

Herodotus and the Scythians: Images and the Inquiry into the Soul

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Herodotus first began to interest me when I read the following sentence in Professor Leo Strauss's essay, "Liberal Education and Responsibility": "A hundred pages—no, ten pages—of Herodotus introduces us immeasurably better into the mysterious unity of oneness and variety in human things than many volumes written in the spirit predominant in our age."¹ After having studied Herodotus a little, I have been persuaded that Professor Strauss's observation was correct. Unhappily, however, as has happened to Thucydides, Xenophon, Cicero, and almost all the classical authors, Herodotus is no longer regarded as necessary for a proper education. And where previous to the late nineteenth century every educated person would have had some acquaintance with Herodotus, one certainly cannot now assume that to be the case. We have replaced Herodotus with the social sciences, with a consequent

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¹ Leo Strauss, *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern*, 23.

immense loss in the richness of our imagination and understanding. But let us now turn to Herodotus himself.

I.1

Herodotus's only book bears the title, *Herodotus's Histories*.² He has been called the "father of history," but what he meant by "history" is utterly different from what modern historians and we, under the influence of the former, believe history to be. A history is for Herodotus an inquiry. (Note that locution, and how we are forced to speak these days. We have to say, "for such-and-such this means that." The implication is of course that it is one opinion among many, and who knows who is right?) His inquiry turns out to be the attempt to discover the *logos* or argument, or better yet, the intelligibility of that great deed known as the Persian War. (We, on the other hand, tend to think of history in two ways: as the methodologically established facts of the past or as the progress of human enlightenment.) Herodotus's *Histories* is the first book to speak of the difference between the East and the West, between the barbarians and the Hellenes. Herodotus brings forth what is already implicit in Homer and Hesiod, those ordering principles which become known as Western civilization. Central to the understanding of being "Western," as we shall see, is poetry. I am of the opinion that Herodotus's *Inquiries* (the more accurate translation of the Greek word which we usually render as "Histories") is one of the greatest books ever written on the nature of poetry—and that brings us to the topic of this series, the Imagination. One cannot find a term in Herodotus that exactly corresponds to our term, "the imagination." Instead Herodotus speaks of images—of *eikones* or likenesses, and of *agalmata* or images of the gods as contrasted with the likenesses of visible things. The *agalma* is an image, as Shakespeare's Theseus says, which gives us the "form of things unknown."³ It is of course the poet who makes such images or brings them forth in *epos* or speech. (An *epos* is the word which is uttered.) The activity or work of the poet is simply called *poiein*, making or doing.

Now Herodotus's primary concern is not with the making of images as such or that faculty in the soul for such making. Instead he is concerned with the understanding of human nature. His question is, why are the Greeks and barbarians different? That question emerges

² I owe a great deal in the following discussion to Seth Benardete, *Herodotean Inquiries*.

³ Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.1.16.

from the invasion of Greece by Persia, an invasion that was in fact the coming of the rest of mankind against the Greeks. The answer Herodotus finally seems to indicate (for he is not given to authoritative or magisterial pronouncements) is that the Greeks have poetry and the rest of mankind none.

I should explain that the first four books of the *Inquiries* comprise a survey of the principal peoples and lands of the world. The last five books narrate the story of the Persian invasions of Greece: first under Darius, which is turned back at Marathon, and then under Xerxes—the memorable and great battles of the second invasion being Thermopylae, Salamis, and Plataea. In other words, the first four books are an investigation into the natures of the peoples and lands, and the overarching metaphor of this part of the work is earth, or that which is at rest; the last five books are an investigation into these natures as work or in action—the greatest action is war—and the overarching metaphor is water or that which is constantly in motion.

To return: Herodotus sees that only the Greeks have poetry. The Persians have no images; they are the truth-telling and just people who will have nothing to do with illusions. The Egyptians have the sacred instead of the poetic; and the Scythians do not and cannot distinguish between images and that which is being imaged. These are the principal peoples and it would seem that these are the principal possibilities. Poetry, then, is especially Greek, and let us now try to see what this may possibly mean.

I.2

Herodotus begins his inquiry with the question of the causes of the war between the Greeks and the barbarians. The causes are said, by both sides, to be a series of rapes of women: first of Io, then of Europa, Medea, and finally, the greatest one of all, that of Helen. The Persians, the truth-tellers, are the first source for these stories. The Persians conclude, as can only be expected, that the Greeks were finally to blame, because:

The Persians say that they, for their part, made no account of the women carried off from Asia but that the Greeks, because of a Lacedaemonian woman, gathered a great army, came straight to Asia, and destroyed the power of Priam. (I.4)

The inquiry begins with the question of justice, or who is to blame. The Persian account is especially concerned with justice. It is they who wish to trace the causes back until they can fix the blame. The difficulty with the attempt to determine who is to blame may be understood if we ask who was to blame for the Arab-Israeli War. What would the reply be? That it is Israel who is to blame for Joshua took the land away from the Canaanites? Shall we have a new political movement, the Canaanitish Liberation Front?

What is striking is that the Persians cannot understand why the Greeks would go to war for a Lacedaemonian girl. According to the Persians, one goes to war only for serious things, i.e., wealth and power. Moreover, the Persians say, rapes are no doubt unjust and ought not be done, but “to take seriously the avenging of them is the part of fools, as it is the part of sensible men to pay no heed to the matter: clearly, the women would not have been carried off had they no mind to be” (I.4). Only the Greeks would go to war over a woman. Helen is of course the most beautiful woman in the world, and what the Persians cannot understand is the Greek love of the beautiful. The question of Helen becomes central to the inquiry. To see why we need only ask ourselves why it is that Homer chose the Trojan War as his theme? And why did Peisistratus, the tyrant of Athens, then make the Homeric epic the public education of Athens?

Herodotus himself is not interested in the question of justice. What interests him is human happiness as it appears in cities small and large. Cities seem to be necessary for the happiness of human beings; to attain happiness a human being must always be in a city—it is his natural dwelling place. Herodotus therefore abandons the question of justice for that of happiness. The question of justice cannot be answered; that of human happiness can.

But let us examine further who the Persians are and why Herodotus begins with their account of the origins of the war.

I.3

The Persians are first presented to us as truth-tellers (I.1); it is subsequently said that they do not even magnify the exploits of their great founder, Cyrus (I.95). They regard telling a lie as the worst thing (I.138). They therefore do not wish to get into debt because the debtor is

forced to tell lies. (Here we have a recognition that necessity may force us into lying.) Persian truth-telling is based upon the supposition that there is no disproportion between speech and things. They also obviously believe then that they can see truly, see things for what they are. They see truly, speak truly, and act truly. One is tempted to say that they are the most scientific and enlightened of all the peoples. They hate deception because it prevents one from acting in accordance with the natures of things. To repeat: their fundamental assumption is that their opinions correspond with what is natural. They are a people who act and speak entirely in accordance with nature. They believe themselves to be the natural rulers of all human beings; they are the tyrant people. Since only the Greeks appear to be different from the rest of mankind, the attempt to conquer Greece is the last step in the enterprise of universal rule. (Themistocles's judgment of the Persian expedition, stated after the Greek victory at Salamis, expresses what the generality of the Greeks believe: "It is not we who have done the deed but the gods and the heroes, who grudged [or: were envious] that there should be one man to lord it over both Asia and Europe" [VIII.109].)

The Persians say that one ought always to speak the truth, but then they say that only the lawful is to be permitted in speech. For, they believe, if something is forbidden to do, it must also be forbidden in speech. They assume that if what is unlawful is put into speech, it will be done. The reverse is also true: if it is not put into speech, it will not be done. There is a direct correspondence between speech and deed. The fullest expression of this principle occurs when Cambyses, the Persian king, proves that he is not mad by shooting an arrow straight into the heart of a young boy. If he were mad he could not shoot straight, for madness is when one's intentions and actions do not correspond one with the other (III.35).

The Persian dictate that what is unlawful may not be put into speech assumes that the legal and the natural can also be made coextensive one with the other. Thus, the Persians believe that no natural child would ever kill its parents. A forbidden act, parricide, is forbidden by nature itself. The laws of the Persians and the laws of nature are one and the same. Then it can be said that there is no truth or being beyond the lawful. But one cannot but conclude that there is here a very great deception or blindness. The Persian stories, supposedly truthful, conceal

more than the lying stories of the Greeks. The lies of Homer may be more revealing than the Persian truth. Indeed, the first consequence of the claim to speak and see only the truth or the facts is an inability to see things as they are, as we shall illustrate later. The Persians are so clear-sighted that they do not see, for they see clear through.

The second consequence of Persian principle comes to light in the law that forbids private prayers to the gods. To permit only the lawful to be said is to remove the distinction between the public and the private. Everything is made public. The Persians are said to deliberate twice on important issues, once when drunk and once when sober. Drinking assures that what is hidden or private will be revealed. It is a way of removing obstacles between private desire and public law.

Again: what is claimed by the Persians is that the mind can and does correspond perfectly with the natural. Such a statement is the same as saying that word and deed, theory and practice, correspond perfectly one with another. As it is thought, so it is or so it is done. And the reverse also holds: if it is or if it is done, then it must have been thought.

If thought and deed are said to be as one, then what is important is to think correctly. The Persians trust that nature or the things that are can be relied upon to work faithfully upon our senses; our senses accurately perceive what is out there. But what is out there are bodies in motion—bodies with no qualities. The Persians have no images; they do not limit things by giving them a shape. The Persians' world, to repeat, is that of colorless, formless bodies in motion. Thus, for example, they call only upon the name of God. In their worship, they have no altar (make no place for the god or gods), use no fire (have neither warmth nor light), pour no libations (have nothing to taste), and have no sound of the flute (have nothing to hear). All that they have is the bare word. It is, moreover, the mental word, bodiless, colorless, formless, and even unsounded. They also deny that the gods are persons or have wills—their gods are “the sun and moon and earth and fire and water and winds” (I.131). Since these are without wills, one need not be afraid of them. We can think out what the world is and what can happen in it. Clear thought can make us masters of the world.

One cannot escape thinking that Persian trust in the unproblematic relationship between theory and practice is more a question of the will than it is of confident certainty. The Persians are a nervous people, prone to fits of anger and madness—when a river

drowns one of the sacred white horses of Cyrus, he spends an entire summer punishing the river by digging a hundred and eighty canals, thus weakening it so that it may not “even wet a woman’s knees” (I.189). When the bridge over the Hellespont collapses, Xerxes commands that the Hellespont be scourged with three hundred lashes and that fetters be thrown into it (VII.35). The punishment of natural forces, as if they had wills, betrays an anxiety in the Persian soul, an awareness of the resistance in things to human thought and will. Herodotus subtly indicates the difficulty with the Persian belief that speech can make all things perfectly clear. Immediately after he tells us that the Persians regard lying as the most shameful thing of all, Herodotus then says that he has discovered that all Persian names end in *sigma* (s) (I.139). Now this is only true of Persian names when translated into Greek. What then is the relationship between speech and things? For Herodotus speaks in Greek when speaking of Persian things, and in his doing so has there not occurred a profound change in how one understands Persia? It is a change, moreover, which affects everything, down to the smallest things. And what happens when we translate Persian and Greek things into English? Can speech ever reveal the things that are simply and completely?

The Persian understands the world as a complex of impersonal forces. He can only become human by mastery of these forces. Thus the Persian turns to the effective word and not to the image. It is power which is the final principle, and the word which makes clear what the forces of the world are also teaches us how to move with those forces. The mastery of things is the assurance that one knows. Xerxes’ invasion of Greece is an inquiry; conquest becomes the mode of knowing.

The denial of the image in Persia is the first possibility that Herodotus takes up. I believe he does so because—as we know—imperialism or the claim of power is the most immediate and the most hostile challenge to poetry. As Machiavelli says, one should prefer the effective truth of things to the imagination thereof.

II.1

We need to turn now to the Egyptian account of Helen. Herodotus does not give this version at the beginning of the book; instead, he waits until

the end of Book II. But before we come to that account, we must first see what Egypt is.

The most striking thing about Egypt, the most peculiar thing, is that the animals are regarded as sacred and animal shapes are given to the gods. Herodotus indicates that the Egyptians and the Greeks seem to make certain distinctions that other peoples do not: they sharply distinguish between the human and the divine, and they sharply distinguish between the animal and the human. But while the Greeks look up to the heavenly gods (the Olympians) or to the suprahuman, the Egyptians look down to the animals or to the subhuman. The Egyptians choose the subhuman or the animal as the revelation of the divine because they wish their gods to be definitely and tangibly *there*. The Greek gods are heavenly or sky gods; they are remote and invisible to human beings; they are like invisible thought. Perhaps the Greek gods are air and fire; certainly the Egyptian gods are earth and water. The gods of the Egyptians have tangible, earthly bodies, for the natural bodies of the animals are the vessels for the divine. The made object, the image, is not enough for them; the whole natural world of living bodies becomes the sacred. The human is to worship the subhuman or animal world, which is superior to the human because it is superior in its permanence or rest. The greater particularity or individuality of human things seems to make them more impermanent. To have the animals as the sacred idols is better than having idols simply, for the latter involves what is obviously an artifact. The animal or god or idol partakes of that ambiguity of what is natural and what is not, which is characteristic of Egypt. Since the natural body decays, however, something must be done to make it into an idol. What is done is to make the body into a mummy. We make images or pictures of the living so that we give to the living something of immortality. The painting or the statue, or, as we say, the work of art, is our means of fixing that which is subject to dissolution. What the Egyptians do is attempt to turn the natural body itself, human and animal alike, into an image of immortality.

The Egyptian choice is for the body; that of the Persians is for the mind. But the Egyptians experience the body as something that requires constant purification or purgation. Hence their great concern with what is clean and unclean. Even good is regarded as something almost impure. The body is corruptible, full of excrescences, stench, unclean exhalations of one kind or the other—how is one to deal with it? What

they attempt to do is to cleanse the body by ceremony or ritual; that is, they transform the needs and functions of the body into sacred ritual. The sacred is the corruptible body transformed. Now that art of transformation is experienced in a double way: there is an acknowledgement of the source of the sacred in the ugly and the obscene and also a forgetfulness of that source.

The sacred cats of Egypt reveal this duality, for these are moved, say the Egyptians, by two necessities: to have offspring and to leap into the fire. They wish to preserve their own, but they wish also to be purified and transformed. The extreme love of one's own is found first in the appearance of the Egyptian people: they look unique. Further, the Egyptians keep only the law of their fathers and add no others to them. They have only one song. The emphasis upon the sacred is thus an insistence upon the uniqueness or individuality of the body. The whole Egyptian effort may be said to be the fixing into permanence of this individuality of the body—they transform the unique body of a particular person into the immortal *eidolon*. The mummy is thus the complete realization of Egyptian civilization. (*Eidolon* is the third term for image; it seems to denote the likeness or image of a specific person or being.)

In speaking of Egyptian customs, Herodotus remarks that they do everything opposite to what other peoples do. Women go to market, and the men stay at home and weave; and in weaving, where everyone else pushes the woof upwards, the Egyptians push it downwards. Herodotus's remark is especially significant, however, when we reconsider the Egyptian gods. Herodotus dares not to state the point, but he gives us enough clues to see what the mystery is. The Egyptians believe that their gods die. For if the gods are to be found in the natural bodies of the animal, then the divine shares in the perishability of the body. However, the Egyptians are also said to be the first people to teach that the human soul is immortal. The Egyptian teaching is that of the transmigration of the soul: the soul, when released from a human body by death, passes through all the kinds of creatures of land, sea, and air, in a cycle of three thousand years, before it can once again re-enter a human body. One must wonder how specifically human such a soul is, for the soul never becomes what it enters—it does not change, it does not become beastly or human. Nothing happens to the soul; it simply

assumes a husk, an external look. The metamorphoses of the soul are external to it; its power is revealed in and through the bodies, especially the powerful bodies of animals. The images of soul are the bodies; and it is these images which the Egyptians fix into a semblance of eternity. And as we collect images of all kinds, so the Egyptian collects his multiple images of soul through the mummified bodies. We must thus reverse our thinking of the soul and the body; the bodies are that which is significant, that which is divine, for they are the revelations or manifestations of soul—and such revelations are all that human beings can have of the divine in this world. The gods die, for the gods are but the most powerful or striking bodily manifestations of the soul—as in the crocodile, hippopotamus, and falcon.

II.2

We may now turn to the Egyptian account of Helen. The story of Helen which is told by the Egyptians is that she never was in Troy at all. Paris Alexander's ship was driven into Egypt by a storm. Proteus, the king of Egypt, learns of Paris's rape of Helen, and he has Paris arrested. When the latter attempts to lie about his deed, Proteus speaks of him as the "wickedest of men," who has done "the most impious deed" (II.115). The Egyptians never once use the word "injustice" or "unjust" in connection with the rape of Helen; and the Greeks never call it an impious act, but rather an unjust one. Proteus then takes Helen under his protection. Thus Helen was never in Troy, but only her image, but the Greeks would not believe the Trojans' protestations and so besieged Troy until they took it and found no Helen there.

Herodotus declares his opinion that Homer knew the Egyptian story and knew it to be true (as shown by passages in Book VI of *The Iliad* and Book IV of *The Odyssey*), but "he rejected it of set purpose," because it was not suitable for epic poetry (II.116). Thus Homer deliberately transformed the story. According to the Egyptians, Proteus is simply one of their kings; in the Homeric epic, he becomes a god who can change himself into all creatures, as well as into fire, water and trees. Secondly, in the Egyptian version the war against Troy becomes a great injustice for which no blame attaches to the Greeks. Homer, on the other hand, presents the gods as concerned with justice and injustice. The Egyptians make the human consequences of just or unjust acts independent of the gods. And, finally, when Herodotus says that Homer used only that

which was fitting for the making of epic poetry, he also means to refer to what he has said about how the Greeks transform Egyptian stories. The Greeks are attracted by such things as etymology, homophony, or, in other words, the play of language itself. They become more interested in the structure and pleasing form than in preserving the original substance of the story. In so doing Greek poetry makes beautiful the grossness of the Egyptian stories.

But the significant question is the intelligibility of the Trojan War. Homer wishes to have Helen in Troy to give meaning to the war. And Helen in Troy would give meaning to the war only if it would make sense to wish to possess the beautiful.

It is by changing Proteus into a god that Homer shows how it the Trojan War makes sense. Herodotus himself makes the connection, for it is immediately after the Helen story that he mentions the Egyptian teaching of the immortality of the soul. What is attributed by the Egyptians to the soul, Homer attributes to a god. Instead of the soul manifesting itself by changing bodies, it is a god who assumes all the different shapes. The poet identifies the gods or the divine as the source of activity, of changes or revelations. In so doing he destroys Egypt, for it is no longer through the bodies that the manifestations of soul appear, but through the gods, and the gods are to be distinguished from human beings and animals.

But how do the gods manifest themselves? We are told, quite openly by Herodotus, that we know of the gods through the poets. What to the Egyptian is the attempt to capture immortality in the *soma* or the body, i.e., to capture the revelation of soul in the body, is for the Greek the right of the immortal divine in and through the poem. The manifestations or changes of Proteus occur in a poem; and we shall see that a poem is a law unto itself, a self-sufficient thing. To say Helen's being in Troy is what fits epic poetry is to say that Helen had to be in Troy. The poem would not be complete otherwise.

For the desire for Helen is the desire for that completeness or beauty which the gods have. The war to possess Helen is the metaphor for the significance of the poem. To possess Helen is important enough to go to war, for what is at issue is the possession or presence of the gods. Herodotus begins with the stories of the rapes of women that culminate in the rape of Helen. He follows these accounts with the Gyges

story, in which Gyges, a Lydian, is forced by his king to contemplate the form of the queen naked, for the king believes that his queen is of all women the most beautiful. That contemplation of the beautiful leads to Gyges being forced to kill the king and himself become the king (I.8–14). In other words, Herodotus indicates at the beginning of his *Inquiries* that the contemplation and possession of the beautiful is a great theme of his work. The Gyges story tells us that there is no safe way to have the beautiful except by oneself becoming a tyrant. There is something unlawful and dangerous in the *eros* to have the beautiful. It would seem then that the Greek attempt to have the beautiful is always threatened by the *eros* of others. But what if the beautiful is given to us through the poem? What if the poem is both the possession of Helen, the queen who is the most beautiful woman in the world, and the capture of kingship? It is the possession of Helen because the desire for the beautiful can be completed only in and through the poem. It is the capture of kingship because to have the beautiful is also to have the presence of the divine powers—we must speak in the plural—which rule all things. If indeed Homer and Hesiod gave the gods to the Greeks, as Herodotus says, then are they not the ones who rule the Greeks? We shall see further, in Scythia and in Greece, who the poet is, and above all, what the poem is. We must now however mention that Herodotus agrees not with the Homeric account but with the Egyptians.

Herodotus seems to prefer the Egyptian account to the Homeric, and his preference reveals the difficulty with both accounts. Neither account makes the human soul the center of change. The possession of Helen is truly intelligible only if the soul is the source of motion or transformation, for then the soul may be completed or transformed by the vision or possession of the beautiful. The beautiful is not something extrinsic to but is rather intrinsic to the order of the soul. Helen is the promise or perception of completeness, which may be attained only if the soul is capable of change and can therefore itself move towards completeness.

But let us now recapitulate the argument. The soul, according to the Egyptians, appears in many different kinds of bodies. In Homer, the god Proteus undergoes many transformations. Homer therefore purges the human realm, for the human soul can now remain human—it does not enter into the non-human. Since Proteus is said by the Egyptians to be a human king and not a god, what Homer has also done is make a

fabulous tale of factual Egyptian history. That very fabulousness is another way of putting a distance between the human and the divine. And since the poet appears more interested in the formal structure of what he makes and is in fact somewhat playful in what he does within this structure—as, for example, Herodotus himself is extremely playful—the distance is made even more emphatic. Or, in other words, secular history becomes metaphor in Homer. Herodotus now points to the last step that must be taken. It is the soul itself that undergoes the metamorphosis. What for the Egyptians is a factual statement about the soul is made into a metaphor by Homer. What we have suggested is that the poem takes on the attributes of the god Proteus. Herodotus indicates that the transformation of the god is indeed a metaphor, but of the workings of the soul.

We turn now to Scythia, for it is in Scythia that we enter into the poem itself. Or rather, it is there that we become one with the images.

III.1

Scythia is the land towards the north (approximately where we now find the Ukraine). It is the land where no distinction is made between image and what is imaged, and thus a place of no images. When we are first introduced to the Scythians, we are told that they blind the slaves who milk the mares because they value the surface most and not that which underlies it (IV.2). Herodotus uses the terms *epistamenon* (*ephistemenon*) and *hypistamenon* (*hyphistamenon*), which have some interesting connotations. The *epistamenon* is that which appears, or is established, ordained, or prescribed. The *hypistamenon*, or the underlying, is used in Plotinus as meaning “to give substance to” or even “to cause to be.” To say that the Scythians do not wish their slaves to know the surface is to play upon the words *ephistimi* and *episteme*, which in the Ionian dialect sounds even closer—*epistimi* and *episteme*. As for that which underlies the surface, they do not care.

It is in this land where the surface is of such great importance that we are especially told of the possibility of immortality. The first story we are told in which something like immortality is attained is that of the poet Aristeas. Only Aristeas has dwelt with the Arimaspians, beyond whose land are griffins that guard gold in the land of the Hyperboreans (IV.13).

Of all the poets, Aristeas has come closest to the land of the Hyperboreans. Aristeas, we are told, died in a fuller's shop at Proconnesus. The fuller locked up his shop, informed Aristeas's family, and spread the news of his death throughout the town. Someone, however, disputes the story, saying that he had met Aristeas on the road going away from the town and had spoken to him. When the fuller's shop is opened, there is no Aristeas there to bury. Seven years afterwards, Aristeas suddenly reappears, with a poem called the *Arimaspeia*, in which he tells of his journey to the far north. He vanishes once again, only to appear two hundred and forty years later in Metapontium, in Italy, commanding that city to worship Apollo (IV.14–15). (This is the only time that a poet, and not a prophet, priest, or priestess, commands that a god be worshipped.)

III.2

The specific story of immortality that is told, however, is that of the Getae and Salmoxis. The Getae are Thracians; they live on the border between Thrace and Scythia and believe they do not die but go to the god, Salmoxis. When they need a messenger to Salmoxis, they send someone by hurling him onto three spears held up to catch him on the points. If he is killed, then the god regards them with favor. If he is not killed, then the messenger is a bad man and has been rejected by the god.

The Getae came to believe in their immortality because of Salmoxis, who was in truth once a slave to Pythagoras. He came back to the Getae, his countrymen, and held many banquets where he taught them that they would not die “but would come to a place where, surviving forever, they would have all manner of good things” (IV.95). While he taught this doctrine, he had dug for himself a great underground chamber, and when this was finished, he disappeared and lived underground for three years. The Thracians longed greatly for him, wishing him back and mourning because they believed he was dead. In the fourth year, he appeared before them, thus convincing them of his immortality.

What Salmoxis does is to teach the Pythagorean doctrine of the immortality of the soul in the most literal fashion. It is fitting that he has been a slave, for he shows a slavish interpretation and a slavish slyness in making himself believed. But there is also something Greek-like in his use of deception. The story illustrates perfectly, however, what happens

when we cross the border into Scythia, where metaphors are made into statements of fact. Herodotus tells us that the Scythians say that northward no one can travel because the earth and sky are overspread with feathers. They do not say, as Herodotus later says, that snow is like feathers. What they do say is that it is feathers. The Scythians are entirely caught up in likenesses; but we need to correct that point; they do not even require likenesses but only signs or indications of that which is at work. What is called an image of the god in Scythia is what we would call a sign. What the Scythians worship most, for example, is a scimitar of iron that, says Herodotus, is their *agalma* or image for Ares, the war god. That an iron scimitar should be associated with war is obvious; what then happens is that the sign that awakens that association becomes the god—i.e., the power who is at work in war.

III.3

But let us now return and consider the story of Aristeas more fully. Aristeas is the one man—and he is a poet—who seems to overcome bodily death. It is after his apparent death that he goes upon his northern journey, from which he returns with his poem. He dwells with the one-eyed Arimaspians who constantly attempt to steal the gold of the Hyperboreans. According to the myths, there are great rivers and a river of gold in the land of the Hyperboreans, which is a land of endless sunlight, abundant fruit, and gold. It lies beyond the north wind, surrounded by terrible ice, but the people do not suffer from the blasts of the north wind. Their span of life is a thousand years, and they spend it in the worship of Apollo. The griffins, part eagle and part lion, guard this gold from the one-eyed Arimaspians. No one has been able to enter the land of the Hyperboreans—did Aristeas, the poet who came closest, try and fail? No one has thus ever actually taken gold from the Hyperborean realm.

Herodotus remarks that Homer mentions the Hyperboreans, while Hesiod has given them their name. As in the case of the gods, the poets appear to be the principal source of our knowledge. Herodotus then mentions, almost in passing, that in the Scythian tongue *arima* is one, and *spou* is eye. The story of the Arimaspians may simply be a play upon the etymology of the name of a tribe. For the Scythians had heard of the Arimaspians through another people, the Issedones, and the

Greeks in turn have taken the story as true from the Scythians. Even more, Herodotus suggests the possibility that the Hyperboreans may also be a fabricated name in a poem of doubtful authenticity, attributed either to Horner or Hesiod. We are returned by Herodotus to the possibility that the Arimaspians and Hyperboreans might exist in the play of speech only, or in the poem.

III.4

The one time that Herodotus laughs is after the story is told of Abaris, “alleged to be a Hyperborean,” who carries “the arrow”—not *an* arrow, but *the* arrow—over the whole world, “without eating anything at all” (IV.36). He laughs because the maps of the world which have been drawn by the poets, Homer for example, make the world perfectly circular, completely surrounded by Ocean, and where Asia and Europe are of like bigness. They are maps, in other words, which are perfectly symmetrical. It must be around such a symmetrical world that the Hyperborean carries the arrow.⁴ Is there something the same about the deed of the Hyperborean and the symmetrical making of the world by the poets? One notes that the word used for arrow is not *ta toxá*, but *oistos*, which has two meanings—it can mean an arrow or a poem. (With a slight change in pronunciation, *oistos*, it means “that which can be borne.”) Only around such an artificially symmetrical world can the arrow or poem be borne with such ease. But the difficulty with such a world is precisely its symmetry—it is an image, but an image of nothing. Perhaps this is the danger of the image or metaphor—it becomes too self-sufficient, and we lose sight of that which it is supposed to be the image.

III.5

We may now state what the realm of the Hyperboreans is. It is the realm where we are at one with the images. It is the land of gold and fire, beyond the north because the region of the soul is cold. The term for cold (*psychea*) sound very much like that for soul (*psyche*). That the region of *psyche* is *psychea*, that is, that the realm of soul is cold, is of course to be

⁴ We note that it is important that Abaris is a Hyperborean and that he does not have to feed while he goes around the world. The Hyperboreans are free of necessity. Scythia itself is a land characterized by self-sufficiency, and the Scythians have succeeded in coming close to being a perfect human order. They cannot be defeated in war, they are free, and they have few needs.

expected. For how else are things to be preserved and kept perpetually fresh except that they be cold? In *Walden*, in the section entitled "The Pond in Winter," Thoreau speaks of a hundred men of Hyperborean extraction who descend upon Walden Pond to take its skin off. To speak literally, he says, they were Irish ice-cutters, for the ice of Walden is shipped to warmer climes. "Why is it," Thoreau asks, "that a bucket of water soon become putrid, but frozen remains sweet forever? It is commonly said that is the difference between the affections and the intellect."⁵ Walden ice is the soul crystallized and preserved. That is, the images are the intellect crystallized and preserved as they are in such as Homer and Dante, Plato and Shakespeare. They are great crystals of soul; or, we may also say, they are golden images, forms in the glory of the changeless metal. These images are the things of the world, things of mire and blood, consumed with intellectual fire, and transformed by the golden smithy's work into monuments of unageing intellect. (I apologize, I could not resist the phrases of W. B. Yeats.)

We are caught up in the images in Scythia, and as we lose ourselves in them we become immortal. Aristeas, the poet, disappears bodily into his poem. He accomplishes what is perhaps the intention of every poet—himself to become a poem. There exist today of course those who call themselves artists, who do seek to make their lives, i.e., themselves, into a work of art. Oneness with the poem, to repeat, is immortality. And I also cannot resist repeating a well-known professor's reported statement on immortality: "We are immortal," he said, "as long as we are alive, because immortality is an experience." We experience immortality when we lose ourselves in the images of the poem, forgetting willingly that they are images. But no one, not even Aristeas, who was bodily assumed into his poem, has ever entered the realm of the Hyperboreans and stolen their gold.

IV.1

When the Persians invade Greece, they come to a valley in Thessaly that is exactly like one in Asia. Both valleys are entirely surrounded by mountains; they each are a bowl into which five rivers flow and come together. Each valley has only a single narrow outlet through which the

⁵ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, 263–265.

rivers issue into the sea. Upon seeing the Thessalian valley, Xerxes, the Persian king, remarks that the Thessalians were wise to surrender to him; he could easily have blocked the outlet and so flooded the valley. The inlets into the valley in Asia had been dammed up by the Persian king, forcing the inhabitants to come to him to howl and beg for water. The Persians thus see both possibilities of mastering the valley, either the denial of water and subjection of the inhabitants, or its flooding and the destruction of the inhabitants.

But Xerxes is mistaken about why the Thessalians surrender to him. They do so not because they see what can be done to the rivers and the valley, but because they were seeking an ally against a neighboring people, perpetual enemies who were threatening to destroy them. Xerxes misunderstands because he does not realize that the Thessalians say that Poseidon, the Earthshaker, made the valley, and therefore no human being can tamper with its structure because it is the work of a god. The Thessalians do not see the necessity that Xerxes so clearly sees. The Persians are ultimately destroyed in Greece because they do not understand that the Greeks are not acting in terms of necessity, and that means that the Greeks are unpredictable; the causes that move them are invisible, and they are especially invisible to Persian eyes. The god permits the Thessalians not to see the necessity, and in not seeing it they become free to see what other possibilities there may be. For the gods are themselves unpredictable; they are persons, independent wills, and they do not respond as inanimate beings do in terms of forces external to them.

The salvation of the Greeks is in their gods. The gods are what free them from the forces of necessity.

We may also speak of the importance of the Greek gods as Seth Benardete does: we “assume that the Greek gods are like men because the Greeks are men. It could be, however, that the Greeks are men because their gods are anthropomorphic. Their gods might have been the cause of the Greeks becoming human beings.” Benardete adds the following conclusion: “Homer and Hesiod, in giving the Greek gods their human shape (53.2), did more than just duplicate human beings from all other living things and stamped them with a specific excellence (cf. Pindar *Nemean* VI.1-7). The gods thus imposed a standard which the Greeks could look up to, so that they could judge whether to respect or

despise themselves.”⁶ In other words, the poets did not anthropomorphize the gods; they theomorphized human beings. Because the gods looked like human beings, men could look up to the gods and judge themselves in the light of the excellences which the gods displayed.

At Thermopylae, Xerxes believes that the Spartans are so few (the “Three Hundred”) that they cannot but surrender. When it is reported to him that the Spartans are combing their long hair and beautifying themselves, he finds it laughable. (The Persian kings, it should be noted, have a marked tendency towards laughter.) When told by an exiled Spartan king that the Spartans mean to fight to the death, Xerxes is incredulous. He neither understands how so few can fight so many, for numbers are the only important thing to the Persians, nor how the few facing death could consider making themselves beautiful to be an important task. Demaratus, the exiled Spartan king, says to Xerxes, “These men have come here to fight us for that pass; that is what they are making their preparations for. This is their custom: that when they are going to risk their lives [or souls], they make their heads beautiful” (VII.209). What Xerxes does not understand is the making of an outward image for an inner disposition of the soul. He does not see how the one might correspond with the other.

The ultimate consequence of seeing only necessity is spoken by a Persian who weeps at a feast (IX. 16), telling a Greek that he knows that all the Persians are about to be destroyed. When the Greek asks if he ought not tell Mardonius, the Persian commander, of his fears, the Persian replies: “Even if what was said was credible, no one would believe it. Many of us Persians know all this, but we follow in the bondage of Necessity. This is the bitterest pain to human beings: to know much and control nothing” (IX.16). A final paralysis of the will occurs, and the Persians are unable to escape the necessity that finally crushes them.

IV.2

I shall return now to a story told early in Book I of Arion, the best singer of his day, which is said to be a story of great wonder. Arion lived in

⁶ Benardete, *Herodotean Inquiries*, 44.

Corinth, at the court of the tyrant Periander. He decided to go on a concert tour of Southern Italy and Sicily, which was a great success, and he earned much money. Fearful of being robbed, he decided to trust in a Corinthian ship. But when they put out to sea, the crew decided to throw him overboard and take his money. Caught in an *aporia*, i.e., a situation in which there was no possible escape, Arion begged for one favor—that he could put on his singing robes, stand on the poop deck and sing one last song before casting himself into the sea. The sailors agreed, for they “thought what a pleasure it would be for them to hear the greatest singer in the world,” and Arion, “putting on all his adornment,” took up his kithara and sang the “High Shriill Song”—the Greek is *nomoi ho orthios*, which literally translated, means “the right or correct laws.” It is the only time that Herodotus uses *nomoi*, which means customs or laws, the laws of the city, to mean “melody” or “tune.” When Arion finishes his song, he casts himself into the sea and is borne off by a dolphin to the mainland (I.23–24).

The sailors do wish to hear the singer, but they are not persuaded from violating the laws when moved by the possibility of immediate gain. Arion has to turn to the “right laws,” and in the midst of the sea where all laws have been set aside, he sings his own “tune” or law. By so doing, he marvelously escapes from what appears to be an inescapable fate. Poetry saves, but not by affecting or changing the difficult circumstances in which human beings find themselves. It is instead the completeness or self-sufficiency of poetry, the *nomoi* of poetry, which by maintaining itself even in the midst of lawlessness, permits escape. The poem is the dolphin, freeing us by rescuing us from the paralysis of necessity. In and through the poem, we experience the possibility of completeness; which is to say, we experience the possibility of the beautiful. And through the poem we experience the immortal. We are neither stunned into inaction by necessity, nor do we become trapped in the mummification of the sacred, nor are we enraptured by the golden images of Scythia. We may instead, like Arion, be borne on the backs of dolphins, so that for an instant we may leap free from the density of our element into a new world, a new horizon, glorying in the light and freshness, before we sink back only to leap again, tasting the possibility of our immortality until we are set safe upon the mainland:

Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood

Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,
The golden smithies of the Emperor!
Marbles of the dancing floor
Break bitter furies of complexity,
Those images that yet
Fresh images beget,
That dolphin-torn, that gong tormented sea.⁷

V.

Having arrived at this point in my discourse, I found out that I could not end with the dolphin; I found it necessary to go on to reflect upon the Herodotean enterprise. In so doing, we must take up again the question of Herodotus and the maps. He laughed, I would remind you, when speaking of the map of the world presented by the poets, i.e., by Homer. It is a map that attempts to be perfectly symmetrical but is not, for it fails, for example, to have a realm of the Hyperboreans. Moreover, to be a map, it must be a map of something; it ought to correspond to something "out there" if it is to be effective or work as a map—and the poetic map does not seem to do so. The poetic map appears rather to be a metaphor for the self-sufficiency of the poem.

In Book V, the story is told of the Ionian revolt against Persia. Athens gave aid to the Ionians, an act that angered Darius and led to the first Persian invasion of Greece, which was turned back at Marathon. Aristagoras, the instigator of the Ionian rebellion, went to the Spartans first to persuade them to ally with the Ionian cities against Persia. He brought with him a bronze tablet on which was engraved all the earth, the sea and the rivers. With the map he points out how all the lands are connected, and he speaks of how the entire Persian empire might be conquered and how the Spartans might be masters of all Asia. Aristagoras's hand easily sweeps across the whole of the Mediterranean and Asia. It is only upon further questioning that the Spartan king realizes the immense distances involved, and orders Aristagoras to depart Sparta before sunset. But Aristagoras goes to the Athenians who are easily persuaded, for having rid themselves of the Pisistratid tyrants, they have become more daring, each Athenian "zealous to achieve for himself" (V.78).

⁷W. B. Yeats, "Byzantium," 33-40.

After Aristagoras's failure with the map in Sparta, Herodotus proceeds to show that he has an exact knowledge of the road to Asia. He claims, implicitly here as he did explicitly with respect to the poets, that he knows how to draw a more exact map of the world. But we have seen with Aristagoras what a map of the world does: the image of the entire world makes universal rule appear most possible to accomplish.

The Persians under Xerxes having been driven out of Greece, the Ionians again come to the Spartans to persuade them to sail quickly to Ionia. But the Greek expedition stops at Delos, the great sanctuary of Apollo, and refuses to go forward: "further than that was all terror for the Greeks; they did not know those parts" (VIII.132).

The curious thing about this episode, which the commentators have noticed, is that a man named Herodotus, the son of Basileides, is mentioned as one of those who went to Sparta. He is one of a Chian conspiracy of seven that sought to free Ionia from the barbarian. This Herodotus is not otherwise known, and the standard commentary remarks, that he was "mentioned by the historian, perhaps because of his name, perhaps from personal friendship or relationship."⁸

It has been pointed out that this entire passage is at the very least "a dramatic exaggeration." It is in fact absurd, for the Greeks were familiar with these waters. Herodotus declares, however, that the Greeks "supposed Samos was no nearer to them than the Pillars of Heracles." The "Pillars of Heracles" are a metaphor for the boundary between the known and the unknown—for beyond the Pillars lie the boundless Atlantic and the unknown West. Thus, Herodotus continues, "so it fell out that there was great terror among the barbarians to venture to sail further west than Samos, just as the Greeks, even at the urging of the Chians, would not venture to go further east than Delos. Thus did fear guard the space between the two sides" (VIII.132).

The unknown prevents the Greeks from sailing farther east. It is an absurd statement, as we have said, amply contradicted by what Herodotus himself has previously told us. It can only make sense, I believe, in the context of what we have been saying about maps.

What a map does, above all, is to remove fear of the unknown regions. Herodotus's book, which is, among other things, a survey of peoples and lands, is such a map—as he indicates several times. But the

⁸ W. W. How and J. Wells, *A Commentary on Herodotus*, vol. II, 279.

true fear he removes, the deepest and therefore the most paralyzing fear of all, is the fear of leaving the familiar realms of soul for new possibilities, for unexplored regions of soul. The Greeks must be persuaded to sail from the Apollo of Delos to the unknown gods. When we reflect upon what Herodotus has done, it has in fact been to map out the places of the soul. We are told that seven is the number of the earth (*On Sevens*, to be found in the Hippocratic writings) and of the human body. But what Herodotus has done is to make the lands of the earth correspond not with the parts of the human body but with that of the soul. Now the soul is invisible, its order or parts, its unity, its *logos*, are all invisible. But the *logos*, i.e., the intelligibility of the soul, reveals itself in the works of human beings as these come to light in and through cities. It has been noticed that Herodotus refuses to discourse directly upon the soul. Instead he proceeds by metaphor, giving us glimpses of the soul through the works and deeds of human beings. Herodotus seems to believe that there is a distance or disjunction between speech and the natures of things. The question is, how far can speech show forth the intelligibility within things themselves? How far can one make a special kind of speaking which claims to be closer to the things themselves than what is usually available in ordinary speech? Socrates seems far more confident of the power of speech to reveal the natures of things. What Herodotus does is to take the different opinions men have, ordering these according to the *logos* he finds in them. But he seldom penetrates through these opinions to replace them by what we might call a philosophical opinion. Hence there is in Herodotus a very strong suggestion that the natures of things do not themselves sufficiently or easily provide an intelligible structure. We have instead the laws of the poem, or the work, or the self-sufficiency of the poem or the artifact, which by giving us some hint of the necessity of the invisible *logos* enables us to navigate through what otherwise appears to be a formless sea.

To conclude: to be a son of Basileides, is to be the son of the kingly or royal one. Herodotus, son of the royal one, has conspired with the Seven of earth and body, or mire and blood, to show us how we may sail without fear to the unknown regions of the soul, perhaps even beyond the Pillars of Heracles.

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