing more than lesser and weaker creatures; we knew they existed, but we paid no attention to them.

My master continued:

– There was a time, long before the great Mutation, when the human body did not change, and if it did change, it was in spite of itself, through accident, illness or old age. Every man thus resembled his neighbour, and he would not have wanted it to be otherwise for anything in the world. Both language and culture reflected this attitude. Each country might have a different language and culture from that of its neighbour, but they all looked the same: every item, every being, every component had to remain the same, just like this Artemis figure who has survived down through the ages. Our ancestors were fundamentally in search of something immutable and as immovable as a statue of a goddess, and they would never have wished to blend in with the elements: water and ether seemed to them less suitable for conveying the aspirations of a people than stone or marble.

They used writing to preserve their language, their history and their science, and they sought to spread their culture to other cities and other peoples whom they often enslaved and colonised; thus France sought to expand her dominion over all the seas of the world, as other nations had done before and would do after. The Greeks, from whom this statue comes down to us, had done the same a thousand years before them, and, like the Greeks, the French also wished to be remembered.

Then, partly because of their immoderation, partly because of natural disasters, the ice caps, which were at the two poles of the Earth, melted, and water covered two-thirds of our planet. Volcanoes and furnaces also erupted from the primordial magma; some of our ancestors tried to conquer space to escape death, and they were stranded on an exoplanet that became their tomb. The globe split open, like the fruit of the

pomegranate tree, and the world was engulfed and ravaged by clouds of fire and flames. A new era dawned and, with it, new species appeared or changed. Humans were themselves forced to change. They developed gills that allowed them to live in either the open air or in the water, but some of them remained what they had been before what they dubbed the “Age of Chaos”. They were like this figure of Artemis before you: a body topped by a head, the arms at the top of the torso and the legs at the bottom, but, unlike her, their chests had only two breasts.

However, the breasts of the females were larger and more ample than the teats of the males. They too thought, like you, that they were made in the image of the gods. Why should they have thought otherwise, right? Who was going to contradict them? No one. The world that had preceded them was necessarily the same as the one they knew from their childhood, and was bound to remain so until the end of time.

Groups, which had been scattered all over the face of the earth, came together and they did what humans had done before the time of Chaos: they cleared vast swathes of land for farming, they domesticated animals and they founded cities and nations. Then the wars resumed, crueller and more terrible than they had been in the past, and nuclear fire was used again, until agreements and treaties were signed. The world became a federation of united states, as had once been the case on the lost continents of Europe and America, and each state had its own governor, parliaments and courts. The old race of humans ruled over the new human races that they had enslaved, just as, before the time of Chaos, human dignity was determined by the colour of people’s skin or their place of birth.

At this point, my master paused for a moment, before adding:

– Two thousand years ago, the federal government, despite the fact that it was made up exclusively of old humans, passed laws abolishing slavery on our planet. A new world war ensued, in which all the human races suffered, and when the war ended, slavery had apparently been eliminated. It was an incredible period, one which has gone down in history as “The Great Reconstruction”; old and new humans lived in

harmony. Schools were built, in which children of both cultures – gilled and non-gilled alike – studied, and something extraordinary occurred: new women and men with scaly skin were granted important positions all across the world.

But the former slaveholders felt differently, and in the midst of an economic crisis, they managed to make their voice heard at the federal level, until the newly elected President of the World let them have their way. This was followed by a period of segregation that lasted several decades. Many of our ancestors, those who were able to live both on land and in the water, realising that it was impossible for them to live in the open air, settled on the seabed, close to shore.

The story might have ended there. After all, we too choose the people with whom we wish to associate. Who are we to criticise the tastes and preferences of our ancestors? Each to their own: the birds in the sky and the fish in the water; and besides, there’s plenty of room in the sea and on land, right Narciso?

I nodded my head in agreement, only too happy that my master had decided to turn his attention back to me after this history lesson. I must admit that I had been somewhat taken aback by what he had said. How could I have been so unaware of the differences between our ancestors and ourselves? I had, of course, learnt a lot in the space of a few minutes, but, as usual, my teacher had embarked on a lecture without even bothering to see if I was following him.

– Narciso, he asked me suddenly, could you imagine choosing Artemis as a partner?

– No, I said, without even giving it a second’s thought. Master, you are mocking me...

But my master pressed on in the same vein:

– Try to put our culture out of your mind for a moment, Narciso, and imagine that you are living in the midst of households with men and

women who resemble this Greek goddess. Imagine that you had always lived among them since you were a child. He pointed to the statue:

– This is Artemis, Narciso, ARTEMIS! You used to play with her on the beach when you were little. You grew up with her, you know her parents and her family. So, now, given all this, can you not imagine that she might be the most beautiful woman in the world? Can't you imagine wanting to live with her under the same roof for the rest of your life?

– It's still abstract, master, I said, uncomfortably.

– Yes or no, Narciso! he bellowed, before immediately adding more calmly: The question is really quite simple. In such circumstances, is it likely that you might take Artemis as your wife?

– Yes! I said. I can certainly see how such a woman might appeal to me, but it's still something of an academic exercise.

– Yes, Narciso! he shot back. Regardless of whether it's an academic exercise or not, you said yes! You see, love has always defied art and the barriers set up by mankind. Love even moves through water, air, fire and earth faster and more powerfully than we can. This statue, which seems monstrous to you at present, this Artemis, it is possible for you to picture living with her!

I burst out laughing at my master's enthusiasm.

– So what if it is? What are you getting at?

– So what if it is? Since you love her and she loves you, you would wish, as adults, to start a family together, wouldn't you?

– Yes, that is within the realm of possibility...

– And would your own family and relatives accept such a decision?

– I hope not! I exclaimed.

– You hope not?

– What do you want me to say, master?

– The following: that, since love is beyond your understanding and since it is, like this statue, a god or a goddess, it would lead you further than you might have otherwise gone. In order to marry her, you would have to travel to the neighbouring state, which happens to allow marriage between old and new humans; and then you would simply return home as though nothing had happened.

– Yes, that's right.

– That's right, but your neighbours wouldn't see it that way, Narciso. A member of the old human race – because you belong to this old race, the one that existed before the Age of Chaos –, a man like you marrying a fish, an amphibian that lives in the water, imagine! How could you? Nobody would be able to tolerate what you had done, Narciso! So, someone would report your marriage and both of you, Artemis and you, would be put in jail pending your trial.

– I too can understand how such a union might infuriate people close to us, master, I replied.

– Quite right, Narciso, we can all easily understand how scandalous such a union would be! When the trial comes around, the lawyer representing you asks you to take the stand and declare that you are both guilty, in order to receive a reduced sentence. After all, you have to admit that what you and she are up to is unnatural. Would you yourself be happy if one of your brothers married such a woman?

– I see what you are getting at, master, I said.

– So, the judge sentences you both to prison, unless of course you leave the state where you have been living for the past twenty-five years. So, you leave: you have no choice but to accept the judge's sentence and pack

up your belongings. You now live in a neighbouring state, which allows mixed marriages, and you have three children... What would you do then? he added, giving me a searching look.

– Nothing, I replied. I would work, raise my children and I live with my wife.

– Of course you would. You would go on living as if nothing had happened, as if all this hadn't happened. After all, if a certain section of the population is disturbed by your relationship, that's their problem. So, you would live like that, far from your own people and the country into which you were born: you would resume working as a carpenter, with Artemis taking care of the house and the children.

But Artemis, your wife, does not see things the same way; any more, for that matter, than many fish-women who, like her, live all across our planet. For several years, her race has been getting organised, fighting doggedly to have its rights upheld. Demonstrations, sit-ins and boycotts are also taking place all over the world, and these demonstrations and protests have reached such proportions that a federal president has had to promise to champion their cause, the cause of the new humans. From now on, your wife and fish like her no longer have to put up with being second-class citizens; they are no longer compelled to live in the seas on the grounds that the Earth is the preserve of the old race of humans.

– It's only fair, I murmured.

– It's only fair, right? But it still bothers you. As far as you are concerned, every man has the right to marry the woman he loves. Why should we have to fight for what is natural? It makes no sense whatsoever. I began laughing. With his story, my master had managed to make me understand that what I had previously considered natural was not as obvious as I had thought. I now found myself having to defend a relationship that minutes before I had found unthinkable.

– Your wife now writes to the President of the World.

– More power to her!

– Yes, but get this: he writes back! The most powerful man in the world writes to her and tells her that she needs to request that her case be heard by the Supreme Court, so that the judge's decision, in the state she comes from, can be overturned.

After such a decision by the most important court in the world, it would no longer be possible to prohibit mixed marriages, and it is your marriage that has been chosen to bring this historic event about. Congratulations, Narciso! It's an important milestone, isn't it? So, what do you do, Narciso?

– Nothing. If my wife wants us to move back to where we came from, all I can do is support her in her efforts.

– Precisely. You respect Artemis's decision. Naturally, you believe that your children have the right to live where your parents and family live. But, in your opinion, this whole thing has gone too far, hasn't it? he asked me.

– Yes, master, this whole thing has gone too far, I replied ironically. I'm glad you realise that!

He fixed me with a stare.

– Why, he asked, why do you think it has gone too far?

– Listen, I realise that what I have been subjected to is unfair, but going as far as to appeal to the supreme ruler so that I can go back to where I was born is quite a step. Why should my story be of concern to the rest of the world? Because that is the point here: the whole world is now looking at me, like you are, staring at me; I'm the one who is going to have to appear before the Supreme Court with Artemis. Why should I yet again have to go and make public statements about tastes and choices that are entirely my own business and that do not impinge on anyone's life or property?

– To be summoned by the Supreme Court to defend one’s rights is a great honour, Narciso. People would find it hard to understand why you or your wife would refuse to appear before the Court! he replied reproachfully.

– I thought previously that I had the choice to love whomever I wished, and you have made it clear that this is not the case. I am not merely the image that I see reflected in a mirror, you have shown me, because what I find natural or beautiful in my reflection is what is, first and foremost, in accordance with the culture to which I belong; the same goes for the women and men that I find beautiful, natural or that I might fall in love with. So now, in order for us to no longer be banished from the place of our birth, I and my wife have to tell the whole world that we have been married, that she and I love each other in spite of what men find beautiful or ugly, natural or unnatural! No, I said, if I were asked to plead my case before the whole of humanity, I wouldn’t do it, because that, too, is unfair. We should not have to justify our personal choices! And Artemis wouldn’t do it either, because she would know that I’m right on this point!

– Good, added my master, I respect your choice. So, what should the Supreme Court know about you and your wife? What would you like to say in your defence, since you refuse to go to the Supreme Court?

– Tell them that I love my wife, I answered. It’s the only argument I could possibly make if I were in such a situation, and it’s the only argument that makes sense.

– That’s right, it is the only argument worth making, Narciso, yelled my master excitedly. Indeed, it’s so simple and obvious that are still wondering to this day why humans ever fought over it! And it is also the statement that one particular member of the old human race chose to make, in absentia, in defence of his marriage to a new woman: “Tell them that I love my wife.” That’s all he said! Historians believe that he was called Richard Loving. Since that day, old men and new women have been able to marry freely and start a family. The reason why can do so today is

also in part because of this Richard Loving, whose marriage was referred to the Supreme Court which, as a result, allowed mixed marriages thereafter!

Finally, my master stopped for a moment to catch his breath.

– It is late, Narciso, the lesson is over. I am truly delighted with your answers! And, as a reward tonight, I would like to give you the statue of Artemis, in the hope that our little thought experiment has allowed you to be able to see and admire it, as the inhabitants of ancient Greece did. Take Artemis, Narciso, she belongs to you. You are more worthy than I am to take care of her now. Love her as Richard Loving loved his wife! So, I reluctantly took my leave, together with the statue. As I made my way home, with Artemis’s heavy body breaking my spines and the evening waves roaring deafeningly through the illuminated fluid of the stars, I railed against my master’s ironic outlook and his poisoned gift. This statue has now been in my home for twenty years. Master died two years ago, and I don’t know why I still keep his present. The fact that people once found Artemis beautiful still seems like a riddle to me today. Look at her; look at Artemis and the multiple bosoms that ring her chest. How could anyone possibly love such a figure, I ask you! Can anyone explain to me how anyone could love this goddess from a far-distant past? Anyone? If you are capable of giving me a convincing answer, I will give her to you; I will give you Artemis on the spot.