

helios

I

anonymous  
translated by ocean

## Translator's Foreword

“Being an account of a citizen of the obscure city at the navel of the world, and the sojourn of a miscreant.”

The remarkable genre-defying manuscript *Helios* was found in the attic of an apartment house in Treviso off the canal dei Buranelli in April of 2000. The moth-infested dormer had never been rented by its centenarian Venetian hostess, and the branching network of records related to prior tenanting of the levels below have yet proven fruitless in the hunt to locate the identity of its enigmatic author. The stacked and weighted manuscript stood in a cleared area amidst sheaves of disorganized papers, a somewhat maligned Royal Arrow typewriter, and many, many spent ribbons of ink. Taped inside it a heavily worn photo of a woman kissing a mannequin.

The anonymous author of *Helios* clipped this note to the dusty stack of pages: “How can anyone take credit for creations on this earth, whose source remains unnameable and whose destiny dust? From chaos the tale emerges, to chaos the tale returns. Art is granted, fermented in sleep and the silences between lovers’ whispers. Between dreams i. Between dreams, all of this.”

At once fantastic literary goulash, extravagant erotomyth, psychologist, and weird science fiction, the pen behind this work has eluded researchers of literature since its discovery. “Have i converted my very flesh into this text . . .” If such be the case, this exquisite body and its ancillaries may be all there remain to examine. What little we have: on the unfurnished apartment floor amidst the book’s shed draftwork a sprinkling of receipts and train tickets dating from the years prior to but ceasing in early August of 1977; a journal scrap referencing the eroded castle in Noale; a few charcoal sketches of Venezia and its outlying archipelago all confirming the author’s travels throughout the classic commonwealth of Veneto in the years which must have seen the manuscript’s

creation: a manuscript of immense exuberance, profuse with feverish repetitions and sprawling self-referential culs-de-sac, in places orotund and florid to the point of tedium, in others luxuriant with a Demeterian abundance. Indeed, this young citizen's coming-of-age ordeals in a fictitious netherworld at once riveted me when my professors at the Écoles Nationale des Chartes dumped it on me as below their attentions: a novel of one word followed by a 500,000 word epilogue, the unscoured thing screaming of an untempered psychology and clearly not having had the benefit of an editor, written by an unknown author in an extinct language? They deemed it bound for obscurity. Converting an obsolete language to my secondary tongue? I took the assignment with relish. And as a training grounds for this neophyte translator it has proved a profound mentor (the translator grants the writer a new voice; has his become my own?), one which, after my preliminary translations gleaned significant attentions, led me to work in its monumental shadow on site in Italy.

Fabulist literary fiction has seen its ebbs and tides on the shores of publishing, washing up little and taking with it some mighty dreamers to dawdle in the low shelves of children's fiction. Outtide: 1970's Italy. High era for our prolific author, working, presumably, with no support from the elite who frowned unfavorably upon the ambiguous genre. Why did the author of *Helios* leave this manuscript in the attic? Among the sheaves of the author's garbled peripheral writings (arrayed around the finished manuscript like the spokes of a wheel or rays of a paper sun) we find reference to another, twin and gilt copy of *Helios* "to be left in the desert:" had the author gone to deposit it? Those peripherals and mass of marginalia (awaiting complete publication by Gallimard, whose introductory essays shall, i expect, prove far more detailed than this) also contain notes toward a further unfinished and unincluded segment in Algernon's journals, as well as allusions to the existence of a collection of "Mother's Fairy Tales." As of this first English printing suggested folios remain as yet unfound. Amongst the miscellanea left by the cryptic fantasist, the inkblotted quotes, transcriptions of eavesdropped conversations, fragments and sketches of faces and trees, he (despite straggling conjecture to the contrary which cites the attunement to fashion, the relationship myopia and such, it is this translator's opinion that, given content, male authorship is crystal clear) also left the barest of pictorial outlines showing an intent to produce an annex elucidating the "animal revolution" in the Omphalasian world's distraught historicity. We can only hope that a prequel will one day present itself in such unlikely circumstances as the primary. Could he still, more than a generation later, still be working? Some scholars read in the reference which Gavin the gallerykeeper makes to suicide

as "the final period at the close of the novel," and the lack of same at the finale of *Helios*, to indicate that the author took his life; others maintain that it indicates precisely the opposite. Thus far we have no evidence to support either; his identity and deeds remain a total blank.

Translation from the original has proven arduous to say the least. *Helios* was written in an archaic Italian dialect which gasped briefly for air amid the many-colored seas of its vulgar Latin radicle. The author must have strained enormously to apply the old tongue to modern use; assimilating the customized proto-Italian to English has often required invention twofold. Aside from the pitfalls of a cuspid language just formulating itself from a rudiment, all the standard translatorly quandaries applied without recourse to authorial consultation. Words house their cultural contexts and multitudinous meanings, echoes of interreferential subtleties; i have tried my utmost to maintain meaning, reference, voice, and lushness of image, whilst preserving rhythm and tempo without sacrificing poesy. Where i have failed, the reader shall forgive the failings as my own. Shards of French and transpositions remain as in the original. The diminutive rather than majuscule use of the proper "i" i have left as in the original; the italicized dialogue; the question mark as optional, as a form of intonation rather than punctuation. The conglomerations of words and outright invention, the nonstandard syntax i have done my best to preserve. This translator has chosen to refrain from burdening the reader with footnotes in the text proper attempting to clarify translatorly decisions and extenuating circumstances of language which would only, in the end, further cloud an already often opaque text. Even, delirious. For indeed the book's compositional and poetic weaknesses (vertiginous achronologies, interchanging tenses, inconsistencies and sophomoric heavy-handed magniloquence) are compensated for by an hallucinatory prose style whose inundation of imagery leaves its readers skinned much like the protagonist finds himself in the opening scene. What remains to that painful-to-touch unsurfaced reader is the young protagonists' hypnopompic quest through and beyond Omphalos into his dubious fate.

Let us hear his words. For found alongside a likely tongue-in-cheek note to convert *Helios* to old Greek and leave it "as oblate in Okeanos' temple," an author's note and dedication, left with the manuscript but not printed in its title pages so not reproduced therein, must here be included:

"When i grow old, should dementia sink me into itself and i no longer know my own hands, come to me dear reader, sit by my bedside and read of this book to me; tell me it be the tale of a young one i once knew very, very well.

And please, open the blinds, and let the winds rush in.

For J., who said, *Make the world beautiful*,  
... and to mollify, if briefly, the clamoring dead.”

A fanciful autobiography then? Who was this “J.”? And which dead—a reference to Genet? What were the habits and influences of this recluse who dined at the canalside *ristoranti* of that most romanticized of European villas? One must ask of the anglicized names, of the setting on a fantastical western seaboard: was he an Ameriphile? And the name of the hills: a reference to the holy terrain of the Sioux? Such quandaries, among others, remain as yet unanswered. But the skeleton of this fantasy, its verisimilitude, owes at least a portion of its calcium to the sundry veiled allusions to literature or popular song of the time, most of which, i am sure, remain lost to us and await scholarly unearthing. These references grant the novel a certain robustness via resonance to our diet stuffed as it is with predigested cultural materials. The attitude to outright plagiarism can be read in Gavin the gallerykeep’s justification: the world bares itself wide for the plundering. Gallimard’s forthcoming publication, to follow this first edition, has shown complicity with this ransack philosophy, as readers of those volumes will be forced to go beyond their usual voyeurist role and slice open the pages, as Gallimard intends to print as per the author’s Autumn Mandriargues’ work: with bound signatures.

The rest, the Delphic references, the convolutions and dead-ends, the snakes leading into snakes, the questions, the analyses, i leave to students of literature, to literary critics those infallible cockroaches (Delovier’s “tedious,” Magellan’s “unreadable,” etc.), and to those more adroit than I. Those others who accuse proselytism and prolix remain unmoved with only their inattentions as company. In their absence let him speak for himself, for another note, perhaps a draft of a preface, also discovered amid extraneous papers, I feel obliged to print here in its full extent not only because it gives a sense of the author’s intent and the piquant flavor of his character, which teeters between an earthen, empathic warmth and a chill misanthropy (which seems, of course, a pre-fragmentation of his characters in turn), but because it is an invitation addressed to none other than you:

“O reader, come with us, turmeric and corroded tin, moth-welted velour slung in backdrop to our junkyard theater, i bid you, as an ancient spell upon the gods

which mortals sheepishly unearth at the end of the count of hours; the gods scoff at faith but peer a slim cyclopic eye at the doubting. Those bearded dramatists were once lynxes, long-bosomed nags, storks; and before that? Animate everyall; the stars careened like lanternbugs, catching in hair and ear canal, emitting a frightful buzz. But what remains of that ur-time? A place where every image churns, an un-place. Aye how lost can we become in that liminalis between here and heaven? If this a bridge, a bridge wide as the red fields of plenty and somewhere, somewhere on that plain, fine reader, fine fallen reader, lies the city Omphalos . . .

Come . . .

For upon this earth a grayness spreads, and we must make our escape, the waking and the sleeping gashed through by a terrible abyss. Places that are many at once; an egress which lead us ever more hastily toward our destined living. Yes escape only draws us closer to this neglected world and its sensuous forms. I that bridge. We. These pages. And reader what has happened to you? What poison has soaked into your skin already (miraculous wild henceforth befall you!)? Are you not of your very essence a bridge of flesh? Could these flesh pages widen to link the realms? A red bridge . . . Could i cram everything in here? Everything? Every wayward vision hijacked from each downspiraling mind assembled into a bridge of dreams?— If i seem to have failed, it is only from the perspective of those who remain. Adieu all lost, from the bridge i leap; my triumphant howl swept into the swirling hypnagogue.

Leave me alone all of you, my meaning is nothing like your meaning, my life is nothing like your lives, my heart is an entirely different muscle, i know nothing of politics and current events, i eschew knowledge, i swing out on impossible ropes over emptinesses foreverwide and net the black butterflies which flutter there. What is sacred to me would to you seem as crumbs and waste; likewise. Go away from me, far away, but do not die, for then you would become much too close. Things have broken and crash-called and i swallow sand and swing but one thing’s for certain: that name resounds through the spheres causing portals to gape and my own mouth too yawns that name, it tooth its first sound and my lips peel back then the tongue so gracefully places its delicate burden on the palate causing the whole thing to open and recede and then the final spit sound cracks the throat and closes up around her name. Some things are not going to be any easier for you than they are for me but we build this wreckage together, reader, you and i; deprived of skin, deprived of the heat of mouths, shorn back to this barest of infinitudes, language, we commence. Not without certain suspicions, certain leniencies, a certain reticence, of course. But we commence, hammering at splinters, bending notes, giving birth to wails

which breach then immediately absorb into the anthracite ice of empty space. From this makeshift bridge, reader, together, upon wreckage, we set out into no territory, you and i: hold my hand.”

Untold gratitude to my team, without whom I would still be huddled on the *canalasso* with unfinished pages. I couldn't have done it without you. A particularly heartfelt *grazie* to the venerable miss Flaviana Rosa Boturini della Gaya, Sorbonne alumna at EPHE's philology department, whose preliminary Italian and French translations, bottomless knowledge of Romance etymology and primal Latin's dizzying permutations, not to mention endless patience with my hair-splitting questions, have proved absolutely invaluable. An exceptional thanks to M. St. Finch and the drafts buried beneath Viennese snows; in my darkest times i would receive by mailboat in my tiny buoy-propped letterbox one of her handbuilt letters, and its dogged faith would reliably grant the courage needed to persevere: *merci ma chère*. My soulful indebtedness to Jesse Silvertrees, who has since the beginning been half of my heart. A thanks also to the kindly monastics at San Lazzaro's who generously permit me season-in, season-out access to their extensive classical linguistics libraries; the somber tolling of their bells worked its way into my bloodstream and truly became the soundtrack to this endeavor. And lastly, to this remarkable author, whose mind it has been an honor to probe: I shan't be the same for having so done.

-ocean, Olympia, February 2015

