



Daniel Adler

The Acheron

It was before dusk in late winter and a golden light covered the forests and ancient hills that had been home to fauns and nymphs before the construction of Eleftherios Venizelos International. On the subway to Akropoli, where I walked to my hostel, I passed pools of golden light that fell between shutters into the cobbled streets. Behind those windows, Greeks laughed, danced and drank wine, older men carried their wives on their arms, and the smell of roasted lamb mingled with the salt of the sea. Perhaps it was the adrenaline of arriving in a new place, perhaps the infectious joy of the Greek people, but I felt very much alive, despite the Aegean wind that forced me to turn up my collar.

Above, the Parthenon reigned over the ancient city; its regal lights illuminated the rocky Acropolis like a sculpture stuck in the sky for all to gaze upon. For thousands of years it had represented a sense of self for these people, a reassurance about who they were and how they had suffered in solidarity to overcome and create a pinnacle of civilization, a democracy capable of both art and war. It is strange to look at a place and understand that it is not living, that it is rock and dirt and none of it conscious, and yet feel somehow that there is nonetheless in any land ‘sacred or fallow’ an energy that shapes and forms it into what it is.

Perhaps it is an accumulation of history. Time imbues every land with a difference that the conscientious observer can feel. Sometimes it is the presence of animals, sometimes humans, sometimes it is the absence of life, a prehistoric emptiness, that we feel, as in the American West, where the ruins of time have changed the landscape from a tropical playground into a barren desert. The Acropolis had for thousands of years been a site of human suffering and glories, and remained such an acme of humanity that still it made me and, I imagined, the Greeks around me, feel very much at home, as though the city were the

same size of twenty-five hundred years before. If a hundred humans stood arm to arm, each representing a generation, we would stretch back to when this temple was built, a hundred lives traced directly backwards through time would lead us to that era when families anointed stones with oil before setting out on journeys and prayed to half-mortal creatures and gods who lived on mountaintops, who decided the fates of men while wishing to be part of their world. I had longed for that era when I was younger, and now here at the foot of the Parthenon, I partook of it by associating with the land those ancestral feelings of worship and reverence that had stayed with it for so many centuries.

Around the block in my hotel, a Greek girl with thin arms welcomed me with a broad smile, teeth that stuck out slightly but did not detract from her beauty. I paid my board and she handed me the key to my dorm. Casting a side-look at her slender body as the elevator doors dinged open, I stepped into the mirrored box and pressed five with a sense of relief from having reached my long-awaited destination. Once I placed my bag near a lower bunk in the twelve-bed dorm, well-lit, spacious, with an affixed bathroom and a window that looked north into a garden, I took the elevator back downstairs to the kitchen, where a handful of young people were cooking and drinking ouzo. I paused in the doorway, recalling the fun of hostel life as a young man in my twenties.

My first time in Athens my friend from New York, Karl, came to meet me in late February of that year. He was also traveling in Europe, had come from Berlin, where it was minus twenty. He had been staying with a young Spaniard named Antonio who had caught a chill. Together in their drafty apartment Karl had tended to him for the month he was there, bringing him blankets and keeping the wood heater full. The winter deepened and by the time Karl was ready to leave, the Spaniard was coughing up blood. Karl assumed he wouldn't make it to spring. He told me about this and I laughed, thinking that he was joking, but now I recalled how serious he was about most things, how like me, people often thought we were joking when we were most serious, and I sent a flare of pity out to Antonio, wherever he was. Karl and I had gone on to have the time of our lives; he was there with me when I first visited the Parthenon and together we toured the rest of Athens. At that time there were riots against the Germans and graffiti that called Merkel a Nazi and advocated leaving the EU stretched across gray downtown buildings. One evening, over a dessert of strawberries and feta, a girl from our hostel asked us if we'd heard about the riot in Syntagma Square. We shrugged and Karl suggested we participate in it. I agreed. We walked down the street to buy a bottle of ouzo

and came back to the kitchen, where our hostel-mates were already gathering for the evening. We shared the liquor and a couple of hours later, when it was empty, left for a bar with beers in our hands. At a corner, Karl placed his empty beer bottle in an overfilled trash can. It fell with a clink and rolled in a circle around its perimeter. He bent and set it upright. ‘That’s no way to start a riot,’ I yelled. I picked it up and threw it across the street. It shattered, scaring a Greek couple. Karl laughed; the others jeered. I kicked a cab as it was going past. Within a couple of years after our return to the States, Karl and I drifted apart. I didn’t miss him much. He found a girlfriend and moved in with her. He stopped doing the things he said he was going to do. I shook my head. Seven years had passed since my first time in Athens, and I felt much, much older. Instead of meeting the other hostelites, I walked around the corner and down the block to a souvlaki place.

I had to get up early.

When I arrived at the village of Glyki the next afternoon, it was a couple of shops selling cheese and olives, a few houses and the Acheron flowing darkly below, as it had been doing for millennia. Remote river of the Ancient World, whose shores were the banks of Limbo on which flies and wasps chased those who could do neither good nor evil, today this river is just forty miles long, and no Charon I could see ferried souls across its banks. This stream was the boundary of the Greeks known world, the green waters flowing slowly between canyon walls and rocky shores, all quiet except for an occasional birdcall and the water’s warble. A breeze picked up from the north, and I buttoned up my jacket, not knowing what else I had expected.

A drone rose behind me, and I turned to see five or six wasps. Farther upstream, a crowd of nearly naked people pushed and shoved, the smaller ones splashing into the cold water, trying to escape from a swarm of black insects hovering around them, from which the stragglers buzzing around me must have come. There came a rhythmic plashing and I turned to see a man in a longboat crossing the shallows, its bottom scraped the rocks as he came ashore, calling in Greek to the herd running from the stinging insects. He was tall and sickly-looking, his limbs gangly yet sinewy, strong. His face was sallow, and his gapped teeth showed as he heckled the once-ambivalent. But they were not people; their bodies were transparent and light; they floated, weaving and ducking, hollering, their shouts of fear echoing sharply along the river. They stepped in the shallows and into the ferry, lips pursed, eyes big, some panting in relief.

A man in a white toga and sandals appeared out of the corner of my eye; behind him, another in a red robe. Both had aquiline noses, wide brows and crowns of laurels. The togaed man turned to his companion, pointing across the river. They waited until those lonesome souls had filled the boat and then the togaed man began to converse with the ferryman. They also sat in the boat, toward the bow. Forgetting myself, I called, ‘Can I come too?’

They looked up at me. The man in white called a phrase in Latin, and I cursed myself, wishing I had been a better student. Though I imagined myself in their tradition, a possible third in their descent to the underworld, time and my own ignorance had made it so that we could not understand each other. I summoned the little Italian I knew and tried again, ‘Posso venire?’

The man with the red headdress looked sharply at me and said something to his guide, who conferred with him, avoiding my eyes, but the boat was already drifting backward. Charon stood, maneuvering his oars, swiveling his craft in the slowly-flowing river. I thought of swimming up beside them, trying to climb in, but I was afraid that if I entered the waters I might remain there, my neck tilted back, forever stuck in an attempt to breathe over the wavelets. Instead I stood, watching them cross the shallows and disembark on the cliffside bank, the robed men wandering off together while the ferryman herded the feathery bodies in the opposite direction. I was alone again.

How many others had come to this shore, hoping to see Charon? How many had he ignored? I felt guilt for neglecting my Latin, being unable to utilize my learning when I had needed it most. Above all, I wondered if my attention to the intervening knowledge from Dante’s time to my own had been for naught, if I had instead paid more attention to the classics, Virgil might have allowed me to join him and his disciple on their descent, to walk through that walled garden with the Ancient Greats, or if now because of the advances in science and technology, the list of men neither happy nor sad who competed for a position in Limbo, were too many and I was yet another, born into a different tradition altogether. And yet while Dante was born of a different tradition than Virgil, they at least spoke the same language, had the same culture. No matter how badly I wanted to be part of what my predecessors had created, I would never be able to; my pantheon of scientists and explorers had too little in common with theirs, more had passed between my world and Dante’s Christian one than between his era and Virgil’s pagan time. For me, both men’s worldviews were intangible no matter how badly I wanted to participate in them: I was literally from a world

that did not exist to either, an America still two hundred years away from being discovered for il Poeta; I was as foreign to them in my present as the civilization of Atlantis was to their past. How vain of me to think that I could sit in the same boat as either of those greats!

The rustic beauty of limestone cliffs and Ioannian forest was all that existed of that lost world of the Ancients. I could only approximate the past through feeling the land; I had to do more, to experience products of beauty made by men from their times in order to know how they lived, thought and loved. No matter how much I thought I knew or felt of that Attic wilderness, only remnants of it remained in my century, where the closest approximations of those forgotten eras were the curved handles of Greek hydriai, the straight nose of a Roman marble, or the vaulted arch of a Florentine doorway.