



VIRGILIO PIÑERA THE ACTÆON CASE

1944

translated by MARK SCHAFFER

The gentleman in the yellow hat approached me to say: "Would you care to form a part of the chain...?" And added, without any transition: "You know, the chain of Actæon...?"

"Is it possible...?" I responded. "The chain of Actæon really exists?"

"Yes," he answered coolly, "but it's far more important to specify the conditions, the two conditions of the Actæon case." Unable to contain myself, I unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt and fixed my gaze on his chest.

"Yes," he repeated, "the two conditions of the Actæon case. The first (he in turn extended his right hand and opened my shirt halfway), the first is that the myth of Actæon may recur anywhere." I lightly sunk the nails of my thumb and the smallest finger into his flesh.

"Much has been said about Greece with regards to the Actæon case," he continued, "but believe me (and here he also sunk his thumb and fingernails lightly into the flesh of my breast), even here in Cuba or Cuzco or any other part of the world, the Actæon case may occur with total propriety." Slightly increasing the pressure of my nails, I responded: well then, your chain is going to be enormously important."

"Of course," he answered, "of course it will. Everything depends, however, on the capacity of the aspirant to the chain of Actæon," (and, as he said this, he increased the force of his grip even more). Immediately he add-

ed, as if possessed by a new boldness: "But I believe you possess the necessary qualities..." I must have let out a moan, very soft, but his ears picked it up, for he said to me—nearly shouting— "The second condition (I looked at his nails digging into my breast, but could no longer see them, a fact which I later attributed to the extraordinary increase in the volume of his voice), the second condition is that it isn't known, if it's possible to mark, to delimit, specify, indicate, to fix (and all of those verbs seemed like the powerful blasts of a train whistle) where Actæon ends and his dogs begin."

"But," I objected weakly, "then isn't Actæon a victim?"

"Absolutely not, sir, absolutely not." He was spraying great globs of saliva on my face, on my jacket. The dogs could just as well be the victims as the victimizers, and in this case, you know what Actæon could also be." Excited by that stupendous revelation, I couldn't contain myself, but unbuttoned the rest of his shirt buttons, and pressed my other hand to his breast. "Oh! You free me from such a weight!" I cried. "You lift such a weight from my breast!"

He looked down at my breast, where he had likewise placed a free hand, and said to me, matching words to action:

"Of course, if it's so easy; if, after understanding it, it's so easy..." The characteristic sound of hands scratching around in the dirt could be heard. "It's so easy," he said (and his voice was now a melisma). "Imagine the scene: the dogs discover Actæon... yes, they discover him as I've discovered you; Actæon, seeing them, is filled with savage joy; the dogs ardently desire that Actæon escape; the dogs believe that it would be best for Actæon to be ripped to shreds; and, do you know...?" (here he was filled with a deep dismay, but I quickly reanimated him by burying my two hands up to my wrists in his chest). "Thank you! thank you!" he said to me in his thread of voice, "the dogs know perfectly well that they would remain in an inferior position with respect to Actæon; yes" (and I inspired him with confidence by sinking my nails deeper and deeper into his chest), "yes, in this unrewarded, almost ridiculous position, if they want..."

"Excuse me," I said. "Excuse me for interrupting" (and now my voice called to mind the same whistle blasts he let out), "but you live convinced" (I said this while covering him all the while with a downpour of saliva) "that the dogs will not stand for this disgrace, for this ominous condition that is victory. No! No! Somehow, sir," I was shouting, "they will not remain, rest assured, be convinced of that; I assure you, believe me, those dogs will be devoured as well... by Actæon!"

At this point, I couldn't say who pronounced the last words, for, as we matched words to action, our hands were penetrating the deepest regions of our respective chests, and as we matched action to words (it would have been impossible to distinguish between one and the other: my voice corresponding to his action, his action to my voice), we were becoming a single mass, a single mound, a single elevation, a single, unending chain.