GODS *and* MORTALS

Modern Poems on Classical Myths

Edited by NINA KOSSMAN

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Nina Kossman

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Among the Gods ■ *Stanley Kunitz*

Within the grated dungeon of the eye
The old gods, shaggy with gray lichen, sit
Like fragment of the antique masonry
Of heaven, a patient thunder in their stare.

Huge blocks of language, all my quarried love,
They justify, and not in random poems,
But shapes of things interior to Time,
Hewn out of chaos when the Pure was plain.

Sister, my bride, who were both cloud and bird
When Zeus came down in a shower of sexual gold,
Listen! we make a world! I hear the sound
Of matter pouring through eternal forms.

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this anthology is to bring together poems that illuminate Greek myths in the light of modern sensibility, in order to demonstrate the durability of classical mythology and the variety of ways in which it is handled by modern poets. Besides presenting a new picture of Greek myths, the collection offers a wide-ranging catalog of twentieth-century poets. Some of the works are by internationally celebrated poets such as Akhmatova, Auden, Cavafy, Lawrence, Mandelshtam, Rilke, Seferis, Valéry, Yeats, and Walcott, while some are by their lesser-known contemporaries. A few of the poets, such as Hans Magnus Enzenberger, Max Jacob, and Marina Tsvetaeva, are recognized in their own countries although they remain relatively unknown to English-speaking audiences.

The basis for the selection was that a poem be a provocative or unusual treatment of a particular myth. With a few exceptions, I omitted poems that referred to a mythological theme in passing, or poems that referred to mythology in general rather than to a particular myth or mythological character.

The structure of the book is thematic: poems are grouped by particular myths. Although this anthology is not meant to serve as an exhaustive sourcebook on Greek mythology, it does cover a wide spectrum of myths. Some of these stories have inspired more and better poems than others. Among myths whose central characters are mortals, the love-in-death story of Orpheus and Eurydice is by far the most popular, probably as a result of the poets' easy identification with the mythological poet-singer. Among the stories about the Olympians, the ones most popular with modern poets concern rape: the rape of Leda by Zeus, of Persephone by Hades, and Apollo's attempt on Daphne.

I have grouped the Hades and Persephone poems under Demeter, because I see Demeter and her daughter as protagonists of the myth; Hades, the god of the underworld, figures in modern poetry mostly as the abductor of Persephone.

In placing Dionysus among the Olympians, I follow the opinion of some authorities who considered him the youngest of the Olympians, and I part ways with Homer, who barred him from Olympus. A popular notion of Olympus presupposes the presence of the god of wine.

The section "Heroes" covers the major heroes *before* the Trojan War (Perseus, Heracles, Jason). Thus, Achilles and Hector, though certainly heroes, are grouped under "Troy," since it was in the Trojan War that they showed their heroic natures. Theseus is grouped with the characters of the Cretan legends, and not with other heroes, because modern poetry is more concerned with Theseus's Cretan adventure than anything else.

Many Greek myths revolve around love, so I chose to limit the "Lovers" section

to those modern poems concerned with characters whose love transcended death in some way: Orpheus who descended into the kingdom of death for the reunion with his beloved; Baucis and Philemon, whose one wish was to be reunited in death; and Alcestis, who chose to die for her husband. Poems based on myths of rape and seduction—for example, the amorous adventures of Zeus or Apollo—are excluded from the "Lovers" section.

Similarly, transformations are so abundant in Greek mythology that the section so entitled contains only those myths where a permanent metamorphosis follows from a mythological character's identity. Narcissus's permanent transformation into a flower is a consequence of his self-love; the metamorphosis of Galatea into a living woman follows from Pygmalion's love for his art; Philomela's transformation into a swallow—a bird that does not sing—is emblematic of her muteness, the result of Tereus's crime. (According to another version of the myth, Philomela was transformed into a nightingale, a bird whose song is thought to express sadness and longing.) However, Zeus's self-transformations into a bull or a swan are temporary; they do not define him.

"Trespassers" covers characters who offend the gods, while "The Condemned" are those who commit crimes by human definition, such as murder or rape. Phaethon, Niobe, Icarus, Marsyas, and Psyche poems are grouped under "Trespassers," and Sisyphus and Tantalus poems under "The Condemned."

***

Among many responses to the same myth I found only a few that seem to echo each other, along lines not predetermined by the original story. Here's a striking example. Marina Tsvetaeva, H.D., and Margaret Atwood, three of the women poets in the predominantly male section on Orpheus and Eurydice, speak as Eurydice, reluctant to follow her lover out of the underworld; independently of each other, these three poets make the usually silent female protagonist of the myth express her rejection of the togetherness offered by the lover.

"... I need the peace
Of forgetfulness ... For in this shadowy house
You, living, are a shadow, while I, dead,
Am real ... What can I say to you except
"'Forget this and leave!'"
(Tsvetaeva)

"... if you had let me wait
I had grown from listlessness
into peace,
if you had let me rest with the dead,
I had forgot you
and the past."
(H.D.)

"You would rather have gone on feeling nothing,
emptiness and silence; this stagnant peace

of the deepest sea, which is easier
than the noise and flesh of the surface."
(ATWOOD)

(Perhaps through her descent into the underworld Eurydice gained awareness of her own unconscious depths. The underworld of Greek myth may be seen as the unconscious itself, the repository of everything not allowed into Apollo's solar domain, daylight consciousness.)

But such similarity in interpretation is rare. More often, poems on the same subject look at it from altogether different angles. "Leda" by D.H. Lawrence and "Leda" by Lucille Clifton provide poignant examples of contrasting attitudes. Clifton's Leda asks Zeus to appear as a man ("You want what a man wants, / next time come as a man / or don't come"), while Lawrence's Leda desires him as the bird, not as the man: "Come not with kisses / not with caresses / of hands and lips and murmurings; / come with a hiss of wings / and sea-touch tip of a beak ..."

There is no shortage of poems that are mere retellings of the myths; of these I chose only the ones that provide an unexpected twist to a familiar story. For example, in Yunna Morits's retelling of the Prometheus myth ("Prometheus"), the eagle that tortures Prometheus is "wound up, like a gramophone box," and although it is "like a real thing," the image belongs to a later, industrial age. In Morits's poem, actually in all Prometheus poems herein, Prometheus exists in a timeless zone which combines the ancients' world and our own, a case in point of a myth that is never dead or "old" as long as there are poets among us who revitalize the old story by entering the mythical dimension and reporting to us from the other side of the myth, or of their own psyche.

The venerable tradition of donning a Greek mask is often used by poets in order to speak of things they would have found difficult to approach otherwise. H.D. is one such poet. She holds the mask so close that at times it is hard to distinguish her own features behind it; the poet becomes the mask. Conversely, the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva, a contemporary of H.D., remains resolutely herself, whether she is speaking as Eurydice or the sibyl. Her mythological masks are transparent. By endowing the personae with her own intensity, Tsvetaeva gives us the most impassioned Greek heroines in modern poetry.

Robert Graves, a classicist par excellence, is another poet who makes frequent use of the Greek mask to speak of his own feelings. In such poems, the trappings of the myth become the specifics of his own life. In "Prometheus" the bird that tortures him is jealousy, and the rock on which Prometheus tosses is the poet's own bed. His mask is not as transparent as Tsvetaeva's, yet we are still able to see the man behind it.

Other poets observe the mythic protagonists rather than fuse with them. A case in point is the Welsh poet Barbara Bentley: in "Living Next to Leda" she becomes an eyewitness to the crucial events in Leda's life. Ironically, it is the Greek poet Constantine P. Cavafy who puts the most distance between himself and his mythic protagonists. Cavafy is a whimsical historian of his cultural past, a wise interpreter of the mythological scene from which he himself is removed. The bird's-eye view of the protagonists' emotional extremes offered by Cavafy can also be found in the work of Yannis Ritsos and George Seferis, the other two modern Greeks poets in the anthology. But while Cavafy's speaker is outside the events of the myth, the

speaker of Seferis's poems is often present in the mythological sets the poet builds—as Orestes or one of the argonauts. Seferis, like Graves, turns a close-up into a long view, the archaic into the modern, the story into the symbol.

Shifts in perspective make most poems in this anthology resonate far beyond their subject matter. The subject matter—the myths—concerns us more than we may be ready to admit, going about our lives on the brink of the twenty-first century. If we think we now know the answers, it is because the questions were first posed in antiquity. If we now see far, it is because we stand on the shoulders of tradition. Myths belong to us as much or as little as the imagery of our own unconscious: the deeper we dig into our psyches the more likely we are to stumble upon an ancient myth. Our ancestors are us or we are our ancestors: the texture of our bones is passed on, along with the texture of our dreams. And perhaps it is because the myths echo the structure of our unconscious that every new generation of poets finds them an inexhaustible source of inspiration and self-recognition. It is my hope that this book will serve as yet another link between tradition in the classical sense and that shelter which the ancient gods never left: our unconscious.

NINA KOSSMAN

TITANS

Atlas

Prometheus

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Atlas

By harsh necessity, Atlas supports the broad sky
on his head and unwearying arms,
at the earth's limits, near the clear-voiced Hesperides,
for this is the doom decreed for him by Zeus the counselor.
—HESIOD, THEOGONY (TR. BY A.N. ATHANASSAKIS)

atlas ■ Lucille Clifton

i am used to the heft of it
sitting against my rib,
used to the ridges of forest,
used to the way my thumb
slips into the sea as i pull
it tight. something is sweet
in the thick odor of flesh
burning and sweating and bearing young.
i have learned to carry it
the way a poor man learns
to carry everything.

Atlas on Grass ■ Vernon Watkins

Atlas on grass, I hold the moving year.
I pull the compass to a point unguessed.
Vast midnight flies to morning in the breast,
All moves to movement, moves and makes a sphere.
Rough Winter loosens leaves long-veined with fear,
Then the seed moves to its unsleeping rest.
Faith springs where beads of longing lie confessed.
Time lost is found; the salmon leaps the weir.
Death stops the mouths of graves, is coverer
Shrouding and hiding what the pulse reveals,
But he, too, moves to his Deliverer;
Judgment will never stop the dancer's heels.
What's gone forever is forever here,
And men are raised by what a myth conceals.

Prometheus

Prometheus moulded men out of water and earth and gave them also fire, which, unknown to Zeus, he had hidden in a stalk of fennel. But when Zeus learned of it, he ordered Hephaestus to nail his body to Mount Caucasus, which is a Scythian mountain. On it Prometheus was nailed and kept bound for many years. Every day an eagle swooped on him and devoured the lobes of his liver, which grew by night. That was the penalty that Prometheus paid for the theft of fire....

—APOLLODORUS, THE LIBRARY, I.vii (TR. BY J. G. FRAZER)

Prometheus ■ Yunna Morits

Like a cat, the eagle on the roof of the world
is ruffled by wind blowing from the Caucasus.
With both eyes the punished titan is watching
beastly Zeus. This is what the cover of insomnia
must look like. The silver spoon of the moon
stirs the juices of retelling.

Zeus's chest sags from passions,
and his fierce torso is strained—
where people like to gather,
he, like a machine, discharges thunder.
The titan holds onto his liver. He reels,
and the peak of Caucasus sways under him.

The eagle, the issue of Echidna and Typhon
and the brother of Chimera with a goat's head,
is wound up, like a gramophone box,
and feeds on live liver. Meanwhile,
the titan thinks: "I'll learn to take deep
breaths, to preserve my strength."

In the cellar of the valley the fruits of lemon trees
gather the light around a sleeping sheepfold.
A shepherd made of clay and water
pours a boiling broth into a shepherdess' cup.
The eagle, like a real thing, devours the titan
and splutters saliva into the powerful groin.

The titan sees neither the eagle nor his own duress;
he sees, instead, a centaur coming down a slope,
mortally wounded in his knee.
Damnation! An arrow has cut into the noble Chiron,
like an axe into a log,
and he is black with pain, like a crow,

and a luxuriant, cloudy outline of foam
accentuates the length of his body.

He begs for death but is immortal—
he curses fate, its bonds of immortality!
There's such pain in him, such torment!
The titan bangs the vaults of heaven—

Zeus comes out: "What do you want, thief?"
The titan dictates: "Destroy the system,
and re-assign my death to my friend,
so his departure is cloudless and sweet:
make sure the Centaur gets the tenderest of graves,
and I—the centrifuge of his deathlessness.

You understand me?" Zeus nods to him unwittingly
and leaves to do as he was bidden.
Buried by Heracles in the shade of a plane tree,
the Centaur no longer suffers pain.
The eagle torments the titan tirelessly,
eating into his liver. But this part of the story
is well known, and enough's been said.

Translated from the Russian BY NINA KOSSMAN AND ANDY NEWCOMB

Prometheus on His Crag (20) ■ Ted Hughes

Prometheus on his crag

Pondered the vulture. Was this bird
His unborn half-self, some hyena
Afterbirth, some lump of his mother?

Or was it his condemned human ballast—
His dying and his death, torn daily
From his immortality?

Or his blowtorch godhead
Puncturing those horrendous holes
In his human limits?

Was it his prophetic familiar?
The Knowledge, pebble-eyed,
Of the fates to be suffered in his image?

Was it the flapping, tattered hole—
The nothing door
Of his entry, draughting through him?

Or was it atomic law—
Was Life his transgression?
Was he the punished criminal aberration?

Was it the fire he had stolen?
Nowhere to go and now his pet,
And only him to feed on?

Or the supernatural spirit itself
That he had stolen from,
Now stealing from him the natural flesh?

Or was it the earth's enlightenment—
Was he an uninitiated infant
Mutilated towards alignment?

Or was it his anti-self—
The him-shaped vacuum
In unbeing, pulling to empty him?

Or was it, after all the Helper
Coming again to pick at the crucial knot
Of all his bonds...?

Image after image. Image after image. As the vulture

Circled

Circled.

Old Prometheus ■ Zbigniew Herbert

He writes his memoirs. He is trying to explain the place of the hero in a system of necessities, to reconcile the notions of existence and fate that contradict each other.

Fire is crackling gaily in the fireplace, in the kitchen his wife bustles about—an exalted girl who did not bear him a son, but is convinced she will pass into history anyway. Preparations for supper: the local parson is coming, and the pharmacist, now the closest friend of Prometheus.

The fire blazes up. On the wall, a stuffed eagle and a letter of gratitude from the tyrant of the Caucasus, who successfully burned down a town in revolt because of Prometheus' discovery.

Prometheus laughs quietly. Now it is the only way of expressing his disagreement with the world.

Translated from the Polish BY JOHN AND BOGDANA CARPENTER

Prometheus ■ Emery George

He fired God and plagiarized the fire,
and published all the flames in the hottest how-to
book of the season. He'd teach people to cook,
make locks and fittings, manufacture armor,
help the consumer if it cost him his game,
cordial relations with Nobodaddy Kronos

up there, and all his foothill-clinging cronies.
He'd had enough of myths. A love-starved groom
will have his bride; a people would not bide
their precious time and live like savages.
Why couldn't they even fry sausages
and eggs for breakfast? What was there left to forbid?
Then Kronos' police and their sadistic humor....
An eagle would be sent to: *de-liver* him,
unless.... It was a nerveless part of a man,
didn't they know? He relaxed with his Homer.

All that took place three thousand years ago.
He had since retired. His "Firehammer School"
prospered at first, but students graduated
to pyrotactics, murderous up-and-go.
Brilliant glass pears, soft-colored tubes at night
lit up; then, over the sea, one afternoon
in August, he felt the stars, sun, and moon
fuse and collapse. He saw a horrible light,
a giant mushroom rising, a tidal-wave-shaped
fortress. Their latest patent.... He recanted, humbled;
in a show of power, two cities were showered
with mushroom fire, and God was reinstated.

Inhabited Liver ■ Marin Sorescu

I feel the wings of the eagle
Stretch wide the lips of my liver;
I feel its talons,
I feel its iron beak,
I feel the enormity of its hunger for life,
Its thirst for flight
With me in its talons.
And I fly.

Whoever said I was chained?

Translated from the Romanian BY ADAM J. SORKIN AND LIDIA VIANU

New Prometheus ■ Jerzy Ficowski

In the inertia of liberated gestures,
(not even the shadows will rise)
in the silence of an unlocked scream
(let the echo sleep in peace),
Prometheus, who no longer has eyes,
(they didn't last to see the rust)
lies compliant, welded
(the mountain of doubt holds him)
to the Promethean torture.

He smothers the fire unneeded by the gods
and rips out his own liver,
to die,
in accord with the myth.

Translated from the Polish BY YALA KORWIN

Prometheus ■ Robert Graves

Close bound in a familiar bed
All night I tossed, rolling my head;
Now dawn returns in vain, for still
The vulture squats on her warm hill.

I am in love as giants are
That dote upon the evening star,
And this lank bird is come to prove
The intractability of love.

Yet still, with greedy eye half shut,
Rend the raw liver from its gut:
Feed, jealousy, do not fly away—
If she who fetched you also stay.

PROMETHEUS AND PANDORA

"...The price for the stolen fire will be a gift of evil
to charm the hearts of all men as they hug their own doom."
—HESIOD, WORKS AND DAYS (TR. BY A.N. ATHANASSAKIS)

For Pandora, Again ■ Sidhveswar Sen

I was stunned
when you held open
that lid

The whirl of wind
twisted us around, plague-ridden
tornado—greed-grief-lament

For repressed urges, sustenance

When blood-strife-dread
human defeat

Stunned by venomous fumes
I
kept standing

In that lored penumbra—
wordless

Until, again, you
shut it close, with startled hands

That gaping, gaping mouth
of primal horror

By then, they had turned everything
topsy-turvy

Only under the shut lid
fallen—hope

Man staked his all on it
and stood, kept standing
for ever

Translated from the Bengali BY RON D.K. BANERJEE

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ZEUS

Zeus and Hera/Zeus in Love