

Why Did I Awake Lonely Among the Sleepers
(Visibles and Invisibles in Simonides and Celan)

*I wanted not to tell a story but to show the turns of things,
their transference. I left blank spaces in the narrative so
that they would be visible.*

—Ozu, *I Lived, But . . .*

Iconology

The ancient Greek poet Simonides of Keos (556-467 BC) is Western culture's original literary critic, for he was the first person in our extant tradition to theorize about what poetry is and how it works. Here is one of the statements of his literary critical theory:

Logos	tōn pragmatōn	eikōn	estin
(Word	of things	picture	is)

“The word is a picture of things.” Consider this sentence. True to itself, it does what it says. It shows us *logos* (“word”) and *eikōn* (“picture”) poised on either side of the world of *tōn pragmatōn* (“things”) in a syntactic tension that precisely pictures their ontology. “Things,” in the genitive case, depend for their meaning on “word” and “picture” at once: both nominatives vie for the attention of the genitive *pragmatōn*, which is placed to read in either direction and unite all three words like the hinge of a backsprung bow. It is a taut and self-controlled construction, but not self-sufficient. The verb “is” secures the relationship from outside, even though, in such a sentence in Greek, the verb “is” is redundant. Simonides’ *estin* insists on itself after other words have had their say and extraneous to their needs. Why? Simonides seems to want to render more than words need to say. His iconic grammar renders a relationship that is mutual, dynamic and deeper than the visible surface of the language, requiring of his reader a different kind of attention than we normally pay to verbal surfaces. It is a mode of attention well described by the Chinese

painter Chiang Te Li, who wrote a treatise in the 9th century AD on how to do plum blossom. "Painting plum blossom is like buying a horse," says Chiang Te Li, "you go by bone structure not by appearances." When we consider Simonidean sentences, we see appearances engaged in a dialectic with one another, by participation of *logos* and *eikōn* at once. We overhear a conversation that sounds like reality. No other Greek writer of the period, except perhaps Heraklitos, uses the sentence in this way, as a synthetic and tensional unit that reenacts the reality of which it speaks. This is *mimēsis* in its most radical mechanism. This is the bone structure of poetic deception.

Sleep

Let us study Simonidean iconology in a more colourful example, the famous Danaë fragment (543 PMG). This poem tells the story of Danaë and her infant son Perseus, put to sea in a box because of a sinister prophecy.

... when
in the painted box—
wind blasting her,
waves going wild,
knocked flat by fear,
her face streaming water,
she put her hand around Perseus and said
"O child, what trouble I have!
Yet you sleep on soundly,
deep in infant's dreams
in this bleak box of wood,
nailed together, nightflashing,
in the blue blackness you lie
stretched out.
Waves tower over your head,

water rolls past—you pay no attention at all,
don't hear the shriek of the wind,
you just lie still in your bright blanket,
beautiful face.
But if to you the terrible were terrible,
you would lend your small ear
to what I am saying.
Ah now, little one, I bid you sleep.
Let the sea sleep,
let the immeasurable evil sleep.
And I pray some difference may come to light
father Zeus, from you!
Yet if my prayer is rude
or outside justice,
forgive me.”

fr. 543 PMG

Throughout the poem Danaë is awake, terrified and talking; the baby is silently, serenely asleep. Simonides has chosen to construct the poem as an alignment of two consciousnesses: one of them is present, active and accessible to us, the other has vanished inwardly. One of them is cognizant of the reality that we see stretched out around it, the other is oblivious to that reality and apparently paying attention to something quite different behind its closed eyes.

The difference between their two states of mind is the chief subject of Danaë's discourse, addressed to the baby (vv. 7-21) as the sea rises around them. Placed exactly at the center of her utterance and her emotion is a contrafactual sentence (vv. 18-20) that operates like a vanishing point for these two perspectives on reality:

But if to you the terrible were terrible
you would lend your small ear
to what I am saying.

In its perfect symmetry, the protasis (*ei de toi deinon to ge deinon ēn*) is a picture of the cognitive dissonance that obtains between these two states of mind. The world of Danaë and the world of Perseus are set alongside one another as two different perceptions of the same physical situation, two discrepant definitions of the same word, *deinon*. It is strange to think how such divergence is possible. Where does the baby's mind go when he is lost in sleep? To judge from his untroubled demeanour, he has gone somewhere more pleasant than the wild sea where his mother is pitching and tossing. Perhaps, as Heraklitos says, "the invisible harmony is better than the visible one" (B54 VS), but we do not know that. What we do know, as we stare at this painting, is that Perseus' state of mind is something as real as his mother's state of mind, although different and inaccessible. Neither consciousness refutes or replaces the other: they interdepend. They are reciprocally invisible. As Heraklitos says, "men asleep are laborers and coworkers of what is going on in this world" (B75 VS).

The meaning of Simonides' poem is something that happens *between* the two worlds of waking and sleeping. At v. 21-22 Danaë repeats the same verb three times: "I bid you, sleep little one, let the sea sleep, let the immeasurable evil sleep" (v. 22). The next verse is a prayer (*mētāboulia de tis phaneie*. . . . : "I pray some difference may come to light. . . ." 23) and out of the prayer steps father Zeus ("father Zeus, from you" v. 24). When Danaë modulates from the second person imperative *heude* ("you sleep, little one") in v. 21 to the third person imperative *heudeto* ("let the sea sleep") in v. 22, she moves from a literal to a figurative register of speech and conjures up the differentiating power of God. Poetic language has this capacity to uncover a world of metaphor that lies inside all our ordinary speech like a mind asleep. "If to you the terrible were terrible," says Danaë to her sleeping child, "you would hear what I am saying." But the child does not hear and a different kind of sleeping has to be imagined by the wakeful mother. "If to you the invisible were visible," says Simonides to his audience, "you would see God." But we do not see

God and a different kind of visibility has to be created by the watchful poet. The poet's metaphorical activity puts him in a contrafactual relation to the world of other people and ordinary speech. He does not seek to refute or replace that world but merely to indicate its lacunae, by positioning alongside the world of things that we see an uncanny protasis of things invisible, although no less real. Without poetry these two worlds would remain unconscious of one another. As Heraklitos says, "all we see awake is death, all we see asleep is sleep" (B21 VS). At the vanishing point of metaphor we may catch a glimpse of the differentiation.

To problematize the relation between the worlds of waking and sleeping was a poetic strategy that fascinated Simonides even outside poetic practice, and one that (I think) aligns his thought with that of Heraklitos, where wakefulness is a metaphor for the philosopher's epistemic alienation from a world of sleepwalkers. These sleepers are the generality of men, who fail to make sense of their experience and live at odds with their own life, lost in what Heraklitos calls "idiot thinking" (*idia phronesis*, B2 VS). Idiot thinking is a matter of mistaking the visible surface of things, the world of appearance and seeming, for the true, underlying, non-apparent *logos* that Heraklitos calls "invisible harmony" (B54; cf. B56 VS). Simonides too is attuned to the invisible harmony of things. His poems are pictures of a counterworld that lies behind the facts and inside perceived appearances. There is one striking fragment in which he confesses his commitment to it:

To dokein kai tan alatheian biatai (fr. 598 PMG)

which means something like:

Appearance constrains even truth.

Or we could overtranslate it:

It is in fact upon the world of things needing to be uncovered that the world of merely visible things keeps exerting its pressure.

Simonides spent his literary as well as his historical life exerting a counterpressure to the claims of the merely visible world. Consider this anecdote from his traditional biography (Cicero, *de Natura Deorum*, 1.22). One day in Syracuse the tyrant Hieron asked Simonides to define the nature and attributes of divinity. Simonides paused. "Give me a day to think about it," he said to Hieron. After a day Hieron repeated his question. "Give me two days to think about it," said Simonides to Hieron. Two days later Hieron asked again. "Give me four days to think about it," said Simonides, and so it continued, exponentially, until at last Hieron demanded an explanation. Whereupon Simonides said,

... the longer I ponder the matter, the more obscure it seems to me.

Simonides has bequeathed to us in this anecdote a sort of concrete poem of man's relations with the Godhead. And what we see enacted in the interchange with Hieron is the properly invisible nature of divinity, receding out of our grasp down the lengthening corridor of time and into the darkness at the back of the picture. Simonides renders the fact that *alatheia* (truth) cannot be seen in this world, no matter how tyrannical the pressure exerted on it by *to dokein* (appearances). Many a poet will tell you he can make you see what is not there. Simonides' claim is more radical; it comprehends the profoundest of poetic experiences: that of *not* seeing what is there.

Celan

In a curious piece of prose called *Conversation in the Mountains* (*Gespräch im Gebirg*, 1959), Paul Celan speaks of visibles, invisibles,

alienation, God, and sleep. This text invites comparison with Simonides' whole way of thinking about these matters, but especially with his Danaë poem (fr. 543). Both Celan's *Conversation in the Mountains* and Simonides' Danaë poem are works of indeterminate genre. The Danaë fragment is called a dithyramb by some and a dirge by others. No one is sure of its scansion, colometry or occasion; we owe its preservation to Dionysios of Halikarnassos who quoted the text without line-breaks in order to show that if poetry were written out as prose you couldn't tell the difference (*de Compositione Verborum*, 26). Based on Büchner's novella *Lenz* (as well as on works by Kafka, Buber, and Mandelstam), Celan's *Conversation in the Mountains* reads like something between a parable and a screenplay. In places, its incantatory prose resembles a prayer or a lullaby. Moreover, like Simonides' poem, Celan's tale uses sleep as an image of differentiation. For it is the story of a person named Klein who is as lonely as Danaë and longs for conversation but finds himself facing a world that does not hear him. It is a world "folded over on itself, once and twice and three times." Klein describes it also as a world of sleepers:

On the stone is where I lay, back then you know, on the stone slabs; and next to me they were lying there, the others, who were like me, the others, who were different from me and just the same, the cousins; and they lay there and slept, slept and did not sleep, and they dreamt and did not dream, and they did not love me and I did not love them. . . .

Celan's tale tells of Klein taking an evening walk up into the mountains, where he meets his kinsman Gross and attempts to have a conversation. For, like Danaë, neither Klein nor Gross is at home in the silence of nature:

So it was quiet, quiet, up there in the mountains. It wasn't quiet for long because when one Jew comes along and meets another, then goodbye silence even in the mountains. Because the Jew and nature, that's two very different things, as always, even today, even here.

Klein goes on to describe a landscape as impressive as the wild sea where Danaë is stranded:

. . . Up here the earth has folded over, it's folded once and twice and three times, and opened up in the middle, and in the middle there's some water, and the water is green, and the green is white, and the white comes from up further, comes from the glaciers. . . .

Celan tells us this landscape is both visible and invisible to Klein. For although Klein "has eyes," he is separated by "a movable veil" from what is going on in nature, so that everything he sees is "half image and half veil." Behind the veil, behind the folded-over surfaces of glaciers, behind the closed eyes of sleepers, lies something Klein cannot see or speak to. Klein feels his separation from the world behind the veil mainly as an incapacity of language:

. . . that's the kind of speech that counts here, the green with the white in it, a language not for you and not for me—because I'm asking, who is it meant for then, the earth, it's not meant for you, I say, and not for me—well then, a language with no I and no Thou, pure He, pure It, do you understand, pure She, and nothing but that. . . .

Language is at issue because conversation, even amid the brutal snags to conversation that both Klein and Danaë experience, is the event that Celan and Simonides want to stage. Why has Klein come up into the mountains? “Because I had to talk, to myself or to you. . . .” What does Danaë beg of her sleeping child? “. . . That you lend your small ear to what I am saying” (19-20). Neither of them finds their way to a satisfactory conversation but both insist on standing in the gap where it should take place, pointing to the lacunae where it burned. No more than Danaë is Klein able to find “speech that counts here.” He cannot talk the language of glaciers, as she cannot speak to sleep or sea. Yet in the absence of a “language with no I and no Thou,” Klein does manage to exchange some “babble” (*Geschwätz*) with his kinsman Gross. What kind of language is this?

The word *Geschwätz* is a common German term for everyday chitchat. But in his recent biographical study of Celan (*Paul Celan, Poet, Survivor, Jew*, Yale, 1995), John Felstiner discusses this word and suggests it may have for Celan “hints of Babel and the loss of original language.” He explains:

For in Walter Benjamin’s essay, “On Language in General and on the Language of Man,” *Geschwätz* designates empty speech after the Fall, speech without Adam’s power of naming. . . . The babbling of Celan’s Jews is a comedown—via the cataclysm that ruined Benjamin—from God-given speech. (145)

Simonides also dramatizes the problem of naming. As Danaë struggles to find a name for something she knows as *to deinon* (“the terrible”), she produces an anguished tautology (“If to you the terrible were terrible. . . .”) in which the two possibilities of babble and God-given speech stand side by side—the latter hauntingly translated into the former, as it must be here among *die Geschwätzigen*. We have no other words to use. We know they don’t count but we lay them against the

abyss anyway because they are what mark it for us, contrafactually. “There may be, in one direction, two kinds of strangeness next to each other,” said Celan once (in his “Meridian” speech, in Darmstadt, 1960). So we see Danaë and her sleeping child aligned in a moment of reciprocal invisibility. Two kinds of strangeness may interdepend, marking the place where babble replaces speech that counts: the green with the white in it. Celan’s tale sends Klein up into the mountains to confront this lacuna, which Celan names *Leerstelle* (“vacant space” or “empty place”):

There [Klein and Gross] stand, standing on a road in the mountains, the stick is silent, the stone is silent, and the silence is no silence, no word is going mute there and no phrase, it’s merely a pause, it’s a word-gap, it’s a vacant space, you can see the syllables all standing around; tongue is what they are and mouth, these two, like before, and the veil is hanging in their eyes . . . the babblers!

The *Leerstelle* with “syllables all standing around” is an eerie place and has the same effect on Klein as the wild waves do on Danaë. Both of them begin babbling into the void. And then, unexpectedly, stumble up against something else. Not the words they were seeking as a way to penetrate sleep, sea, and glacier. Not the listener who will give ear to their words. But something else—something to which (I think) Celan alludes in his “Meridian” speech:

This means going beyond what is human, stepping into a realm which is turned toward the human, but uncanny—the realm where the monkey, the automatons and with them . . . oh, art too, seem to be at home.

Both Klein and Danaë address themselves to this uncanny realm and receive no answer at first. "Whoever speaks . . . no one hears him," says Klein in some despair. But then into the stupendous unlistening void Klein and Danaë each hurl an act of strangeness of their own—a poetic act. Danaë flips the verb "sleep" open on metaphor, leaving behind the literal sleep of her child which she cannot penetrate and moving instead to the figurative register where all is possible and prayer begins:

Ah now, little one, I bid you sleep.
Let the sea sleep,
let the immeasurable evil sleep.
And I pray some difference may come to light,
father Zeus, from you! (23-24)

Klein, in an equally bold linguistic move, wrests the name of God out of his own post-Adamic babble. The phrase *hörst du* ("do you hear?"), already recurrent in his stuttering exchange with Gross, suddenly takes on a capital letter and rises into Being as *Hörstdu* (Hearest Thou):

Says he, says he . . . Do you hear, he says . . . And Hearest Thou, of course, Hearest Thou, he says nothing, he doesn't answer, because Hearest Thou, that's the one with the glaciers, the one who folded himself over, three times, and not for humans. . . .

Hörstdu does not respond to Klein's feat of naming, any more than Zeus answers Danaë's prayer, but still: the movable veil has moved. Spirit is named in an empty place. It is worth noting that, about the time he was writing "Conversation in the Mountains," Celan bought a book on Martin Buber and underlined the sentences:

Creatures stand within the secret of Creation, of Speech. . . . We can say thou because thou is also said to us. . . . Spirit is not in the I but between I and Thou.

When Buber in this passage aligns “the secret of Creation” with the secret “of Speech,” he makes a theoretical point about Spirit that Celan and Simonides prefer to stage as conversation. The point is twofold. For, on the one hand, Spirit does not come from somewhere else; it is already present—invisible—within the elements of speech here in use. At the same time, Spirit does not arise of its own accord, but is wrested from behind the veil by an effort of language between I and Thou. The effort, as Simonides and Celan stage it, is very like a poetic act: reaching right to the edge of ordinary babble, to the place where metaphor waits and naming occurs. This is the act that Simonides calls *logos* and defines as “a picture of things,” for it contains visibles and invisibles side by side, strangeness by strangeness. From such a word, as Danaë hopes (and the poets confirm) “difference may come to light.”

A kind of peace seems to be settling over the end of Simonides’ poem when Danaë repeats the word “sleep” three times as if she were beginning a lullaby. There may be a peaceful allusion too in the “candle burning down” near the end of Celan’s tale; Felstiner sees this as a Sabbatic image of candles lit by a mother to mark the end of one week and the beginning of the next (145). What cause for peace? I suppose we could say glaciers, sleep and sea have been confronted; the terrible has (according to our lights) been named; Spirit moved in a place between. Yet neither Simonides nor Celan allows himself to end in peace and Spirit. Both texts recoil on a hard blast of self. Compare Danaë’s final apotropaic cry (“Yet if my prayer is rude or outside justice, forgive me!”) with the last words of Jew Klein:

I here, I; I, who can say, could have said, all that to you; who don't say and haven't said it to you; I with the Turk's cap on the left, I with the Rampion, I with what burned down, the candle, I with the day, I with the days, I here and I there, I, companioned perhaps—now!—by the love of those not loved, I on the way to myself, up there.

Klein is a survivor—small, scrappy, bereft, but awake and *en route*. Like Danaë, Klein holds his ground in a final gesture of radical individuation. The stubborn loneliness of this scenario seems drawn from a certain conception of the poetic calling which might have made sense to Simonides, and which Celan describes in the “Meridian” speech:

The poem holds its ground on its own margin. . . .
The poem is lonely. It is lonely and *en route*. Its author stays with it.

When I reread Simonides' Danaë fragment with these sentences of Celan in mind, the poem makes sense to me as a picture of the poet's situation: her loneliness, her marginality, her sense of the relation between visibles and invisibles, her staying power—through catastrophe to metaphor, to naming, to prayer. And yes, her utter wakefulness. Before closing the discussion of Danaë, let us consider one more poem in which Celan chooses imagery of wakefulness and sleep. Because I think this is a poem about the poet's effort, so beautifully pictured for us by Simonides, to “stay with” the poem:

ALLE DIE SCHLAFGESTALTEN, *kristallin,*
die du annahmst
im Sprachschatten,
ihnen
führ ich mein Blut zu,

*die Bildzeilen, sie
soll ich bergen
in den Schlitzvenen
meiner Erkenntnis—,*

*meine Trauer, ich seh's,
läuft zu dir über.*

ALL THOSE SLEEP SHAPES, crystalline,
that you assumed
in the language shadow,

to those
I lead my blood,

those image lines, them
I'm to harbour
in the slit-arteries
of my cognition—,

my grief, I can see,
is deserting to you.

Perhaps because he is awake among the sleepers, Celan begins on the dark side of words “in the language shadow.” Here he sees shapes that belong to “sleep” and to “you,” when he approaches. They are “crystalline” shapes—interior and elemental designs—which the poet will capture in a picture form or outline (*Bildzeilen*) and store in his blood. Blood is also the place where a poet’s understanding takes place (*Erkenntnis*). To understand and to keep, in however diminished a form, some picture of the inside crystal of things—perhaps what Klein calls “the green with the white in it”—is a poet’s obligation (*soll ich*)

and places him in a certain relation of “I” to “you.” Whoever “you” are, you are placed at the beginning and end of the poem, to enclose the poet in the middle and make his existence possible for him in two essential ways: for you take on shapes that he can understand and you give him a place for his grief.

The poem ends in this place of grief, on an unlikely verb. “My grief, I can see, is deserting to you.” The verb *überlaufen* means “to well up and run over” (as milk boiling on the stove) or “to rise up and run across” (as in desertion). Both its domestic and military connotations convey an action of displacement: here to there, mine to you. And a mood of error: milk that boils over is lost or spoiled, desertion is a punishable offense. But if these verses do in some part concern the mysterious encounter of I and Thou that gives rise to a poem, why do they choose to represent encounter as transgression or excess, as overflow and misdemeanour? For after all, it is Celan’s stated view that the inception of a poem relies entirely upon this encounter (or the effort toward it). So he says in the “Meridian” speech:

The poem intends another, needs this other, needs an opposite. It goes toward it, bespeaks it. For the poem, everything and everybody is a figure of this other toward which it is heading.

Celan sees the poem as heading toward an “other” and the poet as bent on this encounter. He describes the poet’s method (a bit later in the “Meridian” speech) with the word “attention” (*Aufmerksamkeit*) and defines attention as “the natural prayer of the soul.” Let us permit prayer to return us to the analogy with Simonides’ Danaë. Her conversation with an “other,” which shifts its focus from sleeping child to angry sea to Zeus, also ends in prayer. Her prayer, moreover, combines an action of displacement and a mood of error. For she suddenly sees herself “rude and outside justice” and appeals for forgiveness. It is hard to see what excess or transgression she fears to have committed.

Could Zeus possibly blame her pain or fault her cry for help? But that is the point. In encounters with Thou, you never know. Who can read the mind of Zeus? It is turned away. The properly invisible nature of otherness guarantees the mystery of our encounters with it, pulls out of us the act of attention that may bring "some difference" to light here. Danaë prays for difference—we all do—without knowing what is entailed in that. When our grief deserts us, where does it go and who will we be without it? These are questions that remain in the empty place where *alatheia* and *to dokein* lie side by side, strangeness by strangeness, exerting on one another a terrible and sleepless pressure that only the poet attends.