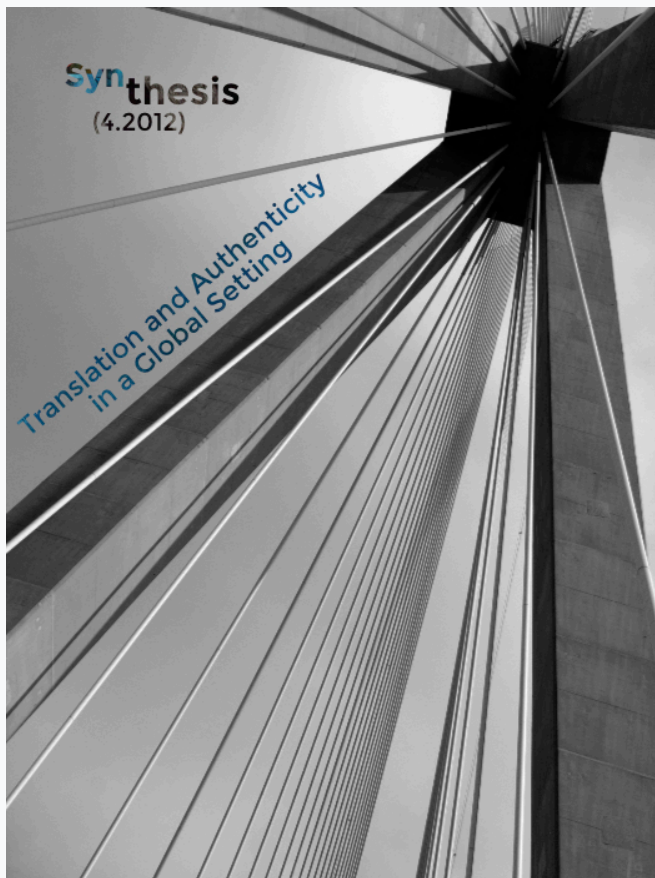


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### Putting Peripheral Poetries on the Map: Helen of Troy Rewritten by Helias Layios

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# Putting Peripheral Poetries on the Map: Helen of Troy Rewritten by Helias Layios

Maria Filippakopoulou

## Abstract

What are the conditions under which poetry of the periphery produces a poetico-discursive event with the power to affect Eurocentric letters? Using insights from global literature theorists such as Franco Moretti and Roberto Schwarz as well as analysis proper to translation practice I aim to test the argument that 'minor' style may become an affect of distinction precisely because it embodies material features of the proletarianised literary margins. To this end, I translate and read the ode to Helen (of Troy) by Greek lyrical poet Helias Layios alongside and against poetry retellings of *The Iliad* by H.D. and Christopher Logue. The analysis, forming integral part of the translation brief, brings to light the full extent of Layios's achievement in its capacity to affect the lyrical range achieved in English by the two other poets within the subgenre of creative rewritings of the classics. Taken as a sample of minor poetry with global resonance, it is shown to provide ammunition for the extension of literary relevance that is translation's glocality mandate.

Here lies a player: in life, in love, in tenderness -  
Naso, the poet, destroyed by his genius  
Lovers, pass by, pass by. I pray you won't begrudge me  
This last request: On Naso's bones tread softly.  
Josephine Balmer, *The Word for Sorrow*

"Geography comes with history," intoned Edwin Morgan before he went on to elaborate on the peculiar rhetoric that has defined European poetry — "the tough, unscented reality that lies at the heart of both history and poetry" (67, 69). On a global scale, Peter Huggill stressed, "[g]eography has been both the most spectacular and the oldest of the frontiers" (305). By definition, geography as a force to reckon with affects interlinguistic translation as a matter of course in terms of output, subject matter and procedural operations; effectively overcoming the hindrance, translation becomes the vehicle through which poetry in a minor language may be uploaded in the global flows of cultural capital (Pratt 11-13). Common wisdom would suggest that translated poetry serves the utopian claim that we can know one another across divides of time, space and language differences. In this paper, I engage with critical endeavours which advocate poetry translation's wider effects; but without a motion to expand the relevance of poetries of the European perimeter and critique global asymmetries in a global literary trade, the widespread belief in the creative potential of translating poetry into a major language would remain inconsequential. This goes hand in hand with a reflection on the conditioning context of the daunting programme of widening the access points to the planetary stage.<sup>1</sup>

My springboard is the untitled poem opening the collection 'February 2001,'<sup>2</sup> written in Greek by Hēlias Layios.<sup>3</sup> Published at the height of his creative powers, the collection fronted by the poem illustrates the scale of the poet's creative ambition in relation to the body of Greek lyrical poetry. Previous work of his has dealt with specific aspects of past poetic landmarks, but the poem praising Hēlēnē/Helen enters into an engaged dialogue with creative versions of the Homeric tale, becoming in effect a flagship for the validity of 'glocal' poetry. As a UK-based academic, native speaker of Greek, my stakes in making a stance for minor poetry are not founded on a supposed direct access to the source text; they are rather a genuine response to the opacity that arises out of its rhetorical construction — an opacity that has at times tested both my ideological investment in the project of translating minor poetry and my feminist consciousness but still strikes me as key to the notion of 'minor' literature. In fact, I propose a bracketed kind of translation aiming to meet the reader half-way; by this I set out to explore whether the close reading translating involves can indeed unravel a central feature of the minor poem. Anticipating what the analysis will demonstrate in greater detail, I view the word-readable minor poem in translation as a work conditioned by aesthetically phrased transgressions and discordance in relation to lyrical conventions and their social cognition abroad.<sup>4</sup>

The poem is framed as the narrating poet's tender address to his long-dead close friend, Christos,<sup>5</sup> to whom he signs the ecstatic praise of his lover, Hēlēnē, in a variety of states and representations. The conversational poem is a seminal rewriting of the classical figure of Helen of Troy and its canonised

afterlife in European culture in an idiom justifiably celebrated by domestic criticism as resonant of Greek's heteroglossia (Voulgaris 78; Katsoulo 85-92).<sup>6</sup> Intricately staged, it turns from a complex lyrical ode to a work of grinding forlornness. The specific argument I present here is that the poem's stylistic achievement may be interpreted as the poetic incorporation<sup>7</sup> of a structural fact about the country's modern condition— ideological insolvency— a view that cannot be fully substantiated within its primary context alone, but rather within an extended horizon: the poem's translation into English with English annotation. Thus, I claim the poem's peripheral position as the kind of added value canonised literary paradigms of this subgenre are lacking, and I use translation as prime site for uncovering the translated poem's untapped potential, undistinguishable from its discursive locale. Glocality, a catchy term proposed in the media (Menand 138-39), becomes the form of planetary locality hosting this new breed, minor poetry represented as a discursive event with global resonance.

### Seeking merit in the minor

The technical difficulty of proposing a unique foreign prosody as an artefact relevant for the concerns of the target audience is well documented in translation studies.<sup>8</sup> In globalisation and postcolonial discourses,<sup>9</sup> poetry translation can and has been reified as a site of resistance, a distinctive expressive instrument of the 'global South,' marginalised languages and language repertoires in a global space deemed either too indifferent or seductively appropriative. Poets of this 'proletarian' World South remain, by default, in literary limbo until they get snatched up and elevated to the canon of World Literature, from Octavio Paz to Evelyn Schlag to Giorgos Seferis. Within the sub-economies of the global literary marketplace, however, (un-)translatability demands further interrogation on account of its disingenuous cultural role. Aside from its usefulness as a textual descriptor or philosophical pointer (an altogether different discussion), it is in effect an instrument conferring direct cultural value on poetries that happen to get translated alongside numerous others that do not. By extension, the concept works to obstruct from view the actual mechanism side-producing masses of 'unread' works, effectively restricting the mobility of peripheral poetries, genres and languages that remain under-represented in the global scene.<sup>10</sup>

The conditions of untranslatability of contemporary poetry are not dissimilar to frequently rehearsed impasses within a revamped comparative literature. The latter's hardwiring towards redressing some of the effects of the imperial, colonial or Cold War past of many minor cultures can ill-serve attempts to understand how literary circulation is affected by global geometries. For one thing, world literature, in the words of Franco Moretti, "cannot be literature, bigger" ("Conjectures" 149). His own model — "literary geography"— brings to attention patterns and fluctuations of literary trade that impose structural constraints which have nothing to do with the work's inherent features (*Atlas* 158-62, 180).

Literary geography has helped map an integrated literary marketplace organising all relevant interactions unequally, thus capturing the struggles for hegemony between major linguistic economies. For all intents and purposes, the globalised world (a fine example of which is Pascale Casanova's "Republic of Letters") comprises a core of a limited number of countries, whose position has allowed them to accumulate literary capital, expertise and its accompanying prestige, and a multitude of countries affected but hardly affecting the literary norms of the core (Casanova 89).<sup>11</sup> Europe's non-contemporaneity — a significant finding in Moretti's *Atlas*— denotes "the different 'literary epochs' inhabited by its various cultural spaces" (*Atlas* 173). This view represents minor literatures within a symptomatology of literary misalignment: aesthetic judgment would, thus, pick up on the *reality* of a backward-facing national literature, a work lacking sophistication or having a parochial perspective. Objectified stylistic advances in the core literatures would, thus, affect minor literatures — primarily through the 'pressure to translate'— and the mutuality of contact would remain largely and securely unilateral, unidirectional (Hallward 15-19). Although the structural (political and economical) basis of non-contemporaneity is beyond the scope of this essay, I would nonetheless like to use the misalignment in question as a useful probe for seeking merit in the minor.

More often than not, global non-contemporaneity produces what Moretti terms the “development of under-development” (*Atlas* 191), a condition of continuing aesthetic dependency and debt in relation to a restricted number of core literatures. The very language describing such structural stiffness — ‘dependency,’ ‘debt’— is remindful of older and current strife in the imploding global labour and capital economies. It was also suggested, however, that the very conditions turning World Literature into an indebted Third World in inter-cultural commerce can provide a promising opening. Literary historiography had to coin the term ‘semi-periphery’ to designate a fluctuating world between the core and the periphery, which captures the way in which world literature changes over time. Sixty years ago, in his presidential address to the English Association, Kenneth Clark saw the provinciality of the periphery as instrumental in its literary aspirations and modest impact. Although he posited the unbeatable superiority of the ‘metropolitan art’ (read: European high art) over ‘provincial art,’ he nonetheless itemised specific ways in which the latter could make a positive contribution to the former: tellingly, these included recourse to the concrete, nature, lyricism, story-telling —in short anything that went against elitism and its concomitant extreme attention to style and experimentation (4-6). But aren’t all and any of the above elements historically expurgated from high aesthetic value and their use and outcome visible effects and springs of capitalism’s refractions? When pro-metropolitan Clarke writes that the strength of provincial artists has been “to cut through the sophistries which protect a self-perpetuating art” (6), the sudden irruption of the class underpinnings of aesthetic capital becomes too obvious to ignore. The metropolitan appropriation of stylistic experimentation on the one hand, and the discrediting of what is culturally concrete on the other play a key role in the analogy I draw between Clarke’s argument and the core-periphery one.

In my version, I attribute both predilections —creative preoccupation with style *and* locality— to the minor artist and argue that competition for recognition today sees her/him not simply on a par but, actually, in advantage: the aesthetic advantage s/he draws from her/his discursive engagement with her/his culture’s embattled history and actuality. More recently, Brazilian Roberto Schwarz put forth a sharper version of Clarke’s key comparison: he stressed the apparent paradox by which peripheral literature acquires international accreditation precisely on the strength of its “maladjustments” in relation to the core norms it seeks to imitate (161-64).<sup>12</sup> In successful cases, as is the case with Layios’s poetry, the inescapable divergence between core and peripheral literary paradigms can produce stylistically unique mixes because these are specific to the peripheral positionality in (traceable) dialogue with Eurocentric norms. But the precise conditions and terms of such amalgamation require a discursive space to accommodate what does not fit —prime example being the practice of translation with commentary. Through a close reading and translation of Layios’s poetry, this article will attempt to show what kind of impact an unnoticed work can potentially have, once translated, on the target repertoire of classically-inspired creative idioms. It could arguably affect Anglophone “protocols of readability” (Apter 148) by its amalgamation of the highly stylised the Republic of Letters has learned to recognise and the culturally concrete, the idiosyncratic, which seems to be consistent with the discursive locale of the minor literature.

### **Reclaiming Hēlēnē: the poem’s new context**

Any poem written in a language of limited diffusion requires some form of translation in order to reach any other audience; translation is the ‘natural’ context in which it is read anywhere else. To reverse the truism, a poem is by definition an ‘underauthorised’ work of literature.<sup>13</sup> In no ambivalent terms, to translate amounts to creating the conditions of literary recognition by mobilising agents who could pronounce how the source text fulfils the time’s aesthetic ideology. <sup>14</sup> The uncomfortable place where one would position herself in order to make an unsolicited intervention in favour of a minor poetry represents the discursive place of translation. <sup>15</sup> Twice removed, a work of poetry offered up for cross-linguistic recognition usually falls within discourses of *noncontingency* (with the noticeable exception of canonised poets): earmarked to be rebranded and marketed as a specimen of delocalised humanity, it is promoted on the strength of communicating emotions deeply rooted in human nature.<sup>16</sup> Similarly to classics, whose enduring canonical status is a direct effect of a-temporality, poetry translation with a classical theme is more likely to be proposed in a form denuded of its local

interfaces.<sup>17</sup> And yet, we need to learn from comparative literature's ongoing efforts towards what Erich Auerbach called "aesthetic historicism": a model of studying foreign literatures that would comprise *both* aesthetic analogies *and* political economy (198), "the poetic per se" *and* "the felt situation of a suffering people" (Herder, qtd. in Trumppener 186). The reality of practice, however, suggests that comparative accounts and translations alike run the danger of distortions and a certain flatness that comes with cultural uses performed outside the specificity of source cultures. Prefacing Hungarian János Pilinszky's poems, Ted Hughes stressed that only "the most literal crib" can convey their "air of simple, helpless accuracy" (Introduction to Pilinszky 13).

In this light, any effort to actualise the significance of Helias Layios's poem for English-speaking audiences would face the noncontingent discourse associated with the rarefied position lyrical and epic poetry hold in Anglophone criticism since Pope's translations of the Homeric epics in the early 1700s. Lorna Hardwick's discussion of modern classics' translations provides, therefore, an apt frame for the poem's contextualisation. She has identified a fairly recent trend in the second half of the twentieth and the early twentieth-first century, an abundance of creative rewritings of the classics, which has legitimised "the creative blurring of the distinction between different kinds of translations, versions, adaptations and more distant relatives" (*Translating* 12) and has revalorised "the transplantation of classical images into new work" (43; Hardwick, "Playing" 180).

Placing my literal translation of Layios's poem in the rich soil of appropriative retellings of classics by a modernist and a contemporary poet helps to illustrate how it complicates the lyrical and discursive potential of such innovative attitudes. Seeking to make the figure of Helen available for contemporary audiences can be seen to be a practice unlikely to be fully articulated without the crucial inclusion of the 'indigenous' response. My belief is that this response provides arguably a fuller version of what is at stake when revisiting the classics today, not so much because it illuminates but rather because its discourse breathes in the 'air-bubble' of Greek heteroglossia and internalised history of subordination, and thence carries with it added opacities that the glocal literary trade should reflect upon. In this light, I would like to argue for a pronounced symbolic dialogue of the poem with Hilda Doolittle's (H.D.) and Christopher Logue's rewritings of *The Iliad*. My assumption is this: were it to be read as a stand-alone poem in Greek, its effects would have been interpreted solely in relation to its original, the sublime image of 'Helene,' or the poet's work. As a translation, it will have to be read in a renewed and enlarged context binding it closely to its assumed interlocutors —the lyrical Helen of H.D.'s feminist poetics, and Helen-as-propriety in the irreverent masculine poetry of Logue. My translation brief, therefore, identifies the poem's context with non-evident frames of intertextuality so as to bring its specific poetics to bear on the notion of glocality.

In *Hermetic Definition*, H.D. contemplates how "[t]here was a Helen before there was a war" (22). Foundational figure of Imagism and instrumental in modernist manifestos, H.D. is known for fronting the figure of Helen as a fully-fledged female character by removing her from the war context in a number of her poems. Later on she assumed the voice of lyric poet Stesichorus of Sicily (ca. 640–555 B.C.) in her *Helen in Egypt*, where she explored an alternative version of the myth following Helen to Egypt where, according to the lost legend, Helen awaited Achilles. Criticism stresses that H.D. uses the figure of Helen to give voice to her aesthetic pursuits and, obliquely, bypass appropriations of powerful imagery by both classicist elites and patriarchy. As Norman Holmes Pearson put it, "the poet as seeker now become [sic] mother, fecund in the creation of still another fragment of the recurrent myth" (iv). In contrast, Logue has given contemporary audiences a revisionist translation of the epic that draws attention to its discordance with the source text, with explosive results in terms of iconoclasm and popularity: as he outlines in the introduction to *War Music*, he offered the epic's "naked spine" (Hardwick, *Translating* 58) by manipulating its narrative development and by adopting an unadorned language highly strung by orality and cinematic verve. His purpose was to create a living poem, although some of his audiences might have been less able to see beyond his desanitation of Homer (Frow 177). Although both poets' versions require their own contextualisation, what is significant for my purposes is their selectivity in the face of a given resource

and their manner of forwarding the interventionist element in poetic rewriting. While Logue “construct[s] a window in the crude sub-surface of the Homeric text” within the poetics of performance and protest poetry (Hardwick, *Translating* 60), H.D. picks an archetypal female icon — a voiceless heroine in *The Iliad*— to bring to light the construction of female psyche (x).

Against these structural choices, Layios offers a different arrangement of the Homeric tale, one that could perhaps be viewed as a reappropriation gesture while also being world-readable. Like H.D., he chooses Helen as the main ‘theme’ of his poem-in-the-making, thus joining in the ranks of creative classical rewriters; unlike Logue, he has omitted the recounting of the war, which recedes in the background and becomes intertextual in nature —references to works poets wrote. Like H.D., he deploys lyrical cadences to capture the effects of a longing that strikes one as ahistorical; unlike Logue, he brings the barbarity of war to life in a manner stylistically and thematically unprecedented. Tangentially to both, his poem hinges upon the passage from the lyrical to the epic in a fashion most appropriate, as we shall see, to the poet’s positionality in contemporary Greek letters within a nominally integrated Europe. The about-face that occurs in the second half of the poem is the point where, once translated, Layios affects an important addition to Homeric varieties available in English. As I am about to show, the initial numbing of the war narrative by an ecstatic heterosexual love gives its place, as the poem unfolds, to a gruesome transformation of the terms of lyrical expression, by which barbarity engulfs the very essence of human affection and companionship. For this to be read not as a merely individual adventure but rather as a social catastrophe, as its condensed epic, one has to read the poem in translation and against the translated work’s interlocutors. <sup>18</sup>

### Translating as close reading

The poem’s lyricism is performed: an informal getting-together of two close friends provides the social frame for the narrator’s reciting. From line one, Layios uses a language of friendship and intimacy: addressing his friend, ‘my Christos,’ he offers to sing a poem in praise of his lover, a woman named Hēlēnē, blended into the historical figure of Helen of Troy. Here is a sense of it, in my translation:

I promise, therefore, a poem with historicity like, but one  
which like a coin moist from your palm softly will roll  
...  
the tale of History I will relate, with tricks of my  
dialect.  
For her name, friend, fierce men gathered, monstrous  
armies came together with utmost determination,  
not only have they performed brave, magnanimous and high-spirited acts,  
not only have they boldly committed virtuous as well as debauched acts (noble  
men nonetheless! this much needs to be said),  
but they have also left enigmatic signs in writing.  
...Third book of “The Iliad” ...There, the Trojan elderlies, wrecked by sy-  
philis,  
protesting about the butchering of their young ones,  
unable to see how a fair-cunt whore could justify any  
tomb.  
Then, in all her imperial glory, enters the bitch. And imperially she is wa-  
lking.  
They are allowed to see her and name her. Hēlēnē. (13-15)

Layios then traces later Homeric traditions, both at home and abroad:

...I get back to  
writing,  
bloody enraged for some bastards, real freaks of nature,  
Homers and Hesiods, Stesichoruses me thinks and Euripideses (the better ones  
of the ilk),

dared, the bastards, to speak of my own Hēlēnē.

...

Hear this now, even an old fuck, from Frankish lands,  
going by the name of Ronsard, sonnet-writer of the last order, capable  
merely for anthologies at most, if that,  
dared to take her name on his demented old mouth. That's right,  
he dared to pass it on to a crazy Irish, a certain William  
Whatshisname,  
some loony visionary or other. Shrewd bastards - poems they said  
they wrote. (16)

The sarcastic representation of Homeric genealogies, domestic or European in origin, becomes, in the poem's performance, the stuff of ordinary discourse between pals, one cocky the other obliging.<sup>19</sup> This, too, partakes of a specific plaiting together of discursive elements that form the narrative, primarily interpersonal and political: for social anthropologists, the narrator's nonchalant belittlement would mask a means of establishing complementarity in entitlement. With similar cheek, Logue has used anachronism as "a way of identifying the authority of the classical with the ideologies of militarism and patriarchy" (Frow 177). Zigzagging alongside such derogatory chit-chat, emerges the real-time lover of the narrator, Hēlēnē, who the narrator met "on Asklipiou street." The poem paints her, nonetheless, as a transcendental ideal, ultimate condition of the historical-literary figure. By now it is evident that the poem is a stage act with a variety of sub-plots, changes in narrative perspective and technique, scenes within-a-scene and self-interruptions. Within the frame of its single lyrical mood, I would pinpoint narrative contents such as the relating of the loss of Christos, tellingly, in the middle of a line; the narrator's reference to his mother; the public confession of his unspecified crime and his closing address to his "fellow men."<sup>20</sup>

Such interwoven sub-currents indicate an incessant change in narrative perspective and localisation: for instance, from urging his interlocutor to "have a smoke," the narrator goes on to point, as if in the present time, to the Trojan elderlies, immediately followed by a freeze frame: "Then, in all her imperial glory, enters the bitch" (15); ushering Hēlēnē and the Trojans into the poetical stage is a quasi gestural effect. Switching from the historical past to the present participle to simple present to depict a key Homeric scene transforms the narrator into a one-man Chorus, whose role is to comment, interpret, or instruct—a much more direct enunciative position than H.D.'s. Reversing the effect, the tense switches manipulate the historicity of the actors and the subliminal quality of Hēlēnē. In contrast, H.D. suggests Helen's intertextual nature by stripping her interior monologue from explicit references and instead prefacing each poem with a loosely philological comment. Layios evokes ahistorical sublimity against intertextual allusions, exploding in the narrator's physical present as, for instance, in the free-standing exclamatory line, nearly context-free, "My Christos, [there's] Hēlēnē!" (14). Same eruption of the bodily present into the recounting of the past when the narrator rushes to clarify that he wrote the poem for his lover, only to be self-interrupted by,

Mistress, for a moment my left hand touches you,  
for the fair bronze that plays on your hair,  
I see your eyes gazing upon me  
with the sheen of an animal. (15)

The narrator deliberately intercalates familiar Homeric vignettes with glimpses of the lovely ghost, memories of being pierced by happiness of the kind that stands "beyond and above [his] own gaze" (16); combustion level temperatures of the real thing need to be tempered by the cold heat of history revisited in a smoke-filled cafe—illuminated for its Anglophone audience by Anne Carson's comment, "[w]e need history to remain ordinary" (*Decreation* 180). Layios artfully handles the discursive tropes that inform his poetics so that the immersion in and out of nonlinear temporal sequences is conducted with conversational ease. Poetically speaking, however, his handling suggests a blurring of the line separating lyrical mysticism from what appears like a politicised form of disruption (that is to say, the poem's irreverence)—the point where, one may assume, the marginal positionality becomes noticeable. The break in the unity of the poem's lyricism by ironical distancing is soon to be followed

by another mood switch, this time closer to the core. But, first, it is important to see how the poem generates lyrical emotion.

The premise of orality serves the purpose of a dialogic reading experience whereby emotional response overrides intellectual pleasure and even imaginative scope. Phaticisms and other tags, liberal use of the present continuous, frequent interruptions of the historic tale, sarcastic or intimate asides, a predilection for poignant sentimentality or self-pity, all belong to a rich tapestry of affective registers Layios orchestrates confidently.<sup>21</sup> Inner emotions are either suggested or evoked by sympathy in a variety of manners: tender terms of address, conventional images of innocence, repetitive use of diminutives and sorrowful pleadings. The sentimentality implied in such expressive devices falls, once again, within the range of indigenous aesthetics, also partaking of fraternity and bonding structures found in Mediterranean societies (Herzfeld 139-41). The poem's overall mood is a function of sentimentality, one that evokes aesthetic experience as a shared practice (Lutz 4-6).

The narrator expresses primarily his distinctive idiom of affectionate love through his sparkling interaction with Christos, partner in the act of writing. Although the friend is, strictly speaking, unvoiced, he nonetheless represents a kind of third presence on whom Layios's emotion bounces off; in narrative terms, the auxiliary becomes structural. Christos's ghost is visualised as, on the one hand, 'tortured spirit,' 'my beloved shadow,' 'soul' and, on the other, 'my companion and my lack,' 'friend' (a total of seven times), 'my brother.' Such terms of endearment manifest an intensity of purpose that may resist translation, into English at the very least.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the intention appears to be intensity itself, one that does not need justification and is never embarrassing for its speaker: the possessive 'my' qualifies the friend's name throughout the poem but a functional translation would require it to be either omitted or bracketed. The discourse of emotions created here produces a kind of representation through resonant states, namely variations and accumulations of proper names that seek to write the presence of the person directly on the material of the communication, the social poem. In another poem entitled 'Helias Layios miracle-maker,' the poet confesses how he 'pillages tombs' of his dead ones for his poetic purposes, how 'he changes their names in sound' to write them in/for posterity (*Poimata* 338). The exuberance also characterising Helene's states goes from the sublime to the phonemic as illustrated by qualifications such as 'sent by the hand of Holy God,' Helene 'without antonoma,'<sup>23</sup> 'panheleno body,'<sup>24</sup> 'destruction of all ordinary,' and even 'ecumene fully arrest[ing] ecumene' (15).

Paradoxically, to translate the poem in English would be to undo the Anglicised name Helen (of Troy) by negotiating one's way through a thread of name qualifications anchored in the poet's non-mimetic aesthetics (see also endnote 26). The sheer intensity of naming in the source text (for instance, 'my wholly mine' or 'ecumene fully arrest[ing] ecumene') indicates a will not simply to overwhelm the origin of Layios's desire by lexical overindulgence but rather to shatter it into a new constellation. The challenge for the translator and the Anglophone reader alike is to bear up the shifting perceptions associated with the obsessively renamed classical Helen, whose common appellation remains naggingly present in English. A process of not-hearing, of *un-doing*, therefore, ought to run parallel to a process of *doing* of the desired woman —entailing a transformation of translation's function, to remake by relying upon and confirming what is already known.

Extremely useful tools in this respect are linguist Vidal Sephina's concepts of "intensives or tensors": these denote "a notion of horror, of awe, of pain, of fear" and include "any linguistic tool that allows to reach the limits of a notion or go beyond it" (105, 113). Analysing Layios's intensity through Sephina's tensors, one can perceive the effects of the linguistic "force percutante" as it reaches-for, over and past the lexical limits of Helene's proper name. Its centuries-long usage —what Sephina calls "microdiachronie" or "restrained diachrony"— which has dulled its intensity, becomes in effect Layios's target; by reworking her name he reshapes her affective significance through a constant battle with effects of convention, appropriation and sterility. Ventriloquising Stesichorus, H.D. defines Helen similarly as "both phantom and reality" (*Helen* 3), followed by the verses, "she whom you cursed/ was but the phantom and the shadow thrown/ of a reflection" (5). Layios's various idioms effectively turn her into an unspecified (albeit superlative) entity, a vessel for the poet's aspirations,



intertextual referent (H.D.'s "inked-in shadow"; *Helen* 23), and warm desirable body his arm suddenly reaches for. Her sublimity is diluted in the overwhelming allegory of her name, only to be retrieved in the meatiness of desire (breasts like "mugs full of hydromelo" [honey dissolved in water]) or, later, the self-hate of men talking about lovers and wives.

The intensification reaches a climax in phrases such as 'panheleno kormi' [all-Hellenic body] (14) and a series of anagrams found in poem IV of the same collection:

For I did not balance myself out in the centre of your name,  
to see epsilon [e] solidly erect against your lamvda [l] and your nē [n],  
for my gaze did not align itself with your posture,  
for I did not feel the domestic darkness of your first letter,  
nor hēta the unfathomable,  
lanaē lonē lēnis nhēlēnē lhēnēlon  
how could I? how were I to understand your name? (21)

Here the physicality of the woman transmogrifies into the voluptuousness of her appellation as in some surreal shot from Pedro Almodovar's cinematography: the poet wishes, but fails, to touch, balance against or align himself with its vowels and consonants: 'hēta,' 'lamvda,' 'nē.' The specificity of the name reaches its utter limits, phonemic superficiality, and concentrates the failing capacities of the poet. His tongue rehearses the letters in different sequences, each time creating anagrams more attractive than the next, while undoing the name's common currency.<sup>25</sup> Calling into speech the raw phonemes of 'Helene' is a fabulous device: gorgeous letters, anagrammatised, produce sensuously grafted names —'lanae,' 'lone,' 'lenis,' 'nhelene,' 'lhenelon'— names that common language has never uttered before. The intensity mechanism is not dissimilar to the Myrmidons's cry for their leader, Achilles: "And the Army love their darling, and they cry:/ 'Achil! Achil! Achil!'" (phonemically successful in echoing 'a-kill'; Logue, *War* 72).

Such processes of un-making, un-naming, while inhabiting, as it were, at the same time 'Helene,' leads us to the second major about-face of the poem —a flash shift that, as we shall see, can help us better understand its specific contribution to Westernised Homeric retellings; for the intensification of Helene's specificity is about to be interrupted by historical misogyny, when she is depicted as "fair-cunt whore"; "imperial...bitch"; "godwhore"; "butchering blood, God's sacred blood" (15). Thus far the poem has been pacing along a single note, lyrical affection; it now embraces a sinister change in mood: the depiction of Helene as a whore writ large matches in intensity the ecstatic praise of her saving grace. The cultural archetype of "Helen hated of all Greece," cursed "through eternity" (H.D. *Helen* 2 and 4), is embraced by the narrator with such unthinking vileness that one has to wonder about the gaping opacity in her representation. The telling of this love sets in motion a mechanism which shows the interrelation between the perspective of the poem and the cultural discourse underpinning it.

The mention of women in the public space has traditionally been associated with a transgression of their domesticated nature: based on fear of female sexuality, the cultural misogyny at work is recognisable by an animalistic verve, hence derogatory descriptions of women's impact on men's actions (Johnson 18-19). Logue illustrates the cliché with "the beauty to be fought for with long spears" (*Husbands* 20).<sup>26</sup> Unlikely breeding ground for this kind of patriarchal discourse, the historicity of Layios's retelling is the channel through which enter into view perceptions of women whose power over men is interchangeably redemptive or destructive, perceptions culturally discredited in the contemporary Western psyche. The question would be how translation could accommodate them stylistically within the restricted domain reserved (since the Enlightenment) for the despicable and the repulsive.<sup>27</sup> For, without doubt, such stroboscopic glimpses of misogyny are part and parcel of Layios's poetics, which frequently turns to classical and biblical figures in order to articulate murder, rape and incest "in a language that sweats and cries" (Psarras 152). Greek critics have repeatedly stressed Layios's recourse to "the Promethean myths of the human race, where subjects do not narrate because they are not yet constructed." His art, in other words, is preoccupied

with evoking not a rational being but the human body “as unclassified possibility, slave to impetuses that motivate it and to a god that annihilates it” (Psarras 151-52).

It is essential to stress here that Helene’s arrest in Layios’s horizon of desire —from adulation to demonisation— is not really contained by his prosodic management of intensity. Make no mistake about it: his poetics are historically positioned in the airpocket of banal misogyny and also, as the brief filial reference suggests, in the peculiar Mediterranean brand of male self-hate.<sup>28</sup> My translation brief cannot avoid accounting for the discordant discursive mapping of the poem which sees denigration and sublimity side by side. The puzzle of the jerky coexistence of the tender and the barbaric in the poem cannot be addressed, I argue, outside ‘crude thinking,’ a cogent model for inscribing periphery on ‘minor style’ aesthetics: in short, peripheral literature as “somatic cognition” of its damaged life (Deleuze 16-19 and Apter 150-53).

As I hope to have demonstrated, the sublimity evoked in the poem as it engages with the living past is complex, because performed and discursive. By dramatising the lyrical exchange between friends, by his lexical fuzziness as a disruptive denotational strategy, by arranging lyrical with base materials, Layios can powerfully affect the “total structure of motivation” (Smith 229-30) which regulates the interaction between narrator-audience. The poem’s conclusion is also crucial here —the emergence of an unseen thus far addressee marks a shift in tenor and register: in the manner of a Christian public anti-confession, the narrator addresses his “fellow men” to state, in plain language, his utter bereavement, framed within a human-less sense of justice.<sup>29</sup>

The bleakness of the address is heart-rending in contrast to the warmth of his interaction with vanished Christos and in the resignation of a language now reduced to its base materials, proverbial turns of phrase in a passive-aggressive tone: “blinded by sin, truly blinded”; “forgiveness, that corpse of a thing” and, finally, “I know what is evil. And I have committed it” (17). Personal defeat<sup>30</sup> is compounded by the manner in which the Greek prosody has registered loss of redemption via either love or comradeship.<sup>31</sup> The similarities are only too striking with Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis of the effects of deterritorialisation on the literary language of the minor: “To bring language slowly and progressively to the desert. To use syntax in order to cry, to give a syntax to the cry” (26). Earlier the poet sang the encomium of Helene in a tone so exquisite that it reached a quasi-religious, funereal quality; now his verses summarise a praxis unable to undo the death of a friend or to write his memory in a living social context.<sup>32</sup>

Assessing the poem’s entitlements, I would turn to Erich Auerbach who memorably deplored the critical rapture over Charles Baudelaire’s artistic achievement in *Les Fleurs du Mal* made at the expense of the poems’ “gruesome hopelessness” (226). I would be very tempted to similarly describe the paradoxical impact of this poem in translation, which would be miserably misread if read merely within the frame of lyrical emotion or emotion discourse: its social performance offers a spectacle of the narrator’s *katabasis* [descent] into virtual annihilation —which precisely grounds its claims to a canon of classical adaptation. For its expression of intimacy through intertextual dialogue is affected by this nameless barbarity, epic in its scale as it is global in its restructuring effects today. In the abject senselessness of mere survival, the peripheral poet, obsessive prophet of human suffering, faces a form of self-ostracisation. It is in this respect that the paradox that sustains peripheral poetry of real kudos shows its colours: Layios has succeeded in inscribing his lyrical language with the destructive signs and effects of war and bereavement while creating a poem of exquisite and urgent beauty. The aesthetic success denotes —is in fact mediated by— a political failure, and the hidden rage of the narrator’s confession brings home Gunnar Mynar’s point that “nothing fails like failure” (12).

### **Conclusion: an argument for locality**

As I have shown above and need to stress again, the poem’s closing verses are truly toxic for they are spoken in a space where lyrical affection slips right off the back of the impermeable finality and matter-of-factness of Layios’s folk idiom. In a way, and in parallel with his experimentations with

Helene's specificity to the point of imaginative erasure, "destruction of the ordinary" is never out of sight. In the words of writer, critic and his close friend Evgenios Aranitsis, Layios was an "eye witness from the era when art still had the will to struggle with scales of significance" (2). To propose a poem in the recognisable idiom of love encomium but one that affects a crude cut in the everyday language of folk wisdom —stating what is what, who gets what punishment, at what price, etc.— is to demonstrate a type of ambition that can be fully grasped only by stretching the poem's relational ambit. Crucially, this ambition is not contained within its source language.

This paper has explored the idea that, for translated poetry to have a broader effect, translation commentary needs to exit practice-confined source-target relations and boldly address the literary republic. It has focused, in particular, on the argument that semi-periphery can be entered by fully embracing discursive splits caused by stylistic manipulation of a pool of resources unique to the proletarian periphery of Europe. This is no special pleading on the basis of the periphery's presumed authenticity, but rather a call for a careful probe of mutual debts; marginal writing is always already conditioned and affected by the 'pressure to translate,' but it is not as clear where exactly lies the latter's debt. Criticism has to redress the minor's representation in the republic of letters with a view to showing exactly how tidal the current of global literary trade is.

Focussing on Helias Layios's poem-epitaph/ode to Helen of Troy, I have tried to show how its translation into English contributes to contemporary creative rewritings of *The Iliad*, most notably H.D. and Christopher Logue's, through a sustained reflection on the various impasses and anomalies of literary effects across and against the structural inequalities of globalised literature. The translation of the poem goes hand in hand with a critical mediation, crucial prerequisite for projecting its relevance and demonstrating its membership in this sub-canon: this is a complex affair with no fixed brief. It would necessarily have to account for the discourse of intimacy that sustains the poem's lyricism, embedded in the social aesthetics of modern Greece, as well as for the forms of intensity that materialise Layios's creative ambitions. Such challenges are compounded by the need to account for the more unpalatable aspects of the poem's positionality, emphatically demeaning masculine discourses that are socially rooted and, crucially, source of the poem's verve. In the Greek-English context sketched as a prop for the general argument, these individual challenges were met by a combined linguistic *and* critical response. Therefore, the essay discussed in some depth rhetorical and stylistic affinities with two distinct re-readings of the Homeric canon and the figure of Helene of Troy; the resulting correlation aims to promote translation as primary tool for carving out a (narrow) space for the minor in globalised literature.

Analysis as part of the translation process has pinpointed the specific ways in which Layios redraws the terms of lyrical expression in relation to creative interpretations of the classical epic: close attention to his particular orchestration of affective registers, intensity controls, and symbolical genre switches demonstrates a complex performance of lyricism and muted protest. Inevitably, the analysis-cum-translation I have proposed here wishes to assign Layios's poem its proper place among important creative rewritings of the Homeric Helen of Troy in English. The correlation should entitle his poem to an "immediate survival advantage" (Smith 48) as a necessary interface of such interpretations. The iconoclasm of Layios's version of intertextuality marks the cocky end of the pendulum; the other end is buried in a damaged narrator acknowledging cultural-political impasses on a national scale Layios himself did not actually live to experience. In a line of epic story tellers, he has not so much replaced the war element with love poetry's lyricism; he has rather brought the ravages of war to bear on the domain of intimacy, foundation for both political and erotic community. This is Layios's creative achievement, reverberating across his virtual interlocutors in the Anglophone canon. Proverbial, lyrical and prophetic, his poetry elicits an experience of sublimation that is later shown to be the lost thing. Extending the argument on the strengths of this case, translation of minor poetry appears to be a project that completely turns around suspicions of false authenticity due to the minor's unexpurgated parochial style, and may, thus, add important nuances to Moretti's literary geography.

There is no easy way to describe the double-bind success of such poetry but two things seem certain about the extensions interlinguistic translation of this type should be afforded. First, the agonistic element needs to be visible in poetry too because clash and strife are real in today's global localities. Secondly, Moretti's semi-periphery requires canons of poetries which recognise people's concerns and suffering precisely *as* aesthetic affect: what the recognition would consist of is that the translational impossibility of a lyrical individual style is not an effect of aberrant or warped sensibilities but the only possibility of aesthetic praxis critics addressing a potentially planetary audience can afford today. It is primarily in terms of such an unlikely achievement —by an individual poet writing in a language of the periphery— that criticism can articulate and eventually trip the paradox, the practical impossibility of wishing to grant minor poetries a universal mandate. The 'pressure to translate' works both ways.

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<sup>1</sup> As Roberto Schwarz put it: "the role of artistic production and historic-social reflection would be to undo [such] compartmentalization[s] and discover, or construct, the universal contemporary relevance of huge chunks of collective experience, stigmatized as peripheral" (161).

<sup>2</sup> The poem bearing the Latin numeral I, kicks off the first part of this collection entitled 'The Final Circle' (first published in the Greek journal [Poetry] 17, 2001), counting ten poems and bearing the inscription '2 February 2001.' The second part inscribed '3 February 2001,' comprises thirteen poems, and is entitled 'Asylum' (first published in the Greek journal *Nea Hestia* 1732, 2001). All references to the poem in the text come from the 2002 edition.

<sup>3</sup> Helias Layios (1958-2005). A poet of cult status in contemporary Greek poetry, he published sixteen books of poetry, of which the critically acclaimed *On Animal* (1996), *February 2001* (2002) and *The Man from Galilee* (2004). He co-founded the short-lived literary periodical *Oleen* in the 1980s, earned his living occasionally as art curator and bookseller, collaborated on poetry collections —*Triodio* (1991), with Dionysis Kapsalis and Yiorgos Koropoulis; *Bouquet* (1993), with Michalis Ganas, Kapsalis and Koropoulis— edited works of poetry, fiction, pulp fiction, and fantasy and produced criticism for small literary magazines; he was also columnist for Readings, the literary magazine of left-wing Sunday newspaper *Avge* [Dawn]. An avid reader and reviewer of Greek and world literatures, his editing and reviewing for publishing houses and newspapers also involved translations from Western and Eastern-European languages.

<sup>4</sup> All translations from Greek provided here are mine and, in line with Christiane Nord's definition of "documentary" translation (47-52), are primarily philological attempts at understanding/commenting on the poem's affective construction and ideological purchase. The translation of the collection in English is, as yet, unpublished.

<sup>5</sup> Christos Vakalopoulos (1956-1993). Writer, director and radio producer. His work and public ethos has left an indelible mark in the post-junta Greek cultural life.

<sup>6</sup> This particular brand of heteroglossia was summarised by Karen Van Dyck who spoke of Greek literature as constructed "in the shadow of a major classical language: ancient Greek," but also "invariably compared to 'major' European languages such as English, French and German" (170). This is a multiply deterritorialised literature for its linguistic history has been mediated by diglossia —the coexistence of puristic and vernacular varieties of Greek— bitterly fought in ideological and political terms since the 1880s.

<sup>7</sup> I am greatly indebted to Roberto Schwarz for this notion, as well as for the overall perspective.

<sup>8</sup> Indicatively see, Venuti 127-31 and Robinson chaps. 2-4.

<sup>9</sup> Indicatively see, Arteaga, Bandia, and Cronin *Translation* 2003.

<sup>10</sup> A recent report prepared by Literature Across Frontiers —an EU-funded advocacy platform for literature and translation in minority and regional European languages, based at Aberystwyth University— has painted a rather grim statistical picture of translation flows between Arabic, Hebrew and Turkish and English (Büchler 23-24).

<sup>11</sup> In terms of translation, the two groups are represented through Michael Cronin's distinction between "target-language intensive" and "source-language intensive" ("Altered" 88).

<sup>12</sup> Ted Hughes pointed out that: "[t]he attempt [East-European poets] have made to record man's awareness of what is being done to him, by his own institutions and by history, and to record along with the suffering their

inner creative transcendence of it, has brought their poetry down to such precisions, discriminations and humilities that *it is a new thing*" (Introduction to Popa xxi; emphasis added).

<sup>13</sup> Consider, for instance, the following excerpt from Anvil Press' submissions page: "At present we are not looking at any unsolicited work. We will post a notice here to say when we are ready to resume doing so...If you are writing in English but living outside the UK or Ireland, consider starting to publish locally. We judge the quality of translated poetry by the quality of the translation as English poetry. Our translators are mainly poets in English. But we cannot publish unknown foreign poets, however good." See . 3 Feb. 2012.

<sup>14</sup> As Barbara Herrnstein Smith has brilliantly shown, translation is one of the many ways in which "the value of a literary work is continuously produced and re-produced by the very acts of implicit and explicit evaluation that are frequently invoked as 'reflecting' its value and therefore as being evidence for it" (*Contingencies* 52).

<sup>15</sup> Theo Hermans points out that "as long as a translation is recognized and functions as a translation, a translator's discursive position is necessarily inscribed in it" irrespective of any projections of "disembodiment" in the process (64).

<sup>16</sup> Contrast this emphasis —in relation to the translation of classics —with Josephine Balmer's creative purpose "to help monolingual as well as bilingual readers to give them the *experience of comparison, of judgment* more normally reserved for the scholar" (*Classical* 22; emphasis added).

<sup>17</sup> As a reviewer of Stephen Mitchell's 2011 translation of *The Iliad* pointed out: "This very mistiness is part of the attraction: we peer through the centuries to uncover Achilles playing the lyre; the Trojan Hector joking with his son; Helen, painfully aware of her destructive beauty, weaving tales into tapestries; the aged king Priam, weeping at the feet of the man who killed his son...when we look at the stones of Troy, we see not aliens, but ourselves. That remains the poem's greatest pull, and Mitchell has re-energised it for a new generation" (Womack 30).

<sup>18</sup> The proposed extension of the poem's legibility is also linked to a beneficial remove from the domestic literary arena. The psyche of this small guild is customarily likened to 'a neighbourhood stuck in the '50s,' ridden by forms of "bottomless conservatism" and a hostility towards anything truly innovative (Aranitsis 3).

<sup>19</sup> In his ethnographic biography of contemporary novelist and left activist Andreas Nenedakis, Michael Herzfeld discussed "the constant demand for displays of self-confidence" in Greek patriarchal society, underpinned by a constant risk of having one's foibles and weaknesses erupting into the social surface: "social beings," he infers, "walk a tightrope between daring and folly" (142).

<sup>20</sup> The verses marking the closing address run as follows:

I have no complaints, begrudge no one, here true just-  
ice prevailed.  
Blinded by sin, truly blinded - fu-cking yeah.  
I don't ask for forgiveness, I don't accept mercy,  
keep your forgiveness for someone else, that corpse of a thing...  
Fellow men, you are wasting your time if you expect me to feel fear.  
You see, I know what evil is. And I have committed it. (17)

<sup>21</sup> The notion — "situational variations in language use, many of which have an affective dimension"— is instrumental in the critique of the discourse of emotions: affective registers suggest "a culturally defined set of complementary representations of emotion linked to conceptions of the person as well as the situation" (Lutz 17).

<sup>22</sup> A preoccupation with these terms' emotional load can reach a certain limit in English after which no more can be added: for instance, adding the personal pronoun on either the person's first name or its qualification can appear embarrassingly odd or parochial in its persistence in English.

<sup>23</sup> 'Antonoma' in the source text (literally 'anti-name') stands here for 'substitute-for-a-name,' 'alias'; a functional translation would probably be 'without metonymy.'

<sup>24</sup> The source text neologism is a composite word constructed by 'pan' (meaning 'all'), plus 'Helene,' adjusted to agree in gender with the grammatically neutral noun 'body.'

<sup>25</sup> Layios, Charis Psarras wrote, 'abandons visual imagery to replace it with an invocation of *what is already language* and can no longer become object of representation...(while at the same time taking) care to keep the evoked subject of poetry clear.' This abandonment of mimesis in his poetics means that "his language carries the very matter he addresses" (153-54; emphasis added).

<sup>26</sup> See also the lines:

At the window of the closed stone capital,  
Helen wipes the sweat from under her big breasts.  
Aoi!...she is beautiful.  
But there is something foul about her, too. (Logue, *War* 78)

<sup>27</sup> Barbara Smith articulates the problem within the discourse of value:

features that conflict intolerably with the interests and ideology of subsequent subjects (and, in the West, with those generally benign 'humanistic' values for which canonical works are commonly celebrated) —for example, incidents or sentiments of brutality, bigotry, and racial, sexual, or national chauvinism— will be repressed or rationalized, and there will be a tendency among humanistic scholars and academic critics to 'save the text' by transferring the locus of its interest to more formal or structural features and/or by allegorizing its potentially alienating ideology to some more general ('universal') level where it becomes more tolerable and also more readily interpretable in terms of contemporary ideologies. (*Contingencies* 49-50)

<sup>28</sup> "My mother rightly taught me to forgive everyone/ even chicken-thieves. My mother./ And me, of course, rightly too, I blanked her. My own mother." The fluent translation of the line, "I...blanked...my mother," has actually erased something untranslatable in English, which nonetheless offers a swarm of associations: in Greek the colloquial expression used by Layios means, literally, 'I wrote my mother.' The association between 'writing someone' and 'shrugging off someone' might be at odds with the task at hand but, momentarily, its linguistic noise creates awareness of what I might call *allo-discursive* domain: that is to say, an area of interaction with the source text where one briefly contemplates the illegitimate option, usually outcome of a word-for-word translation. Whether one then decides to legitimise an unrecorded, nonsensical turn of phrase or not in the target text, the impression persists of something that has slipped out, whose sharp intensity has been cunningly masked in this Greek colloquialism from the eighties. For a similar example, see Johnson 58-61.

<sup>29</sup> Compare his choice with Logue's masculine depiction of loss of brotherhood, in the scene in which Achilles is told of Patroclus' death in battle:

Down on your knees, Achilles. Further down.  
Now forward on your hands and put your face into the dirt,  
And scrub it to and fro.  
Grief has you by the hair with one  
And with the forceps of its other hand  
Uses your mouth to trowel the dogshit up;  
Watches you lift your arms to Heaven; and then  
Pounces and screws your nose into the filth.  
Gods have plucked drawstrings from your head,  
And from the template of your upper lip  
Modelled their bows. (*War* 58)

<sup>30</sup>What was lost to the narrator is poignantly stated:

Listen to me, her breasts were mugs full of hydromelo,  
And her eyes and her loneliness were larger than light itself—  
And only the name of Helene  
had blossomed for me and yielded fruit  
has beaten —shame and rage— death. (16)

<sup>31</sup> The plight alluded to here is not contained by individual fortunes. Emily Apter has pinpointed the cultural process, from late capitalism onwards, by which "the idea of subjective damage, or the withering human, becomes a way of talking once again about class —specifically, the class that has been globally downsized, packed up and moved out, micro-minoritized, or managed like an exilic community," both within national borders and supranational entities (150).

<sup>32</sup>We are reminded here of the symbolic and actual power of comradeship in Layios's generation, which continued to engage in political action and ideological debate throughout the most debilitating times for the modern Greek democracy from the mid-1980s onwards. Like most left-wing writers of his time, he witnessed the inability of the liberal intelligentsia to capture and contain the gradual and merciless descent of society to a state of political sleepwalking, from the corruption scandals of the socialist government of the 1980s to the more recent institutional and social arrest.

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