5. Preserved in the Collegiate Church of San Isidoro in León is an eleventh-century silver reliquary, on whose sides scenes from the book of Genesis are sculpted in relief. One of the panels shows Adam and Eve shortly before their expulsion from Eden. According to the biblical narrative, they have just realized that they are naked and have covered their shame with fig leaves, held by their left hands. Before them stands their vexed creator, wrapped in a sort of toga, and making an inquisitive gesture to-

ward them with his right hand (which is clarified by the caption, "Dixit Dominus Adam ubi es" [God said to Adam, Where art thou?] [Gen. 3:9]). This gesture is mirrored by the right hands of the culprits, as they childishly attempt to make excuses for themselves: Adam points at Eve, and Eve points at the serpent. The next scene, which particularly interests us, illustrates the verse from Genesis 3:21: "Et fecit Dominus Deus Adam et mulieri eius tunicas pelliceas et, induit eos" (And God made for Adam and for his wife tunics of skins, and clothed them). The unknown artist represents Adam already dressed, with a posture revealing great sadness; but, with delightful inventiveness, he depicts Eve with her legs still naked, while the Lord appears to be putting the tunic on her by force. The woman, whose face we can just barely see above the neckline of the dress, resists this divine violence with all her might; this can be proved beyond all doubt not only by the unnatural torsion of her legs and the grimace of her
squin dissenting eyes but also by the gesture of her right hand, which desperately grasps at God’s garment.

Why does Eve not want to wear her “fur coat”? Why does she want to remain naked (it appears that she has either taken the fig leaf off or that, in the vehemence of the scuffle, she has lost it)? Of course, an ancient tradition, which can be traced back to Saint Nilus, Theodoret of Cyrus, and Jerome, conceives of garments made from animal skins—the Septuagint’s chitonai dermatinoi—as a symbol of death (indeed, pelliccia, the Italian word for fur coat, which maintains a sinful connotation up to this day, derives from tunicae pelliciae, the Vulgate’s rendering of the same phrase). This is the reason why, after baptism, those tunics of skins are replaced by a garment made of white linen (“When, ready for the clothes of Christ, we have taken off our tunics of skins,” Jerome writes, “we will then put on linen clothing, which has nothing to do with death, but is wholly white, so that, after having been baptized, we can gird our loins in truth”). Other authors, like John Chrysostom and Augustine, insist instead on the literal meaning of the episode. And it is probable that neither the maker of the reliquary nor its buyers intended to give a particular significance to Eve’s gesture. Yet this episode acquires its proper sense only if we remember that this is the last moment of the couple’s life in earthly Paradise, the last moment when our progenitors could still be naked, before being clothed in animal skins and expelled from Paradise forever. If this is indeed the case, then the slim, silvery figure that desperately resists being clothed is an extraordinary symbol of femininity. This woman is the tenacious custodian of paradisiacal nudity.