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The seduction of the name. Helen and her spectre

> Menelaus' palace did not give you
> sufficient scope for your riotous luxury
> Hecuba, *The Trojan Women*

1 Helen of Sparta? Or: Helen of Troy? Who is the woman whose appearance enraptures the gaze of anyone, whose beauty threatens to establish an eerie link, to the point of becoming the foundation of a culture – a foundation that never seems about to end – between the aesthetics of death and war?

2 Who is Helen? She answers and does not mince words, when in the sixth book of the *Iliad*, talking to Hector, she considers herself a bitch. This is not enough: a despicable bitch. The most beautiful of all women, incomparable to any other woman, the queen whom in the third book of the *Iliad*, the old men of Troy, as the battle rages at the gates of the city, do not stop looking at, to compare her to the gods, says of herself: I am a bitch. A bitch, we might add, not tamed, not tamable, and at the same time, unfailingly available: without modesty or shame. A bitch? Certainly, Elena is almost inhuman, her extraordinary beauty makes her bestial, ferociously dependent on the gaze of others, the object of male desire, a male who for her is ready to do anything, even destroy everything. Elena seduces, mortified herself, humiliates. She is treacherous, even plays the role of victim: she tells Hector, better would have been not to be born. In the third book of the *Iliad*, while the men are slaughtering each other, Helen first feels a rush of nostalgia towards the cuckold par excellence of Western culture, Menelaus, but shortly afterwards, she does not play hard to get, and she succumbs to the lust of Paris' body.

3 Who is Elena? Where does her ambiguity end, if it ends at all?

4 Phenomenal Helen. She is who we want her to be: whore, adulteress, traitor of peoples, queen, bored mother, distracted daughter,

respected daughter-in-law, repentant and implacable lover. Then along comes Euripides and in 412 B.C. He stages his Helen, in a tragedy – almost a comedy, a comedy of misunderstandings –, which seems to stifle the myth of the most desired woman, the queen destined to indulge her passions without making too many calculations. For Euripides, she suddenly takes on the features of a faithful bride, devoted to her husband whom she has not seen for seventeen years.

5 This is *another* Helen, a woman committed to contesting the legitimacy of any conflict: the motive for war is based on an illusion. In the *Helen*, Menelaus' wife does not go to Troy, so no responsibility rests on her. Only her image, her *eidolon*, which everyone believes is the real Helen, goes there. The woman, in the flesh, is in Egypt, staying at the tomb of Proteus, the now deceased king. Euripides could not be clearer: war is a blunder, a mistake, a misunderstanding, a desire for conquest based on the illusion that a woman's body can truly be possessed. You can fight for her image, captured by the power of her appearance, but the body, despite everything, always resides elsewhere.

6 Is war then a spectre? Indeed, when the myth of Menelaus' wife is readapted in *Helen*, dismembering the more canonical logic of the model of absolute beauty (for Homer, Helen's beauty tends to fatally imply the bride's unfaithfulness), certain cultural strongholds of archaic Greek civilisation seem to be shattered, right down to the foundations. What does the ghost of Helen say? An image is not possessed; less so a moving image, which lives without possessing a precise identity. Euripides has the power to free Helen from her image by literally providing her with another image that allows her to dissociate her existence, her beauty, her desires, from death. We repeat: Euripides' materialism is a phenomenal indictment of the senselessness of all mass violence: Helen embodies a radical desertion of war; a *spatial*, psychological desertion from the reasons for battle.

7 A doubt, however: does Euripides merely turn the table, or did Homer already know the hypnotic character of Helen's appearance inseparable from her body? Therefore, is it not the case that Euripides in *Helen* stages what is in many ways a well-known fact and thus

disposes with excessive agility of the myth of a woman whose beauty would be the basis of a bloody conflict? A myth of beauty and war that indicates, precisely, that war, the longer and bloodier it is, the more reckless it turns out to be.

8 Isn't war, in other words, inextricably linked to simulacra, false beliefs, but above all to the need to attribute a *sense* to the tragic and senseless vortex of existence itself? After all, the unpresentable, ugly Thersites of the second Book of the *Iliad*, the Greek soldier different from all the other heroes described by Homer, had not already shouted the truth in Agamemnon's face: this is your war! Of kings and the mighty, it is not about cripples, wretches, nobodies, nameless men and women. He says it clearly: we go home. Humiliated, immediately by Ulysses, Thersites is still a soldier, he weeps defeated, struck down, mocked, he sobs. In the *Iliad*, there are two monsters among the Achaeans: Helen, chilling for her extraordinary beauty, almost a foreigner by now, and Thersites, the man who dares to inveigh against power and, for a moment, an abysmal moment, where everything trembles, he imagines that everyone like him should desert the work of war.

9 Probably also Euripides' version of the myth of the most beautiful woman of all remains, at least in part, entangled in the myth he would like to overturn. If it is true, in fact, that in the *Helen*, the queen of Sparta never arrives at Troy, thus appearing free of any responsibility, does she nevertheless continue to pity herself, feeling a guilt burden upon her that, according to the facts, she certainly does not have? Where then lurks the guilt that evidently precedes every fact, situation, action? Although separated from her image by Euripides, on balance even the Egyptian Helen remains encapsulated in it, as if she cannot escape from her own cage, even though it is open. To free herself from the gaze of the other, from her beauty, from her appearance, it is not enough, Euripides also seems to think, to cut ties with her own image: Helen *is* her own image even when – and what the woman discovers on the shores of Egypt – her image abandons her. So, what is to be done?

10 Davide Susanetti, editor in 2023 of a new Italian edition of Euripides' *Helen*, tells us that Helen does not exist. Like every phantom that inhabits our wildest fantasies, she turns out to be a *void*: the void of

the law of war. Indeed, this woman, at once mysterious and apathetic, or perhaps apathetic precisely because she is mysterious, a veritable machine of desire, hers and not hers alone, she is neither exhausted in the negative description offered by the Homeric poems nor, at the same time, in the familiar, apparently anti-dramatic version of Euripides. Helen, neither Antigone nor Medea, dares the unimaginable: she defies the symbolic and sexual power of her appearance, of her cursed history. In Euripides' tragedy, but dare we think, even escaping from Euripides' hands, as the chorus evokes the myth of Demeter and Persephone, she completely dismisses herself trying to hold together the destructive charge that her beauty evokes and, at the same time, a force capable of allowing its *subjectivity* to emerge beyond the gaze of others, finally becoming something other than itself, no longer nailed exclusively to its terrifying, exciting, deadly beauty.

11 As the French philosopher Barbara Cassin once wrote, Helen is the cause of war that divest the causes of all war. Helen's equivocalness, in effect, cuts in two, tears and lacerates, a profound conflict that fuels an entire historical parable. Homer, by placing Helen's conduct at the foundation of war, performs a risky, double-edged operation: on the one hand, he associates absolute beauty with war, thus unleashing that aestheticisation of death that will be the most peculiar character of every fascist aspiration, as Walter Benjamin will say once and for all in the conclusion, which we all remember, of his essay on the work of art. As if we, today, exploring the character of Helen, could come to terms with a very long trajectory capable of cultivating a culture in its entirety, from Homer to the State of Israel: a fascination with death and mass destruction; the ruins of Troy and those of Gaza linked by a fate of terrible bloodshed. At the same time, with a short-circuit that is difficult to manipulate, but precisely for this crucial reason, Helen's immeasurable beauty, her incomparability with that of no other, her outsized trait, is a warning to deal constantly with: it signals that the reason for war has no reason, no motive to rely on and that can provide it with sense and justification.

12 Clarifying, once and for all, that at the foundation of every foundation, inevitably, there is nothing but an absence. Not a lack, to be regained, to be reappropriated, but, we insist, an absence.