Centaurs, Rioting in Thessaly: Memory and the Classical World
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introduction

Centaurs, rioting in Thessaly

I cannot ignore the fact that my own thought, however original I may deem it to be, is but a ripple, at best a wave, in the huge social-historical stream which welled up in Ionia twenty-five centuries ago.

—Cornelius Castoriadis

Much of the thought and the practice of human life is irredeemably related to Ionia, to Achaea, to classical Greek civilisation. Certainly one, if not the only one, of the central imaginings of ourselves and our world is Ionian. Our mapping of ourselves in our world also owes a huge debt to the classical. The emergence, materialisation, and extra-territorialisation of Ionian spaces of philosophy and democracy indelibly mark our world. The very concept of the human is Ionian even if comparable ideas of the human emerge in the world of Genesis and Gilgamesh. But here darkness emerges just as the human Achaeans emerged from darkness into history. Ionian spaces are also spaces where there are indecisions about whether our being is human or animal, where there are fractures between civilisations resting

upon categories of barbarism,² and where exist the horrors of the Ionian spaces as slave states.³ The Persian expedition of Xenophon was a journey across territory and into battle, but it was also a journey into human separation and a reflection on human darkness. We are but footnotes of Ionian history and philosophy—we replicate time and time again the darkness and the light. The question of the barbarian is central to classical thought in terms of self-definition. Often the confusions about the human have their origins in a process of demarcation between peoples—specifically around the seams and borders between them. But peoples in movement are syncretic even if their hybridities are confusing and often irrational.

The porous, permeable boundaries (even if we could detect those borders) of the human are time and time again challenged by the way we imagine ourselves and others. That humanness, through our capacity to plan and design and imagine, is extended into our buildings and machines and our art. Ionians dissolved and re-imagined their being constantly through playing with the ideas of barbarian and animal—and specifically the imagining of Centaurs and other hybrid species. Ionians imagined and designed labyrinths to both lose and find themselves and others. They fought and eventually conquered the city of Troy—perhaps the origin of some of world history’s most potent, if mundane, labyrinth myths.⁴ The Ionians created toys and machines for themselves which enhanced the very idea

² See Edith Hall, Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 1–2, for the beginning of an analysis of Greek ethnic self-consciousness through the development of tragedy.
of the human and extended it into the realms of birds and gods. Their prosthetic wings allowed them to escape the labyrinth and fly into the sky. This may have been myth, but what is myth but the lived reality of imagination, the stories we tell ourselves about us and what we are?\(^5\)

Those stories come to us as repetitions and to be repeated again. They often come from the libraries and the documentation of other civilisations after the collapse and disintegration of the classical world. They are sometimes encoded in the artefacts that are the remnants of Ionian civilisation. The actual origins and meaning of those stories and imaginings are often lost to us but it doesn’t stop us replicating them for our own purposes. The constant proliferation of labyrinths in our art and in our fields and the reworking and re-display of Centaurs in our museums and books display an obsession with a set of repetitive motifs. Centaurs, labyrinths, the Icarus legend are just three amongst many others; Circe, the Atreides, Oedipus, Antigone, Calypso, Clytemnestra, the Maenads, Achilles, Helen and Paris, the wooden horse, Hades.\(^6\) Greek dramatic theatre displays them all time and time again.\(^7\) Some of the most powerful myths that we repeat today are but footnotes or marginalia in other stories. The capacity to revivify a motif is often grounded on its discovery or its perpetuation into any given historical moment. Often they are recompositions of multiply transferred stories as in the use of the classical by

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English dramatists. Perhaps more mysteriously, the constant perpetuation and rebuilding of labyrinths indicate their utility for ways of thinking about ourselves as if their building and their traverse could solve something for us, now, rather than hint at some opaque and inaccessible origin.

This book is not about any kind of understanding of classical Greek civilisation—it is not a work within the corpus of classics. It is the work of a reader entranced by some mythic motifs that recur in his life time and time again. This book is about humans and their obsession with understanding themselves through repetition—specifically a set of motifs that emerge from classical Ionia. It is about reading and about how reading books and images almost compel us to repeat their stories and themes as if they were fairytales.  

8 The almost constant production and reproduction of motifs of Centaurs, labyrinths, and flying human beings is how we come to understand ourselves now as human beings, just as others before us in Ionia were obsessed with the same process. Understanding the origin of these motifs is part of classical studies, as is the decipherment of languages, and the mapping of the ancient world. Our book is not about those original beings that ran across the mountains of Thessaly but about the effects that they have had upon us in the present and their social power.

Fairytales happen in lands, more precisely the land above and the land below. Often humans were held captive in fairyland, taken from the realm of the sun into that of darkness. We are deluding ourselves if we think that Faerie is more imaginary than the world in which those humans walked. We walk, above and below, amongst magical precipices. Our world is

enmeshed with fabrication and fiction and is not the less real for that. Accounts of traversing Faerie or the world of the dead, of seeing gods and Centaurs, abound. They might even be delusions, but they delineate something profound about our capacity to imagine lands and worlds. For many of us Narnia and its maps are a more significant presence than the world beyond our door. So, the space of Ionia is an imaginary space. Centaurs riot in the Thessaly of our imagination, Troy is broken up still in our stories, and the Achaeans traverse the steps towards its centre. It would be unforgiveable if historical practice forgot this — that the story-worlds of our ancestors and ourselves are as real to us as the artefacts which we make out of them and which still survive, even if in fragments like our stories.

In the first chapter we examine the territory of classical discourse, perhaps as we enter the camp of the Achaeans upon the plains of Troy. This is a camp, however, of our own making. Troy remains a cipher and a metaphor — even if the meanings it carries and delivers to us are obtuse and opaque. These are what Moses Finley in his critical theory of the classical world has called the ‘Never Never lands’ of Ionia — fabrications, fictions, imaginaries whose ultimate and original meaning is lost to us and can never be recovered. The idea of the Never land was developed by Finley to denote the world of Odysseus and his adventures and to question the ways in which some used the Homeric text to locate real places and destinations. The relation of the text to the world and the world to the text is fluid — we read through the text to the world just as we situate their texts within contexts of worlds. But our Never land is the imaginary space from which subsequent peoples, including

archaeologists like Schliemann, have extracted their motifs and treasures.

In the second chapter we look at the recurring figure of the Centaur and why it casts its shadow so obsessively across our history. If the Centaur, as it takes a pause from battling its Lapith enemies, can be tracked across the plains of Thessaly, what might this mean for both historical method and its search to reveal antiquity and at the same time illustrate something about why it recurs in human narrative and art so frequently? The Centaur is a cipher. It can represent Barbary, or the human relation to animals, or Persians, or many other things. The Centauromachy and its origin is literally enshrouded in myth and one hopes that new ways that historians might approach the classical world might reveal more about its emergence. Meanwhile, we continue to repeat it, to replicate it, to recompose it because it does something for us. We use it as essentially an artefact to think with. At the same time we still have unrevealed the reason why it is so ubiquitous from classical aesthetics onwards and why its repetition is so compelling.

In the third chapter we look at another motif of repetition — that of the labyrinth. Children still frequent the byways of labyrinths. They are still a central theme of our literature, a central metaphor for our world and why we are lost in it. But like the Never lands of Ionia it is a fiction, fabrication, and imaginary — yet one which is built and rebuilt constantly in human cultures. Some have considered the centre of the labyrinth as the entrance to underworlds, its traverse as a walk to the land of the dead. Others have seen the labyrinth as a literal or metaphorical mapping of the route towards monsters either internal or external to us. It occurs in different forms across many civilisations, even in archaic games scratched in walls
by ancient labourers. The classical version is at times located within discourses of monsters, sometimes Centaurs but more often that other hybrid, syncretic beast — the Minotaur. This classical version has even, by some, been located in the specific material spaces of the palace of Knossos. The proliferation and elaboration of the myth of Theseus and Ariadne is located at least in the fabricated version of that labyrinth. It is still with us and we still rework and build those labyrinths. Perhaps significantly the ancients locate the work of building the labyrinth in the design and labour of a human being. Not only does this say something to us about the fabrication of our material world, it also suggests perhaps that we can measure it, understand it, map and survey it. If we cannot survey the products of our being then we will be even less able to survey the worlds and doings of gods.

In the fourth chapter we examine the maker, engineer, designer of the labyrinth. Not only is Daedalus a craftsperson but he is obsessed with the boundaries of buildings and worlds and the borders to be transgressed between the human and the non-human. His attempts to create animal-hybrid engines of movement, much like the hybrid beings of the Centaurs tell us something about both humanness and the act of creation.

In the final chapter we conclude by trying to understand why Ionian spaces and imaginaries are so important for our current projects to ask humanity to change itself. Not to reform or revolutionise human nature, but ask it to think again and again about its different manifestations. The return to the ghosts of the Achaean camp can illustrate our social and political practice in the world we fabricate and make for ourselves, as we newly fabricate and extend our own bodies with machines. Repetition and recomposition achieve their social power in the
inhabitation of ghosts within real and active human frames and social relations. The dead of world history emerge time and time again.