

## Marina Warner

Marina Warner, whose illustrious career has distinguished her around the world as a most acclaimed scholar on myth, symbolism, and fairy tales, accepted a blind date to ruminate on Joan's work. Among the fascinating novels, historical and critical writings Marina has produced are several reflections on artists. Although new to Joan's work, her own investigations nicely dovetail with those of the artist. The result is a journey to the navel of the world, an ancient source.



Well, Aran Island, Ireland

PHOTO: JOAN JONAS



Omphalos, Roman copy of Greek original, Museum of Delphi, Greece

## On Oracles & Treacle: Some Reflections of the Art of Joan Jonas

**'I know the grains of sand on the beach and measure the sea;  
I understand the speech of the dumb and hear the voiceless.'**<sup>1</sup>

The Pythia at Delphi, c. 600 B.C.

**'The performer sees herself as a medium:  
information passes through.'**

Joan Jonas, 1993<sup>2</sup>

I.

At Delphi, the oracle spoke with a double tongue and her enigmas were difficult to untie before fate revealed the plots they encrypted; by then, it was too late. The oracle told Croesus that if he went to war with Persia he would bring about the fall of a great kingdom. He was overjoyed and heaped more presents on the temple sanctuary, huge vessels and sculptures in precious metals, to thank the god, who was on his side and had said so through his medium, the Pythia. She was the priestess who sat in the *adyton*, the forbidden and hidden cell under the temple, and prophesied in answer to the questions put to her. Croesus did not understand that she was warning him he would destroy his own kingdom. And so he did. But sometimes the oracle spoke so clearly her words continue to strike a pure, ringing note: *Gnothi seauton* (*Know yourself*), she replied when asked what was the greatest good a human being should strive for.

I was visiting Delphi, and thinking of Joan Jonas, and of her work, of her riddling stories and enigmatic performances. She assembles fragments; she reflects on vision and its illusions and its revelations; she mediates compressed, resonant images that form part of stories. As she draws and erases the drawing from the slate,

then draws again, she summons presences that evanesce and drop away, then materialize again and are bodied forth; as she creates musical patterns, and traces shapes and even plots with dance and gesture, she is following a cluster of secrets that we can intimate as we become absorbed in her performance. She struggles to know herself, scrutinizing her face and body for clues and exploring the way the world experiences that self back in echoes, images and reflections. In Jonas' film *Volcano Saga*, the seer says, "Tell me your dreams," and many of her performances convey that inward, skewed atmosphere of dream experience. It seems prophetic that Joan Jonas' grandmother, traveling in Egypt at the beginning of the last century, took a photograph of the Sphinx. Joan's stepfather liked conjuring, she has said, and she makes magic shows in his footsteps. There always tugs at us, while we watch her performances, a growing fascination with what lies beneath, with where and when the dream will open up its meanings, like those the young seeker tells the seer submerged in the healing sulphur springs in *Volcano Saga*.

But Joan Jonas' relationship to expression is not exactly Delphic, and invoking oracles needs to be nuanced here, for she provokes further thought rather than providing answers. She deepens the strangeness of fairytale and its conventions when she breaks into them and exposes their elements, as with *The Juniper Tree* in 1976. In the 1979 piece *Upside Down and Backwards*, she cuts, intercuts and reverses the plot flow of *The Frog Prince* and *The Boy Who Set Out To Discover Fear*, then recites them in an affectless monotone. This treatment effectively strips them of consolation. To "know yourself" through fairy tales does not mean finding