

Modern Greek variations on the myth of Helen: Helen's ageing and death in Modern Greek poetry from the sixteenth century to the present day

Ωραία εσύ ... από τη σκόνη του θανάτου αναγεννώμενη
Takis Sinopoulos

Que tu es belle maintenant que tu n'es plus
P.J. Jouve

In a recent novel by the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood entitled *Penelopiad*, Penelope in Hades (where she's been living for the last 3000 years) narrates the story of her life in a sarcastic witty style. With her in the Underworld is her annoying cousin Helen of Troy. Penelope criticises her cousin's way of life in Hades:

I was wandering through the asphodel, musing on times past, when I saw Helen sauntering my way. She was followed by the customary horde of male spirits, all of them twittering with anticipation. She gave them not even a glance, though she was evidently conscious of their presence. She's always had a pair of invisible antennae that twitch at the merest whiff of a man.

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Helen's beauty launched not only a thousand ships; it also launched countless literary works dealing with her myth, either directly or indirectly (like the novel just mentioned), from Homer to the present day, in both Greek and Western literature, in prose, poetry and drama. Some of these works idealise Helen, some try to find excuses for her conduct, others even slander or defame her. Consequently, modern literary scholarship has not only given us a number of general studies on the myth of Helen in literature but also numerous papers on many of these specific works. Modern Greek literature has its own rich contribution to make to the subject, which, alone, would demand a special monograph, that still awaits its author.

However, I do not intend to play that role. I certainly don't want to spend a 45-minute lecture bombarding you with a list of names and titles with only a couple of sentences of comment on each. So I have had to restrict my material. But with what criteria? I have decided for a start to limit our discussion almost exclusively to works of poetry. Regarding the approach to the material, I asked myself whether it would be more interesting to look at Helen as presented in a specific period of Modern Greek literature, or would it be better to examine how a particular aspect of her story is treated at various times? I preferred the latter, as I have always been intrigued by the mysterious dialogue which develops sometimes between writers of different periods on the same subject, writers who may not even know each other's work.

The natural choice would be to see Helen as a *femme fatale* who causes a devastating, ten-year war because of her beauty and the passion it generates. But I find it even more tempting to look at the dark side of the moon. To see how writers conceived of Helen as an old woman, even a dead woman, and to ask how and why they reversed her main characteristics, youth and beauty, to which she owed her fame.

■ ► But let us first make a musical introduction to our theme and listen to a song with music and lyrics by Giorgos Stavrianos, first sung by Kostas Mantzios ten years ago. The refrain connects “Eleni” of its title with our Helen of Troy: “It is not Helen that is waiting for you / A wasted life, running fast away. / In the state of siege, Troy always loses. / Pull out the stops, search for the how and why.”

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Two years ago, one of the longest poems of Cretan Literature, the *Old and New Testament* (which we'll simply call the *Testament* from now on), was published for the first time. It consists of more than 5300 15-syllable verses, in rhyming couplets. This moralising poem, previously almost unknown, adds a new chapter to the poetic exploitation of the myth of Helen, showing her in Hades as a very ugly, battered skeleton. The *Testament* was written in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, a hundred years or more before the great classics of Cretan literature such as *Erotokritos* and the plays of Chortatsis. The poet remains unknown, but there are strong indications that he was a Catholic Greek, who spoke the Cretan dialect as his mother tongue and had a good knowledge of Latin and Italian, though not of ancient or ecclesiastical Greek.

The *Testament* includes stories from the Bible, as its title indicates. They are narrated by Death (Charos), who has undertaken to show a living man round the Underworld; not the Underworld of Greek tradition, however, but that of the Catholic Church, since there are clear references to Limbo and Purgatory. Before Charos starts his metrical narration of stories such as Noah's Flood, the Annunciation, the Flight to Egypt, the Passion and many others, the Man touring the Underworld asks to meet some dead person and discuss “life” in hell with them.

I beg you, show me somebody to talk to;
I'm very curious to question them,
for them to tell me of their pain and suffering,
so tell them, Charos, please, to talk to me.

Charos complies and chooses one of them: a horrifyingly ugly woman, covered in wounds, awash with tears, impossible to recognise. The Man plies her with questions about her identity only to receive the unexpected answer: "I'm Helen, wretched Helen, [...] Menelaus' wife and Paris' stolen partner, through whom Troy's mighty power was destroyed". Helen is the last woman we would expect to see in this state, and, no doubt, the reason she is shown this way is moralistic, in accordance with the general aim of the *Testament*. The poet shows her as a model to avoid par excellence, and condemns her from the very beginning of her speech with the pun "Ελενα είμαι η ελενή". The poet wants to call his audience to repentance and Helen is a very suitable model of human vanity and the sins to which it leads.

So, after the Man has listened to Helen introducing herself, he tries to come to terms with the fact that he is standing face to face with the symbol of eternal beauty:

Is that you, Helen, famed throughout the world [...]?
Are you the morning star, the shining moon,
that could defeat all nature with your beauty?
Where is your shining beauty, your clear face,

where are your golden clothes, where are your pearls [...]
Are these your lovely eyes, your painted lips ...*and so on*.

This, in fact, is Helen as imagined according to tradition, impossible to conceive ending up in Hell. The Man, after recovering from the first shock, realises that some sin must be the cause of this predicament, and asks to be informed: «Tell me about your crime, about your sin, whether your many charms were your undoing». Helen answers his question with a monologue of about 200 verses, before retiring back to the darkness of the Inferno.

Helen's speech can be divided into four parts, clearly showing the care that the poet lavished on its composition.

First, in an 8-verse prologue, Helen laments that Man has reminded her of things forgotten for centuries, increasing her anguish. Then, in part 2, she narrates the incidents that led her "directly" (πάραντας) into the Inferno. The facts are well known from mythology and ancient writers (The Judgement of Paris, Paris's journey to Sparta, his liaison with Helen, the two lovers' escape to Troy and Helen's refusal to go back, the Trojan War and, finally, the sack and burning of the city). Yet there is a point in Helen's narration that I haven't found in any other version of her myth: she describes how she and Paris died in the conflagration, in each other's arms.

Then too, such was my fate, I too was called,
I was found burned, with Paris, in his arms.
I came at once to Hades, pain and torment,
because of my many crimes and all those deaths.

This development must be another innovation by our poet. He does not want to allow his anti-heroine the opportunity to go back to Sparta with her husband and repent. People at this time were very aware that death can come at any moment, even to the young and beautiful and powerful, so they should not leave repentance for later in life. The message is clear: avoid sin at any stage of your life, because there may not be time to beg God for forgiveness.

The second part of Helen's speech ends with a series of contrasts between her appearance when alive and her present state in Hades (for instance: "For the make-up I used to put on my face, look at my face now, look what a state I'm in"). And so the Man's question "Tell me about your sin" is answered.

The third part is the answer to the Man's curiosity to learn about the suffering of the dead in Hell. Helen describes the tortures she suffers every day in fire, cold water and filthy mud. The sixteenth-century audience of the *Testament* learns what to expect after a sinful life on earth.

The last part of Helen's speech, as long as the three others together, takes the form of a letter to the beautiful young women of the Upper World with the aim of protecting them from the dreadful consequences of sin. The device of a dead person sending letters to living relatives is known from other Greek works, such as *Apokopos*. Here, though, Helen has no relatives alive to send a letter to, so she accomplishes her moral contribution to the *Testament* by addressing a sort of sermon to a category of woman prone to arrogance and adultery because of their beauty. The letter takes clearly the form of a carefully composed rhetorical speech, on the theme: «Don't be led astray by earthly pleasures».

After finishing the dictation of her letter, Helen doesn't speak any more but retires, in fact creeps «like a snake», back to the darkness. And so ends this episode of the

Testament, unique in its conception, as far as we can ascertain. Yet behind this long passage, and despite its apparent originality, we can discern an ancient source that may have been known to our anonymous poet and may have influenced him in including a dialogue between Man and Helen in his edifying text.

The first time in ancient literature that Helen appears in Hades is in Lucian's eighteenth *Dialogue of the Dead* (2nd century A.D.). In that dialogue, the Cynic philosopher Menippus is touring Hades together with Hermes, when he asks his guide to show him the beautiful women and handsome men who reside there. Hermes is in a hurry and shows him only a few, of whom one is Helen. Menippus especially wants to see Helen, but he is presented with nothing more than a skull.

Menippus: Show me Helen's head anyway. I could hardly pick it out by myself. *Hermes*: This one is Helen. *Men*: Well! Is this what launched a thousand ships from every part of Greece and was responsible for slaughtering so many cities? *Hermes*: Ah, Menippus, you never saw her in the flesh.

Here Helen does not participate in the dialogue, as she does in the Cretan *Testament*, where she is the uncontested protagonist of the passage. However, the similarities in the general concept are so obvious that we cannot resist considering this Dialogue as the source which gave the Cretan poet the general idea for the episode of a living man in the Underworld whose meeting with Helen gives the author the occasion to moralise, briefly in the ancient text, and more extensively in the medieval one. Lucian was very much admired and imitated in both Byzantium and Renaissance Italy. Renaissance Italians read him as a moralist (which very much reminds us of the *Testament*) who had the advantage of a clear and amusing style. *Dialogues of the Dead* was among the works of Lucian most frequently translated into Latin and Italian during the 15th and 16th centuries, and hence they could be more accessible to people like our clerical poet.

Apparently, Lucian made Helen in Hades a popular literary motif, whose latest version is Atwood's *Penelopiad*. As far as Modern Greek poetry is concerned, this motif recurs centuries after the Cretan *Testament*, in the work of two lesser known poets of the 20th-century: Ioannis Moschonas and Aris Diktaios – the latter, by an interesting coincidence, coming from the same place, Crete, as the poet of the *Testament*. As we will ascertain in the course of this lecture, Helen will get old and die several times in Modern Greek poetry of the post-war period, but she will only once reappear as an inhabitant of the Underworld, in a poem by Takis Sinopoulos.

Ioannis Moschonas composed the poem "Helen's death" (Ο θάνατος της Ελένης) in 1925, later publishing it in his collection *The Diary of Death* (Το Ημερολόγιον του Θανάτου), 1927. Helen herself doesn't appear at all, but the whole poem is about her forthcoming arrival in Hades, where Persephone is indignant at the prospect of receiving that woman. Persephone threatens her husband Pluton that she'll return to the Upper Word if Helen arrives in their kingdom; there is not enough room for both of them in the Underworld:

"I've heard Helen has died. Tell Charon
to stop her wherever she is!
If she comes here, farewell, I'll make my way
back to where I came from.

Either me or her! One of us will remain in Hades

and one will reign!
Sun and moon never stand together –
Hades will become Troy! Who wouldn't abduct her?"

Particularly striking in Pluton's reply is his use of the word "dies" (πεθαίνει) and its opposite "immortal" (αθάνατη): Helen may have literally died this time, but she has died metaphorically of sensual pleasures on numerous occasions in her life. Sensual death nullifies physical death and a life full of pleasures is preferable to immortality: "Any woman who dies in pleasure many times, / doesn't want to remain immortal in our Hades" ("κι όποια μέσα στην ηδονή πολλές φορές πεθαίνει / Αθάνατη τον Άδη μας δε θέλει").

Aris Diktaios was born in Heraklion, Crete, in 1919 and died in Athens in 1983. He studied law and worked for broadcasting and publishing companies. In his work *Our century* there is a prose-poem entitled 'Eleni', which starts with the poet asking himself where to find Helen (Πού θα σε βρω;). In this poem, death is connected with Helen through two images of the Underworld, the 'mourning of shadows (dead people) who disappear in Hades', and 'memory', which is 'the valley of asphodel, the lily of my generation' – asphodel being those yellow or white daffodils symbolic of mourning in Antiquity.

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■ ► But I think it's again time for us all to relax with a musical interval. This time we'll listen to the world-famous composer Manos Hadjidakis, who wrote the music and lyrics of the song "For Helen" in 1977. The woman figure is basic in Hadjidakis's work. He composed about 70 'female' songs, in which three types of woman dominate: the mysterious girl, the mother, and the mature woman. His Eleni, belonging to the first type, is "a girl who no longer exists". According to Hadjidakis himself: "Eleni is the myth about a girl of our times who has vanished. Eleni is a ghost in the shape of a girl who appears and disappears every now and again [...] it's the constant idea of a vanished girl". The lyrics of this beautiful song will appear translated on the screen, for you to enjoy its intense poetical feeling. Please note especially the idea of Eleni's tomb in the last stanza.

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Returning to the Interwar years, we encounter Helen in the work of Sotiris Skipis (1881-1952), a poet, translator, playwright and member of the Academy of Athens, wrote three short poems on Helen ("Song for Eleni", "Song of Eleni" and "Eleni" - the first two composed in 1927, the third in 1948) and one long poem in the form of a dialogue entitled "Eleni's return" – Ο γυρισμός της Ελένης, 1928). In the poem "Eleni", Menelaos is about have his wife killed, sacrificed in place of a ram. At the very last moment, the Muses rush in and save Helen, taking her with them as their tenth sister, and so her death is avoided. ("Μα ο Βασιλιάς τους δίχως καν να τους θωρεί, / προς το θυσιαστή, που το μαχαίρι / στυλπνό κρατάει στο χέρι, τη Βασίλισσα / σπρώχνει με βια! ...Κράζει, βοά το πλήθος. // Μα, ω θαύμα! μες στην τόσην αναστάτωση / άξαφνα ορμούν οι Μούσες... Την αρπάζουν / και την πάνε για πάντα στον Ταύγετο"). This scene apparently echoes Euripides's *Orestes*, where the hero kills Helen, but her corpse disappears, skatched to safety by Apollo. Then, Helen, thus saved by the gods, became a star.

Back to Skipis, in his verse dialogue “Eleni’s return”, the Women’s Chorus mourn because they’ve been informed that Helen has died: “On the scales of our grief, the death of Beauty-Helen is a thousand times heavier than the loss of our kin” (“Γι’ αυτό στη ζυγαριά, ξένε, του πόνου μας, / για το χαμό δικών και συγγενών μας, / χίλιες φορές βαραίνει περισσότερο / ο θάνατος της Ομορφιάς – Ελένης”). Skipis doesn’t want Helen dead. He is afraid of her death, because she is “the spirit of Greece” (ήταν αυτή το Πνεύμα της Ελλάδας), she is “the substance of our country” (ήταν αυτή του τόπου μας η ουσία). The poet understands Helen’s death is unavoidable but prefers to postpone it and not show it in his own work.

Some thirty years later, however, one of the most important poets of the post-war years in Greece, the medical doctor Takis Sinopoulos (1917-1981), is not afraid to talk repeatedly of Helen’s death. Sinopoulos experienced the Second World War, which decisively influenced his work. So, all persons in his poetry are war heroes, victims, or dead people. Eleni is one of them. The poet devoted to her two poems (“Eleni” and “Eleni II”) in the collection *Μεταίχμιο* (1951), as well as the collection *Eleni* of 1957, consisting of nine poems plus an “Invocation to the sun of Helen”. Helen appears in other poems as well (for instance, in “Songs” 7, 8 and 11 of the collection *Songs* (Άσματα) I-XI (1953), and in general she is the figure who “dominates from his first to his very last collection” (the Χρονικό).

Just like Hadjidakis’s girl we saw earlier, Sinopoulos’s Eleni has two aspects simultaneously: she is “half mythical – half contemporary, half real – half imaginary, the symbol of eternal femininity”, but at the same time “she comes from death and sheds death around her”. Sinopoulos’s poem is full of the anguish of war, the Nazi and Fascist Occupation, starvation, bombing and the chaos in people’s souls which the poet had experienced in and after World War II. Yet the collection *Eleni* is at the same time a hymn to beauty. As George Themelis has put it, “poetry [in Sinopoulos] is a break in the crystal from which beauty pours – [and beauty is] Helen’s dead body”.

Sinopoulos’s poems on Helen are stirring. Allow me to read a brief selection I’ve made of the verses which directly connect Helen to death, the verses that have touched me most. I’ll read them in Greek, for you to enjoy the poet’s original writing, but an English translation will appear at the same time on the screen.

Πρώτη φορά όταν έκραξες μες στο πυκνό
σκότος με τρόμο τ’ όνομά μου κι η κραυγή
λυσίκομη έφτασε στον Άδη κάτω [...]
Δεν ήταν έργο του μυαλού μου Ελένη.
Σε σύντριψα σε σκόρπισα κι ακούστηκε
κείνη η κραυγή πούσκισε σα μαχαίρι
το χώμα κι έφτασε στον Άδη κάτω. («Ελένη II»)

[Μιλά ο Πάρις:] Κι ένοιωθα πάλι εκτός απ’ τη σιωπή και την Ελένη
αισθήσεις άλλες που τις γνώρισα μόνο μέσα στο θάνατο. («Άσμα VII, Πάρις»)

[Μιλά η Ελένη:] Όμως εγώ πεθαίνω απόψε που γεννήθηκα.

Η σκιά της γης με σκέπασε κι είμαι άλλη μια φορά
μέσα στη γνώση του θανάτου μου άσπιλη από θάνατο
λουσμένη τώρα από
τον καρποφόρο ήλιο των ποιητών. («6. Ο θάνατος της Ελένης»)

Η Ελένη τώρα γίνηκε ένα με τη γη.

Λάμπει μες στην πατρίδα του θανάτου υπέρτερη...
Και τούτη την Ελένη την αγγίζω της μιλώ.
Τα μάτια της πελώρια από το χρόνο
περνούν πάνω απ' τους τάφους λούζονται
συμφιλιωμένα με το φως. Εδώ είναι η νέα Ελένη. («7. Η σκέψη του ποιητή»)

Ωραία εσύ
νυχτερινή του απείρου εξαίσιο του θανάτου λάφυρο
από τη σκόνη του θανάτου αναγεννώμενη. ...
Ω ποτέ
ποτέ μη φύγεις για τους τόπους του χαμού
στις χώρες τις απάνθρωπες μη σπαταλήσεις
τούτη τη σάρκα σου από σμάλτο κι από κρύσταλλο....
Μες στην πελώρια πόλη του ύπνου θα συναντηθούμε
σάμπως σε μια αυτοκρατορία νεκρών ποιητών
κατάμεστη από σταλαχτίτες-ποιήματα ... («8. Ποίημα για την Ελένη»)

Η Ελένη εντούτοις δεν υπάρχει πια
μες στην εγκόσμια λύπη.
Υπάρχουν μόνο τα ποιήματα
μια συλλογή από σπαραγμούς
ένα θλιμμένο ουράνιο ρόδο. («9»)

Another famous Modern Greek poet, Yannis Ritsos, devoted to Helen one of his “major poems”, *Helen*, plus 4 more appearances in other poems, in all of which she is marked by the ravages of old age. Ritsos’s *H Ελένη* was composed in summer 1970, during the seven-year military dictatorship, under the influence of the death of the poet’s sister, and it is dedicated to her memory. The poem was then published in March 1972, and nine months later was included with 17 other long prose-like poems in the collection *The Fourth Dimension*, which consists of works written over a period of about 20 years, most of them having as their title the name of a mythical, tragic person. Most, like *Helen*, take the form of a monologue by the person mentioned in the title, addressed to some friend or visitor. Helen is an old woman in this poem, living in an ancient, ruinous mansion. The person to whom she addresses her monologue is a young visitor, silent throughout. At the end of her speech, the old woman dies and the visitor leaves not knowing where to go.

Images of death and its associations appear in Helen’s speech from its very beginning. The black colour, the lost sense of time....., the sense of the vanity of human affairs....., even the mention of urns, a scene of ritual mourning,..... plus other death rituals, and the simile of some anonymous man:

Ritsos also responds to the Euripidean idea of the artificial double, the likeness of Helen that went to Troy instead of herself. In Ritsos’s poem, though, most of the main protagonists in the Trojan war are also mere shadows:

The concept of the mirror recurs several times in the course of the poem. At one point, Eleni refuses to look at herself in the mirror, because she is afraid to see her aged face....., but later she asks for a mirror to look at her face after being made up by her woman servants, apparently in an effort to revive her old image:What links the two passages is an attempt to avoid the reality of ageing.

The poet devotes several passages to the description of the physical ravages of ageing. Even before her actual death (which, as we said, occurs at the end of the

poem), Eleni seems to view her house as a place of the dead; as a metaphorical Hades in which she lives isolated.

Death is everywhere in Ritsos's *Eleni*; around and inside the woman. Death is personified, its smell is everywhere, it comes closer and closer. Helen herself experiences her death as an ascent. Having lived for so many years in a death house, surrounded by the shadows of the dead, her own death can't take her deeper in to the Underworld; It can only take her higher. Here is the end of her monologue, a few minutes before she dies:

...And that scene, on the walls of Troy – did I really undergo an
ascension,
letting fall from my lips - ? Sometimes even now,
as I lie here in bed, I try to raise my arms, to stand
on tiptoe –to stand on air– the third flower –

Unlike the optimistic tone of the *Moonlight Sonata* of 1956 (one of the first poems of the *Fourth Dimension*), which is again a monologue by an old lady to her young visitor, *Helen's* perspective is pessimistic, which is attributed to the fact that the poet is now about 60 years old, and is experiencing the death of his sister, the dictatorship, plus the split of his party, the Greek Communist Party . Ritsos speaks through the voice of Helen, since all mythical heroes of the *Fourth Dimension* are distinct personas of the poet, and “their voice sounds as his voice”. As in other poems of the *Fourth Dimension*, Ritsos filters some of his own experiences and emotions through the voice of his protagonist.

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Having discussed the three major works on a dead or aged Helen in Modern Greek poetry, namely the episode from the Cretan *Testament*, and the poems of Ritsos and Sinopoulos, I want to stress one point that impressed me while studying them: in all three, Helen appears together with a man, who discusses with her (in the *Testament*) or addresses himself to her (Sinopoulos), or to whom Helen addresses herself (Ritsos). In the first two cases, the man can be considered as a *persona* of the poet; in the third, Helen herself may be seen partly as a *persona* of the ageing poet. It would be worth studying this device further, but I'm afraid I don't feel quite competent to do so. Fortunately I've got the excuse that time is running out, but I would be happy to listen to your suggestions later on.

■ ►At this point, before we proceed to the last Modern Greek poem on an aged Helen, let's listen to a rock song, very popular among young people in Greece, "Ο βασιλιάς της σκόνης", "The king of dust" [or maybe “of powder”? depending on the meaning we give to the word "σκόνη"], composed in the mid '90s by the rock group Xylina Spathia ('Wooden Swords'). The song speaks of targets unachieved and ideals shattered: this disillusionment is symbolised by the remote city of Troy and an old lady called Helen: "I know Troy will always be far away / and beautiful Helen must be an old woman by now". ("Ξέρω πάντα η Τροία θα 'ναι μίλια μακριά / κι η ωραία Ελένη θα 'ναι τώρα γριά").

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About thirty years after Ritsos's *Helen*, another poet imagined the ancient beauty as an aged woman who "sees her wrinkles as remorse for the lovers she desired and who didn't carry her off / and she dissolves into tears/ when she thinks of how many other Troys/ her incontinent rage / could loot". The poet, Stathis Koutsounis, born in 1959, is a High School teacher in Athens, having studied law, literature and classical music. His poem "Helen" forms part of the collection *The Terrorism of Beauty*, published in 2004, and is most probably the very latest modern Greek poem on an aged Helen of Troy. It's worth noticing Koutsounis's common motif with Ritsos's *Helen*: the conception of the beautiful woman looking in her mirror, where she discovers the ravages of age, a conception which also connects both these poems to the phantom Helen in Euripides's play, the image that went to Troy instead of Helen herself. The mirror is the point where two different traditions of the myth of Helen (the one we saw here and that of Euripides) cross paths in the works of poets throughout the ages.

And thus closes a circle of about four centuries of Modern Greek literature on a Helen who dies and descends to the Underworld (*Testament*, Moschonas, Diktaios, Sinopoulos), or wants to ascend into the sky (Ritsos), whether as an aged woman (Ritsos, Koutsounis) or not (*Testament*, Moschonas, Skipis). Yet the motif of Helen's ageing was not originally invented by Greek poets. It first appears in the 15th Book of the *Metamorphoses* by Ovid (1st c. B.C. - 1st c. A.D.):

Tyndaris weeps too when in the mirror she sees an old woman's
wrinkles and asks herself why she has been ravished twice.

In the 16th century, the French nobleman and poet Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1585), in one of his *Sonnets pour Hélène*, "borrowed from Ovid this rhetorical motif of an aged Helen, who mourns for her lost beauty". In that same century, appears for the first time a sort of biography of Doctor Faust (inspiring famous plays by Marlow and Goethe) where the hero calls Helen from the Underworld, falls in love with her and they have a son together. Later, the Italian poet, playwright and politician Gabriele d'Annunzio (1863-1938) and the famous surrealist French poet Gillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918), both of the late 19th – early 20th century, returned to this idea, presenting Helen as "badly-aged" [κακογερασμένη] "with no teeth in her mouth" (d'Annunzio), or as an "old woman with sweet lips" (Apollinaire). Another famous French poet of about the same age, Paul Valéry (1871-1945), in a sonnet of his youth puts Helen announcing that she "comes from the cave of death" (Megaro, 18). On the other hand, Pierre Jean Jouve (1887-1976) finds the dead Helen still beautiful, in his poem "Helen", translated into Greek by Odysseas Elytis, starting with the verse "*Que tu es belle maintenant que tu n'es plus*", [Backes] which Sinopoulos's used as a motto for his collection of poems on Helen. The American poet Ezra Pound, finally, in his *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* of 1920, used the image of the aged Helen to stress the futility of war, in these verses, which are considered to be the model for Seferis's "empty shirt":

There died a myriad
and of the best, among them,
for an old bitch gone in the teeth,
for a botched civilization.

And here, a little before closing this lecture, enters the unavoidable question “why”; why did poets choose to show the most beautiful woman of all Antiquity as an old and dead woman? What made them reverse the picture of eternal beauty?

The answer as far as the Cretan *Testament* is concerned is straightforward, given by the text itself: Helen is intended to be an edifying lesson against the arrogance and the sin caused by beautiful looks, in the context of moralising Medieval literature.

But what about the aged Helen of the twentieth century? On one level it is a way for poets to convey their perception of the merciless cycle of life, which includes the wear and tear of time. To show the effects of aging on the woman most praised for her beauty is far more effective than using just any person as an example. No doubt the deterioration of the body affects the poet personally as a human being, but instead of showing it as a personal experience, he prefers to show it through a pseudohistorical person (like Iason Kleandrou in Cavafy's poem “Melancholy of Iason Kleandrou, poet in Kommagene, 595 A.D..”) or through another persona, like the woman in Ritsos' *Moonlight Sonata* or his version of Helen. For some poets (like Sinopoulos in particular) the disillusionment, the sense of futility arising from the war and the slaughter it caused makes Helen an appropriate symbol, due to the notorious war she had brought about. Whether dead or a phantom, she seems to say that in the end it was all for nothing.

Yet, beyond aims and symbols, what is intriguing in such a wandering through the ages is that “dialogue” between poets from various periods and generations, and from various countries. One poet reacts or responds to the other, by reversing or developing an idea. The Cretan poet of the *Testament* apparently develops Lucian's 18th *Dialogue of the Dead*, Sinopoulos admits his debt to J.P. Jouve (Varelas, p. 335), Koutsounis follows Ritsos in the motif of the mirror, *and so on*.

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To close this brief contribution to the literary exploitation of the myth of Helen, I chose a song written for a recent production by the National Theatre of Greece, a song which, in its turn, responds to previous songs on Helen (you may recognize “For Helen” by Hadjidakis and “Nitsa Elenitsa” by Mitsakis) and with the famous “Eleni” by Seferis. The song comes from the play *Which Helen?* (Ποια Ελένη;) by M. Reppas and T. Papathanasiou, a play that became a big commercial success in 2003-2004. To take you out of the melancholic climate of my lecture, I'll describe briefly the plot of this musical comedy.

Euripides's phantasmal Helen, Seferis's “empty tunic”, Hadjidakis's “icon full of tears”, the mystery woman who never went to Troy, becomes, in this version, a fat and ugly cousin of the *belle Hélène*. Hera, in order to take revenge on Aphrodite, sends this ugly Pefkis to Troy instead of the beautiful wife of Menelaus. Yet the Trojans see in Pefkis what they expected to see: the most beautiful woman on earth, and fall in love with her one after the other, including Hector himself. Deception and self-deception create a series of unexpected, funny situations which end with the uncovering of the truth and the avoidance of the war of Troy!

☉ ► Here is the closing song of this play and of our lecture as well:

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