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Eleni and Her Rhapsodists

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THE STORY OF Helen of Troy, half-divine daughter of Zeus and Leda whose kidnapping would send a fiery-haired tyrant on a quest to destroy a city and whose beauty would eventually entice a young German professor with the Devil on his side, has—like many of her compatriots’—been left to the hands of posterity to make of her as they will. Perhaps then it is fitting that the people who claim their rights as descendants should be so demanding in their appropriation of her. Of the many artists whose visions and revisions of the story of Sparta’s first lady have peopled this century, few outside Greece know those by George Seferis and Yiannis Ritsos. We might say that the not-so-subtle goal of this piece is to fill, if in its own modest way, such an unfortunate lacuna.

To begin with the obvious: both poets have deigned to name at least one of their poems “Eleni,” which is the modern Greek variant of Helen. To continue with the even more obvious: both have chosen to use this name for a purpose that we can most succinctly classify as deliberate. And though both utilize her story in different ways, something common to each is present. As is often the case when a writer takes to task a myth for his or her own purposes, what surfaces is nothing if not a kind of hubristic humility: averse to relying on a commonly accepted story, yet unwilling to tamper with what makes said story recognizable. In the case of the “Elenis” of Seferis and Ritsos, Helen of Troy is transformed into an idea gone wrong, yet consistently repeated through time. For hers of course is the history of war, the history of the rationale those who wage war use to justify war; hers is the story that returns in a cycle of winning words that nonetheless proves useless in rewriting the past but that may, perhaps, prove useful in comprehending the present.

The “Eleni” of George Seferis works from a different story than the one Homer recounts. The poem is based on Euripides’ eponymous tragedy, which assumes that Helen was never at Troy but spirited off by Hermes to sit out the war at the Egyptian court of Proteus. “I never went to Troy,” Euripides’ Helen says in Seferis’ carefully-placed epigraph, “it was a phantom.” “Could all this have been for nothing then?” asks Seferis’ speaker. Was it “all for an empty tunic?” Who better to sing the bitterness of such subterfuge than Teucer? Half-brother to Ajax, blamed for this brother’s suicide after the loss of Achilles’ armor to that wily Odysseus, Teucer would receive no sympathy from his father Telamon for the loss of one so great as Ajax. So he was banished from his home island of Salamis, and it was decreed by Apollo that he make his new home in Cyprus. Forced on him by the gods, Cyprus becomes the place where he must somehow find a way to escape the past and the guilt and all their unfortunate associations.

Seferis’ poem opens with a simple haunting refrain: “The nightingales won’t let you sleep in Platres.” This “Blind voice,” as it is called, echoing across Cyprus’ mountainous interior, functions as the penetrating reminder that initiates the remembrances of the poem. As the nightingales continue their warbling, Teucer’s taste for his past and for his fate is whetted, prompting him back to the banks of the Scamander where his troubles began, back to the root of everything that brought him to Cyprus in the first place, to none other than Helen. For Teucer has no qualms about tying his pains back to that infamous woman, the one with the “Breasts girded high” and the “sun in her hair”, whose stature composed of “shadows and smiles everywhere” seems to settle in Teucer’s mind in that space where desire and bitterness meet.

But if she was never there, how then can he be so confident of his description of her, as the one with “the skin alive, and her eyes / with the large eyelids?” And even if she had been at Troy? Few of the soldiers ever got to see the cause of all their heartache. Would Telamon’s modest son have ever ap-

proached Sparta's great beauty? Seferis imagines his Teucer imagining his own Helen, an immaculate quasi-goddess of myth, an image of a woman that Ritsos will enliven in a much different light. Here though she is the woman with the living skin and the eyes: "And the eyes," Teucer recalls, the ones "with the large eyelids." Interesting to note the part of her eyes that he describes, not their color, nothing more than the lids. Her eyes are in a way left blank, the lids enclosing them the only thing Teucer can recall, as though perhaps he had never seen anything less superficial than a facade. Teucer's Eleni is really nothing more than a facade, from the superficiality of the shape of her eyes to the vagueness of her body's "living skin" and sun-filled hair.

Teucer cannot help but admit that this image he had of her was not the real thing. He never actually saw her, and like the many Achaeans who died because of her, his was merely an idea of a legend. He does not, though, choose to transform her physical image into something ugly or negative. He cannot help but absolve her of a guilt she never merited in the first place: "At Troy, nothing: just a phantom image" he says, following this with the stark realization found four lines down: "and for ten whole years we slaughtered ourselves for Eleni." And all for what? he concludes in the poem's final line: "all for an empty tunic, all for an Eleni." Euripides' image from the epigraph is still there, but now she is no longer Eleni but "an Eleni." Her singularity now but another phantom, she becomes indefinite, universal, perhaps even a lesson for posterity—though this is a lesson Teucer believes will only fall on ignorant minds. If this fable is true, the poem wonders in its final stanza whether

in future years some other Teucer . . .
 isn't fated to hear
 messengers coming to tell him
 that so much suffering, so much life,
 went into the abyss
 all for an empty tunic, all for an Eleni.

The gods' familiar deceit, an empty tunic. If this is true, he wonders—though of course unable to ever receive an answer.

The “Eleni” of Yannis Ritsos chooses to ground itself in the traditional Homeric story. This woman was most definitely at Troy. But by the time of the poem’s setting, gone is the enchanting figure from the days of the war. Ritsos’ poem meanders through a series of recollections, but his heroine is not a part of some minor warrior’s ossified memory. Here, the memories are her own, invoked in recollection from a place we might generalize—perhaps to our detriment—as modern. The battles of Troy now long since passed, all that remains is an aged woman.

The elderly Eleni keeps in constant communication with the figures of the Trojan War. “What are you up to?” she asks an unspecified fighter, who seems to have just walked into her living room. She proceeds with her questioning:

Do
you still have
that shield on which you had my face engraved? You were so
funny
in your tall helmet with its long tail—so very young

There will be many more moments for Eleni to reference a time when her beauty had inspired such acts of reverence, not just shields adorned with her image but young suitors who recited poetry in her name and soldiers from enemy camps who were too overcome with the awe of her beauty to continue their slaughter. These interchanges between Eleni and her past associations occur frequently throughout the poem, but they always remain grounded by the present moment in a home plagued by the lingering dead. “I don’t know why the dead stay around here without anyone’s / sympathy” she says a bit later on.

I don't know what they want,
wandering around the rooms in their best clothes, their best shoes
polished, immaculate, yet noiselessly as though they never touch
the floor.
They take up space, sprawl wherever they like, in the two rocking
chairs,
down on the floor, or in the bathroom; they forget and leave the
tap dripping;
forget the perfumed bars of soap melting in the water.

Despite their roaming, these nameless dead remain grounded within the house, which forces Eleni to deal with them on a level more appropriate to her present reality. These images then, the wasted water of a dripping tap, and the melting soap, point to the disintegration and wasting away of Eleni herself, reflected in a face grown old, a body turned slack. Whereas the nightingales' song echoes across the whole of Seferis' poem, forming reminders of the past, Ritsos' poem allows its crumbling edifices to build themselves up over and again, jarring Eleni back into the reality of her present circumstances. The warbling of nightingales versus dripping taps. The former seems more appropriate for the most beautiful woman who ever lived. But this is the thing about parts of our pasts that have been denuded of all traces of nostalgia. When they get associated with elements from our current reality, the present-day signifier cannot help but be an innocent pawn to the limitless eternity of all that came before. Isn't this what Ritsos' Eleni means when she muses on what it is about the dead that can be so confounding? What she refers to as "the augmentation of the / unchangeable / and their silent self-sufficiency." Nothing alters more in our minds than that which is fixed forever.

Which is to say, these poems are less about ideas of the past than about the rigid plasticity of such ideas.

And perhaps not a little about the the attractiveness of these ideas too. "In choosing between a thing and an idea," Joseph Brodsky once admitted, "the latter is always to be preferred." I imagine he is not alone in thinking this way. Ritsos' Eleni is a testament to this; for in choosing between

a memory and a memento, who in his right mind would pick some knick-knack over an idea of an experience?

Both poems understand that the past is a worthless model for the present, as Kostas Myrsiades writes in the introduction to his translation of Ritsos' poetry. Both poems, however, also understand that the past is created not simply through memories but through words as well. And what better example of this than Helen of Troy? Hence Seferis' positioning of his Helen as an innocent pawn. Ritsos does something similar, but without absolving Eleni of any complicity in the fabrication of a historical image.

Consider the fourth sentence Ritsos' Eleni utters. First she ushers the reader in, telling him "Yes yes," it is she, and sadly grumbles how no one comes around anymore. Then she makes a curious statement, curious when one considers that the opening of her dialogue utilizes the language of host and guest. It almost sounds like the stock opening lines of an unwelcome visit to someone's great aunt. Then the old woman speaks, and it sounds nothing like the common pleasantries to which one is accustomed. "I'm starting / to forget how to use words. Anyway, words don't matter," she says. Again, consider this line further down: "Words don't come to me on their own now—I search them out as / though I'm translating / from a language I don't know." As though the words did have meaning at one point, but the effect of her age and of her experiences was nothing less than the destruction of her faith in language. The years have progressed; Eleni has forgotten not just words but names as well, i.e., she has lost the ability for words to retain some kind of tangible hold on ideas and images through time.

It seems that over the years this Eleni has come to realize that her entire history has been a well-crafted justification of intentions not always her own, words being the building blocks. As she says:

So, events and things don't have any meaning—the same goes for words although

with words we name, more or less, those things we lack, or which we've never seen—airy, as we say, eternal things—

What are these things then that we lack, these things words are attached to as though a name could ever fill up the space left by absence? In her book on Helen of Troy, Laurie Maguire calls the Queen of Sparta “an absent center,” conspicuously missing from the story she herself initiated. In a way then, Helen of Troy’s role in the myth of the Trojan War is to be a name. A name like any other, and thus an “absent center” for a history that will never fail to tumble to pieces if you dare inspect the structural integrity of the name’s foundation. And yet these names tend to persist, indefatigably on. They are such “airy” things as Ritsos’ Eleni says, “eternal” nonetheless.

In the beginning of Ritsos’ poem, Eleni’s self-awareness seems to emerge as proof of her innocence, much as Helen’s entreaty of innocence to Teucer was in the Seferis poem. She recalls her past, shut up as she was, in her “own Trojan Horse.” One can begin to pity her, a feeling that comes up again four lines down when this poor old woman cannot remember how long ago she lost her husband: “(was it months or years?)” she asks herself. Soon however, it becomes evident that this is not the blameless pawn of Seferis’ poem, nor is she a detached figure from the war but a clear and willing participant in the story of the war, in her own way at least. The long recollection of her walking along the wall while the Achaeans and Trojans fight for her below showcases a starkly different Helen from the old woman we have grown accustomed to in the poem. She places a flower in her hair. She holds one to her breast, to her lips, letting another fall down to where the men were dying. She recollects the battle Paris fought for her:

there I was, beautiful, untouched, experienced,
while my two rivals in love were dueling and the fate of the long
war was being determined—

This is Eleni’s consolatory memory, and it is mired in vanity. She takes pride in her figure perched above the scene,

beautiful as she was, experienced as she was, she looks on with those vacant eyes, “Only her eyes—larger than ever, autocratic, penetrating, vacant” as our unnamed narrator in the opening prose section describes them.

Perhaps though this vacancy is nothing more than a necessary detail, for what more could we expect an onlooker to see peering out from an empty tunic? What more would be believable coming from a character with such a grievous history? Whose indelible connection to the original war of wars provides Ritsos with ample opportunity to parallel his Eleni’s poetic narrative with the poet’s own grievous moment, writing as a persecuted intellectual during the years of the military junta that ruled Greece between 1967 and 1974. In much the same way that the historical moment of Cyprus’ war of independence in the 1950s provides Seferis with a resonant narrative to which to tie the story of the exile of Teucer, who recollects with wonder how a name so easily attaches itself to specious causes like so much thin air. “What a terrible thing,” Ritsos’ Eleni says, “to have named a shadow.”

The exact name is always less important than the act of naming. Because in the end something as inconsequential as an “Eleni,” a “Helen,” never suffices.

This is what Seferis’ and Ritsos’ poems are saying. For to rewrite this character as a shadow—the way Seferis’ empty tunic and Ritsos’ elderly grande dame are but shadows of everything Helen is supposed to be—is to admit that the truth of this myth was always something we were never quite able to get our hands on, the way Marlowe’s face that launched a thousand ships is really just a devil in a dress.

But to conclude that the use of myth in these two poems is about tying the absurdity of warfare and the causes and excuses that we use to explain them to the absurdity of warfare historically and archetypally would be to conclude with a banality. For what would make these poems any different from so many others, from a poem like Auden’s “Shield of Achilles,” for example?

For me the answer to this question is beauty. Even if your interpretation of the Trojan War myth blames the Achaeans' entrance in the war more on Menelaus' wounded vanity or Agamemnon's hubris, the war itself is still indissolubly linked to the idea of beauty, precisely because of Helen's place in the story. This is not just someone's wife we're talking about here. And it's not just that it's a king's wife either. This is the most beautiful woman in the world. A woman whose beauty, whether or not it was dwelled upon to such lengths in the primordial oral beginnings of the myth, has been dwelled upon relentlessly ever since these origins. Perhaps therein lies the relevance, in its *a posteriori* longevity? Or perhaps we make more of her beauty simply because of everything, all the ragged carnage, it supposedly inspired.

Thus the myth asks us to consider the role of beauty in violence, in politics, in the pride of men (and, as Ritsos' poem reminds us, of women too). Which then forces us to ask, what now? Is beauty to be admired but not adored? Regarded but feared? Should we consider the beauty of a woman the way we consider the beauty of a work of art created by a master? As something aspiring to the eternal? As something worth adoring because its creation lies so unbearably beyond our capabilities?

And like all things beyond our reach, we of course cannot help but lean forward and make a grab for it. Isn't this what Teucer's description of her eyelids is? Surely as much as Ritsos' laconic speaker is as well, as she cooperatively accepts her present by defiantly reaching into her past. In both, we have an acknowledgment that one could never adequately describe such beauty, an acknowledgement that nevertheless, one could never resist from attempting to do so. Because who, in the end, doesn't favor an idea? And so attempts are made to wrangle in what this Helen was all about, and in the process, to pretend to be controlling what she represents all along. In much the same way, one would ascribe the cause of something incomprehensibly horrifying to a mere woman, whose beauty and fame was always well within our

control. In much the same way, causes are so limpidly clear well after the events they effected have long since faded into the past.

NOTE

My citations of Seferis deviate slightly from the translation. I keep the original “Eleni” rather than use “Helen.”

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