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On Sappho

Robert Wood · Wednesday, August 22nd, 2018

I first encountered the Greeks like everyone else. This was not as a text that was written, a book that I sat down and read without any idea of what they meant. Rather, I came to it through popular culture, through reference, through the shared imagination of the world itself. They seemed familiar when I read *The Odyssey* and when I read Sappho. It felt like I had read it before or knew, somewhere deep in myself, what this writing meant and why it mattered. It was like encountering a long lost relative. Sappho was, of course, held up with a certain singularity, *the* female exemplar who was the exception to the misogynistic rule and that even looms in this volume where she is placed next to various men from all over the world. But, the attentive reader will also note how I am a fellow traveller to feminism, peppering this text with citation of poets like Amy Hilhorst to Emily Dickinson. Sappho though is one origin point, a place to begin, that connects us to the Greeks right up to the contemporary Emily Wilson, who is the first woman to translate *The Odyssey* into English. And so, the Greek lineage is clear and still developing.

It is clear from reading these classics that the Greeks lived in a world that is richly sensuous. It is a place of death, feasts, nature, meat, oceans, boats, wine, cloth, gods. People spend time celebrating, drinking and eating, listening to music and poetry, hearing about miraculous feats as narrators reveal parts of their journeys. This is there in Sappho and it is there in Wilson.

In Wilson’s translation, we come to know Odysseus as a complex character and hear of his travails and travels in a beautiful, simple, lyrical rendering. What it suggests to me is that these classics reward re-reading, that we can encounter something wholly familiar in a way that feels refreshed.. I think one of the most remarkable achievements is that the voice of Homer comes through in a rhythmic flow that is accessible to English language readers who come from anywhere across the globe. In encountering Wilson’s work, I am reminded of Italo Calvino when he wrote:

To read a great book for the first time in one’s maturity is an extraordinary pleasure, different from (though one cannot say greater or lesser than) the pleasure of having read it in one’s youth. Youth brings to reading, as to any other experience, a particular flavor and a particular sense of importance, whereas in maturity one appreciates (or ought to appreciate) many more details and levels and meanings.

The Odyssey gives us both pleasures at once. On the one hand, we know it before and on the other, in this translation, it is wholly new. There are pleasures here from the single line to the overarching narrative that keeps us coming back for more. Perhaps we should reflect once again on the first words Odysseus yells when he reveals himself to his enemies at home: ‘Playtime is over.’ And in

that, we know there is work to do as readers and writers, but also that we can take pleasure by renewing our faith in the greatest of epics thanks to Wilson's own labour.

And alongside that epic as well as the epics that appeal to me from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* right through to Rachel Blau DuPlessis' *Drafts* in our own era, are poems that are fragments. These are tantalising morsels that speak in a similarly major way, addressing themes of love, the cosmos, nature, family, food, the body, passion, politics, and power. This is where Sappho remains exemplary, a classic that one returns to, like visiting the museum and letting the eyes rest on a piece of marble that was worked on so long ago. Hers is a wry and knowing eye, a way of gazing upon the world to see the gods for what they were, to think about the human condition as it emerged and existed in this place and time.

Sappho writes, in the Mary Barnard translation:

> *I asked myself*
>
> *What, Sappho, can*
> *you give one who*
> *has everything,*
> *like Aphrodite?*

And to ourselves we can ask the same question, what can we, the poets of today, give to the gods of the past, from Aphrodite to Sappho, to the muses who move us, to those who are the bedrock of history as we know it. In simply asking that question though, we might find our answer, for in the fragments, shards, pieces of the mosaic that is history, that is world literature, we pay our respects to elders. We find in the archaeological digs of the past we learn a little more about ourselves. We offer up our poetry to the gods above.

Sappho, of course, is not alone as a feminist icon that matters for world literature. But she is alone in this work, in getting the title of a chapter. In *The Poet's Library*, I have focussed on speaking back to the idea of a canon, not to re-institute a new one, not to claim that this list of 26 is definitive, but as a way to unpack my own reading project as part of a living culture. This is a collection of classic texts as a 'meridian'. You will have seen how the title often betrays what I am speaking about, provides an entry point to think of what it means to enter here and leave somewhere else. If we started with Frost we ended with Autumn Royal. It is about being allies in speaking back to a hegemonic idea of culture, even though in simple negation we might reinscribe the structural faults of that time, simply updating what we tried to get over.

That might mean creating a broader coalition with an idea of solidarity and allies, of wondering how can we expand our idea of a 'meridian' to create blocs of understanding, and like Sappho did, ask what can we give to world literature.

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