

from *Repetitions* · Yannis Ritsos

FROM THE ARGONAUT EXPEDITION

Rocky landscapes, adventures, seas, faces, exploits
half real, half dreamt—even the oarsmen
are mentioned by name one after the other. We didn't hold back
anything.

Only, when they were building the ship, above the harbor,
among the trees—it smelled of planed wood and resin, and you
could hear the birds—that night,
while the shipbuilders slept, the Goddess came invisibly in the
moonlight

to fix a piece of oak to the bow from the forest of Dodona,
oak that talked and foretold the future. Later,
during the trip home, on the silt beaches of the great Sandbank,
they were obliged to carry the ship on their shoulders
twelve whole days and nights. Until we even forgot Cyzicus
who was killed through a misunderstanding one stormy night.
And no one of us wondered why they weren't warned
by that piece of wood, sacred wood, from the forest of Dodona.

THE PROTOTYPES

We must never forget the good lessons, he said—those
of Greek art. The heavenly always side by side
with the day-to-day. Next to man: the animal and the object—
a bracelet on the arm of the naked goddess, a flower
fallen to the floor. Remember the fine representations
on our clay pots: the gods alongside birds and animals,
along with the lyre, a hammer, an apple, the box, the pliers;
oh yes, and that poem where the god, when he finishes his work,
removes the bellows from the fire, picks up his tools one by one
and puts them in his silver chest; afterwards, he takes a sponge
and wipes

his face, his hands, his sinewy neck, his hairy chest.
Clean like that, orderly, he goes out in the evening, leaning
on the shoulders of golden young men—the work of his hands
who have strength and thought and voice—he goes out into the street,
grander than all, the lame god, the worker god.

REMINDER

Why do you bother digging into these things (the why of it,
whose fault it was, if it happened this way,
if it could happen like that)—you'll never get to the bottom of
it. It's always the same. Remember Pholus,
the son of Silenus, that night with a young moon out, in his
cave,
after the carnage, standing alone in amazement, wondering, as he
drew an arrow
out of the side of one of the dead: "How could a thing so slight
annihilate these beautiful, huge bodies?" And suddenly
the arrow fell out of his hand, pierced his foot, left him dead
on the spot.
And maybe in your case there wouldn't be a Heracles to arrive
in good time and bury you
so that at least your name might stay linked to his
and with his fourth labor, the best known, that of the Eryman-
thian Boar,
and in a corner somewhere, on an Attic pot, you might find your
figure outlined,
even if a bit pallid, beside the thoughtless hero and Dionysus'
wine jug.

MANLY VALOR

This year the judges were very confused—they didn't know who should win the prizes

(wasn't it just the same in other years?): breathtaking bodies shining naked in the hot sun—and the sweat adding radiance and beauty,

running down to the chin from the temples and to the legs from the belly and chest.

Who was to get the wreath and the ox? That hip, these knees, these thighs?

The judges measure, weigh, touch, subtract. And this sun hits hard—it dazzles your eyes. Would it be better to settle the thing by lot

or vote for a tie?

The marble gives off sparks, the toenails too, the nipples.

Temples throb, buzz. A broken pitcher. The wreath of flowers on the judges' bench

has already withered. And the tethered ox bellows. Twilight comes.

The judges take their time.

Still, the public doesn't show the slightest impatience—people babble silently, as though sad. They recover for a moment, exchange a few words; a forced, incongruous laugh is heard—it dies at once.

Oh, we understood well enough: the perplexity was justified. No matter;

let the other exercises be postponed until tomorrow or let them not be held at all—

Here all the games end.

And without fail—oh yes—the government should publish a new decree: it is forbidden for funeral processions to pass in front of the stadium.

Because this way

death loses its authority and its just proportions—no one pays attention to the dead any longer; and perhaps they will get angry.

Leros, October 19, 1968

THE PRESENT

“Go on down,” they told him. “Don’t be afraid. Coming back up will be glorious.
Your future crystal clear in front of you.” He hesitated.
Still,
he got himself ready in the chapel of Good Luck, passed by the abode
of Forgetfulness and Memory, offered sacrifices
on the tomb of Agamedes, washed himself in the Hercina,
guided by two charming twelve-year-old boys,
rubbed himself down with oil, and went ahead. At the last
minute,
in front of the black mouth of the oracle—the sacred place,
closed off
by an intricately decorated brass railing—he stopped. “No,
no,” he yelled.
“No, no.” He drew back, frightened. He may have remembered
the unfortunate spear-bearer Dimitri, who never came back up.
Of course
they say Apollonius brought up two metal plaques from there. But
he—
what use did he have for Pythagorean verbs, the past and the
future. The present
was preferable, however meager and insignificant. The unknown
was preferable. And suddenly he felt
all the moment’s dazzle. He cut a laurel leaf, bit into it, and
left on the run,
while the admonitions and curses of the priests roared behind
him.

translated by Edmund Keeley