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Helios and Athene

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Helios and Athene · *H.D.*

Athens, 1920

I

The serpent does not crouch at Athene's feet.
The serpent lifts a proud head under the shelter of
her shield.

The serpent is marked with pattern as exquisite
as the grain of the field-lily petal. He is hatched
from an egg like the swan.

The baby Ion, son of Helios, was deserted by his
mother. She laid him among violets. Athene, the
goddess, sent serpents to protect him. These serpents
fed the child with honey.

When Helios the god slays the serpent, he slays in
reality not so much the serpent, as fear of the serpent.
The god learns from the serpent. Be ye wise as serpents.

The serpent lifts a proud head beneath the massive
shield-rim of Athene, guardian of children, patron of the
city.

On one of the remote altars of Demeter at Eleusis,
is a serpent carved beautifully in high bas-relief.

The Eleusinian candidate, it is thought, at one
stage of initiation, walked through a black cave,
the retreat of snakes.

The mind may learn, though the body cringes back.

Consider the birds. Be wise as serpents.

In Athene's hands is a winged creature, a Nike,
her own soul.

Consider the birds. Consider your own soul.

II

The naked Greek, the youth in athletic contest, has set, accurately prescribed movement and posture. This convention made of him a medium or link between men in ordinary life and images of Pentalic frieze or temple front. We gaze upon this living naked embodiment of grace and decorum. We are enflamed by its beauty. We love it.

When we have exhausted the experiences of personal emotion, we gain from the statue the same glow of physical warmth and power.

The statue of Helios on the Olympic frieze, as the beautiful personality that once charmed us, acts as a go-between.

The youth is a link between men (let us say) and statues.

The statue is a link between the beauty of our human lovers and the gods.

The statue enflames us. Its beauty is a charm or definite talisman.

Our minds can go no further. The human imagination is capable of no further expression of beauty than the carved owl of Athene, the archaic, marble serpent, the arrogant selfish head of the Acropolis Apollo.

No individual has created beauty like this. No country or individual ever will.

But the Hellene did not throw down his chisel and rest in self-complacent admiration.

His work began when his work was finished.

The priest at Delphi, the initiate, even the more advanced worshipper, began his work where the artist ceased his labour.

The statue was like a ledge of rock, from which a great bird steps as he spreads his wings.

The mind, the intellect, like the bird rests for a moment, in the contemplation or worship of that Beauty.

The mind grips the statue as the bird grips the rock-ledge. It would convince itself that this is its final resting place.

The mind, in its effort to disregard the truth, has built up through the centuries, a mass of polyglot literature explanatory of Grecian myth and culture.

But the time has come for men and women of intelligence to build up a new standard, a new approach to Hellenic literature and art.

Let daemons possess us! Let us terrify like Erinyes, the whole tribe of academic Grecians!

Because (I state it inspired and calm and daemonical) they know nothing!

III

It was in Helios' heart to break, in Athene's
not to be broken.

So Delphi and Athens stood, existent, gaining power,
gaining strength, through inter-dependence of hatred.

But this hatred was clear, defined, removed from
any hint of personal intrusion, intellectual, abstract.

If Athene's citadel broke, Helios' temple crumbled.
If Helios yielded to her, Athene herself was undone.

Delphi and Athens were thus allied forever.

Delphi, the serpent, the destructive heat, Delphi
the devastatingly subtle seat of oracles, Delphi whose
centre of religion was a centre of political intrigue,
Delphi the lie, the inspiration, the music, found in
Hellas, in the world, one equal: Athene.

Athene with silver line between eye-brow and ridge of
helmet could look with all the concentrated power of her
eyes and leave unscathed no God in the world but one:
Phoebus of Delphi.

The olive, turned from sombre gray to trembling silver
by the wind, sweeping from the snows of Pentellicus, the
imperishable silver of her helmet, the serpent whose belly
shone silver as she lured him by her daemonic power to
lift his head from the black grass; the white silver of
the olive leaf, the white belly of the serpent were as
her guarded eyes.

To Helios alone could she open wide their splendour.

He hated her because she stood unconquerable: he loved
her as an equal.

IV

We cannot approach her direct, so abstract, so cold,
so beautiful.

We approach her, if at all, through the medium of the
Mysteries and through the intercession of other Gods.

At the foot of the Acropolis, as a lover, waiting at
the feet of his Beloved, is the theatre of Dionysius.

The Greek Drama, the outgrowth of the worship of
Dionysius, is a means of approach to Athene.

The greatest Athenians of the greatest period were
initiates of the Eleusinian mysteries. Those great
mysteries were protected by the Love of Athene.

The Love of Athene is symbolized by the arch of
wings, for Demeter by the cavern or grot in the earth,
and for Phoebus by the very essential male power.
Love for Athene is the surrender to neither, the
merging and welding of both, the conquering in herself
of each element, so that the two merge in the softness
and tenderness of the mother and the creative power and
passion of the male. In her hand is the symbol of this
double conquest and double power, the winged Nike.

The winged Nike, the white sea-gull, the imperturbable
soft Owl, the owl, whose great eyes search the night, the
mind, the dark places of ignorance.

Athene, the maiden, Parthanos, is doubly passionate.