The Birth of Anthropology out of a Pause on Pausanias: Frazer’s Travel-Translations Reinterrupted and Resumed

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Alas, poor Frazer: deceased since 1941, yet never at rest. Yes, Sir James George Frazer: repeatedly revenant. After World War II, Theodor Gaster eventually pruned The New Golden Bough; later Stanley Edgar Hyman gauged Frazer’s legacy, along with Darwin, Marx, and Freud; and John B. Vickery saluted Frazer’s influence among literary modernists: T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and others. Meanwhile in 1969, I. C. Jarvie had assessed disciplinary “othering” of Frazer’s approach versus Bronislaw Malinowski’s functionalism—by then also “historical.” Subsequently, I recommended amalgamating anthropological and literary rereadings of Frazer and Malinowski (among others), aiming to avoid reductive polarizations that keep reemerging. My hope has been to disrupt hackneyed habits of professional patricide.

Some years after that, Marilyn Strathern returned to Frazer’s studies of the Old Testament, her father’s favorite; and Marc Manganaro productively situated Frazer in interdisciplinary movements “from fieldwork to text.” Soon before, Robert Ackerman’s fine biography had appeared in 1987, followed by a scintillating account of the Golden Bough’s elaborate spreading by Robert Fraser-with-an-S. I find congenial the latter’s slightly arch yet generous ethos of argumentation: “At times the impossibility of knowing anything for certain seems to have inspired in Frazer a sort of twinkling delivery, a sardonic self-scrutiny, a cat-and-mouse game with truth. He was not above playing to the gallery in this respect.”

to a reissue of Frazer’s popularized 1926 abridgment of *The Golden Bough*, comments that my construal (in 1982) of Frazer’s “irony” was a tad “presentist”—ahistorical, “postmodernist” even (me!—way back then!). I here counter jovially with a contrary insinuation: might it not be “presentist” rather to restrict irony to recent guises, thus implying (questionably) that any “Victorian” could only have been credulous, never ironic? (Strathern inclines this way also, along with Stocking—both friends whom I admire.) Indeed, my interpretive aim in resuming and continuing my reading of Frazer, among others, has been and remains multiple “contextualizations” (in Stocking’s historicist sense) of comparative ironies—in which formations Frazer arguably participated (in multiple textualizations!).

Yes, Frazer was manifestly steeped in the “romantic irony” of Jean Paul and Friedrich von Schlegel; he even translated master-ironist Heinrich Heine, his favorite German poet, whose lines he plucked as the epigraph for “The Language of Animals”:

> Sie sprechen eine Sprache/ Die ist so reich, so schön
> Doch keiner der Philologen/ Kan diese Sprache verstehn.9

I once went so far as to surmise that Ludwig Wittgenstein’s lucidly ironic doubts etched in the margins of *The Golden Bough* were conceivably not “ahead” of Frazer’s own “language games”—about belief, magic, and their ambiguities; that my opinion has been echoed by R. Fraser makes me (an only occasional Frazer-backer, and partially) feel, for once, more like a “social fact” than a lone voice.10

Frazer’s comparative task was manifestly Sisyphean. Returning to Frazer (already much revisited) feels Sisyphean-squared, even when this task is tackled sparely, as here. Yes, Sisyphean-squared-yet-spare, this essay forgoes considering retorts by Edmund Leach or remarks by Mary Douglas; nor can I reengage the Cambridge school of mythology (e.g., Jane Harrison), recently revamped by scholars in Victorian-Edwardian cultural studies intent on dragging in “sexual dissidence.” Rather, I address arrays of aftermaths to Frazer in token fashion, just enough to launch an interpretive query: can contemporary anthropology harness Frazer’s *difficulty* (in George Steiner’s sense)—his immense erudition, daunting range, and neglected travels and translations? Might critical comparison today, whose proponents no longer write as long as Frazer, still strive toward reading more capaciously—including him?

To facilitate ironic *rapprochement* with Frazer’s cross-cultural corpus making, I list a few germane dates and details—for the convenience of
readers who either are unfamiliar with this strange-but-true predecessor or, having encountered his prose, have repressed so quaint an ordeal!

Quick Chronologique of Select Frazeriana

1869 — Matriculates, University of Glasgow (classical studies).
1878 — Goes to Germany to polish German; buys Heine in Hamburg.
1882 — Inns of Court; admitted to bar (never practiced).
1883 — Reads Edward Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* on walking tour in Spain.
1884 — Meets Robertson Smith, who assigns him (for *Britannica*) Penates, Priapus, Proserpina, and Pericles; later Totem, Theseus, Thespiae, and Taboo (germ of *Golden Bough*).
— Edits Sallust (Grammar School Classics series).
— Arranges with Macmillan to edit Pausanias.
1885 — *Journal of Philology* piece on vestal virgins via “survivals” in Tylor’s sense (germ of *Golden Bough*).
— Learns of excavation at Nemi; Ernest Renan’s *Le prêtre de Nemi*, a philosophical drama (germ of *Golden Bough*).
1886 — Proposes to Macmillan a selection of Heine’s poetry in German, with linguistic and literary background.
1887 — “Questions on the Manners, Customs, . . .” (fieldwork survey manual).
1888 — “The Language of Animals,” with epigraph from Heine.
1889 — Reads late-seventeenth-century account of ritual killing of king on India’s Malabar coast.
— Writes Macmillan about work on legend of the Golden Bough.
1890 — *The Golden Bough* (2 vols.); travels to Greece.
1894—William Robertson Smith dies.
1895 — Fellowship tenable for life, Cambridge; again to Greece.
1896 — Marries widow Lilly Grove, née Adels dorfer (Alsatian).
1898 — Publishes Pausanias translation and commentary.
1900 — *The Golden Bough*, 2nd ed. (3 vols.)
— “. . .Origin of Gender in Language,” nondogmatic theory.
1911 — *The Golden Bough*, 3rd. ed. (12 vols.).
1941 — Blind Sir James dies; deaf Lady Lilly follows suit within hours—perhaps a *kalos thanatos* (“good death”), perhaps not.
James George Frazer, whom generations of ethnographers dismissed as a “non-fieldworker,” had actually planned research in New Guinea (fell through). Frazer resourcefully backed John Roscoe’s efforts in Uganda and indefatigably encouraged fin-de-siècle fieldworkers in Australia (Lorimer Fison, Sir Baldwin Spencer, Francis James Gillen, etc.) whose researches “founded” anthropology as we know it, or used to. Less sedentary than generally supposed, Frazer himself came out (of his armchair) for excursions to Greece—in 1890 and again in 1895. On neither a splurge nor merely a spree, Frazer possibly resorted to travel-research to recuperate from proofing The Golden Bough in 1890, and then to assuage the furtively felt loss of William Robertson Smith, who died in 1894.\(^\text{14}\)

Officially, Frazer was drawn thither by Pausanias’s second-century c.e. Description of Greece—the fullest evidence history retains of antiquity’s ritual locales. Frazer resolved to retranslate this vital source, despite its (to him) stylistically perfunctory sentences: “Devoid of rhythm and harmony, . . . they do not march but hobble and shamble and shuffle along. . . . The reader is not let down easily by a graceful cadence, a dying fall; he is tripped up suddenly and left sprawling.”\(^\text{15}\)

Ultimately Frazer produced a kind of Pausanias-cum-anti-Pausanias: both faithfully “Englished” (for substance) and freshened with eloquence (for effect). Converting flat depictions into rounded prose, Frazer also updated them with later findings (archaeological, literary) meticulously assessed. His immense commentary remains valued today by expert folks—“classicists”—whose business it is to know.\(^\text{16}\)

Frazer’s Passagen (an Interruption)

Our hero’s journeys Greece-ward could be compared with those of near contemporaries—Oscar Wilde or Herman Melville, say, picking luminaries at random. Doubtless complex “motives” (per Kenneth Burke) prevailed and still prevail “of and for” (per Clifford Geertz) any philhellenism; that of Frazer deserves construing alongside Nietzsche’s, say, or other cases considered by Richard Jenkyns.\(^\text{17}\) That worthy project could easily interrupt the one I am pursuing here. Equally distracting are eerie parallels between Frazer and a critic whose interdisciplinary prominence has swelled as much as Frazer’s has dwindled. They share a time of death (1940–1941)—Frazer aged and by natural causes; the other one fortyish
and by his own hand. Both souls, moreover, based vast projects on Pausanias, or ironic transpositions of his example. (Mystery guest, will you sign in please.)

[Walter] Benjamin’s work on the “mythological topography” of Paris was closely modeled on Pausanias’s *Guide to Greece*; he reasoned that like the ancient traveler who “wrote his topography of Greece in the second century A.D. as the places of worship and many of the other monuments began to fall into ruin,” so, too, should the modern historian decipher and invoke in the “ruins” of modernity their ancient mythologies. His fascination with the arcades, “being the galleries, which lead into its past existence,” was intensified by the sensation that they functioned like the ancient labyrinths that Pausanias had entered. They transferred their visitors from the real world of the street into the “*Passagen* myth.”

More precisely, Benjamin had emulated Johann Jacob Bachofen, whom he deemed a “modern Pausanias, a fellow-traveler who actually revisited those ‘sites in ancient Greece from which one could go down into the underworld’” Had Benjamin jolted his critical apparatus a few decades further along history’s storms, prophecy’s winds, and chronology’s winks (i.e., reversals), he could have tagged a still more “modern Pausanias.” Frazer, I submit, represents something like (1) a slightly later Bachofen (both retranslated Pausanias, Frazer correcting Bachofen’s version) and (2) a somewhat earlier Benjamin. Indeed, Benjamin’s imaginative rummaging among modernity’s “ruins” (via literatures) explicitly recalled the “ancient labyrinths that Pausanias had entered.” The same is true of Frazer’s spirited sallying among primitivity’s “ruins” (via ethnographies).

Yet like Bachofen, Frazer had gone Benjamin one better—had gone so far as to retrace Pausanias’s footsteps. Indeed, “being there” (Greece), Frazer tackled “the task of translating” *topoi*—including a renowned one from Pausanias’s account of Piraeus that subsequently haunted Benjamin: “Thus the arsenal closely resembled what we should call an arcade, except that the sides were occupied by store-rooms instead of shops.” Yes, Bachofen’s tombs, Frazer’s tomes, and Benjamin’s arcades (**Passagen**) are all tied to Pausanias and therefore to each other. Such intricate affinities signal (to me) endless ironies of transhistorical cross-cultural rereading; suggesting so, I also echo Michael Bernstein’s cautions against easy parallels between Benjamin and contemporary critical sensibilities:

Benjamin has frequently been claimed as the inspired predecessor of today’s leveling eclecticism, but the impassioned heterogeneity of his approach is very far from the casual irony and unproblematic shuttling among
different eras and models that we think of as “postmodernist.” The postmodernist catalogue is seen from the outset as temporary and easily abandoned. Benjamin’s, by contrast, is fiercely cumulative and impossible to discard. And this loyalty to all that has been abandoned as worthless, to everything whose loss has not been acknowledged or registered, is Benjamin’s abiding legacy.21

Abiding too was the “catalogue rhetoric” of Frazer, possibly worth partnering with Boasian readings and comparative writings by authors with kindred affinities (Henry David Thoreau, Melville, and more).22

*Frazer’s Jouissance (“Ivresse en Grèce”): A Resumption*

For now let us set aside labyrinths, “arcades,” and arsenals to wonder whether Francophile Frazer found bliss in scholarly labors of the hive—such as upgrading Pausanias’s dull-as-doorknobs diction.23 I presume he did, because Frazer confessed as much—albeit in formulaic French, veiled to please readers thereof. His *préface* to *L’Adonis*—in 1921—extracted from *Le Cycle du Rameau d’Or* and translated by his wife Lilly Frazer (*une française*)—deserves quoting at “Frazerian” length. (I “English” it here unroundly, so better to cue snatches of French in my commentary juxtaposed.) *Voici alors*, Frazer—tellingly back-translated:

This new translation thus debuts smack in the middle of the original work. Why? Because I want [*désire*] to plunge the French reader into the thick of things and not subject him to prolixity [*longueurs*] of an introduction that might well alarm him. In fact, I have tried to seduce him by offering at the outset what would most interest him . . . three oriental divinities—Adonis, Attis, and Osiris. In tracing [*retraçant*] the origin of rites, whose aim is to reanimate nature and dress [*revêtir*] her annually in a new cloak of green, one is forced to stray for a while in a gloomy labyrinth [*s’égarer longtemps dans un sombre labyrinthe*] of customs and ideas that are raw, ill formed, and wild. Only after having seen paraded past a crowd of frightful phantoms does the reader experience soothing encounters with gracious figures of these antique deities created by a more refined imagination and profounder sympathy. . . . The eternal charm of such creations of a fantasy already ripe [*déjà mûr*] and a philosophy still wary [*encore hésitante*] is heightened by the splendor of the landscapes that contain the stories of gods simultaneously mortal and immortal—who died every year with the falling leaves, flowers, and grains, so to live again [*revivre*] in nature’s annual renewal. I tried to
depict several such lovely scenes consecrated by the genius of ancient au-
thors and artists, following descriptions of modern travelers who visited
these places; for, unhappily, although I have voyaged with delight and, so
to speak, intoxication in Greece [pour ainsi dire ivresse, en Grèce]—this re-
gion of infinite enchantment—I have never visited the Orient, or even
glimpsed from afar its coasts and ranges. Nevertheless, having carefully
studied and compared what other witnesses more fortunate than I have
written about these celebrated shores, it feels as though I myself traversed
with them the lands they let us see; cast my own eye on the river redden-
red running in the depths of its ravishing valley; admired 

cascades of Hierapolis sparkling in the distant sun and dappled in every
color of the rainbow; explored the deep caverne corycienne yawning abruptly
in the stony plateau with all the opulence and freshness of evergreen vege-
tation. And I believed I heard with my own ears the dreamy lulling murmur
of subterranean waters. If I linger overmuch in these landscapes filled with
charm, I hope the reader will forgive me and consider such delays as rest
stops on a lengthy voyage.24

Observe with me, readers, how Frazer’s effusive salute to Greece punctu-
tuates digressive apologies for never having visited the Orient “proper.”
Some Scotsman! (That Frazer seldom stuck to the point.) Some rational-
ist! (Old Frazer always rambled, never navigated a straight line.) Some
scholar! (Cagey Frazer, abetted by the missus, repackaged his Augean la-
bors for Gallic tastes.) One might even call them—eventually Sir, and
Lady alike—“experimental” in their promotional tactics and textual
praxis.

Places (e.g., Greece) Temporally Translated (with Parerga)

Frazer’s currying of French favor illuminates his way of writing-for-read-
ers; it may pay to dwell a spell on such solicitous prose. Having “been
where,” after all, some relevant evidence existed, Frazer nonetheless never
quite claims even indirect authority. Rather, travels to Greece help him
imagine “being elsewhere”—whose autres témoins he can therefore com-
pare, and studiously. Frazer recalls his travel-experience (or really, his
translating prior travels in Greece by traveling in Greece) to help convey
an Orient his own eyes cannot attest. And he grafts allusions to his Pausan-
ias adventures on French versions of shoots (all these floral jokes are old:
recycled) of The Golden Bough—which sprang from the Pausanias project,
or interrupted it. Probably Frazer’s two principal endeavors were more
like parerga—each to each.
“Parerga”—a term I first failed to understand in Arthur Schopenhauer’s Parerga and Paralipomena—is a keyword in Neni Panourgia’s own “description of Greece,” Fragments of Death, Fables of Identity. Parergon means an effort lying alongside another: a digression, an interruption even; multiple parerga could be called labyrinthine. This paragraph is a parergon on parerga: a meta-parergon. I’ll get back to substantive parerga, and to Panourgia, later.)

Judging from Frazer’s French, its well-read writer wanted readers (like voyagers) to savor lieux (and milieux). Frazer conjured “place” as it might, “being there,” be seen and heard: “je crois avoir entendu de mes oreilles le murmure rêveur.” All Frazer’s writing (in English, too) conveyed polysensoria of place-names, or “noms-de-pays: le pays,” as Marcel Proust might have said. (Proust, by the way, learned to say, or write, such things [in French] by translating John Ruskin’s English: c’est une longue histoire!) Frazer’s translations, plus cobbled commentary, convey spatial sensoria (“place”): something about the light, the parfum, the fraîcheur de sa vegetation (aroma? felt moisture?)—that possibly perdures “across” time (note the spatial metaphor!).

Temporal chains of translation thus carry across Pausanias’s descriptions into Frazer’s fin-de-siècle “sites.” Now, Pausanias himself had translated into his second century c.e. evidence from antique Attica and from 500 B.C.E. Péloponnèse. And Frazer’s translations (published in 1898) of that translation subsequently carry across into memories of his prior travel-translations—memories earmarked in French on 23 juillet, 1921.

(Parergon. Nor was that the end of it: Frazer’s 1921 remembrance of 1890s experience—retranslating Pausanias’s translations [themselves spanning centuries]—was borne [“carried back across”] by me, from of all “places” New Jersey, to a conference at Syros in 1999, squeaking in at millennium’s end. That occasion was my “excuse” [pretex, “motive”] for Greece-going in these cycling “chronotopes.”)

But why do I (or my parerga) rehash and belabor exponential re-travel-translation? Only because an interpretive pursuit dubbed “anthropology”—diverse tradition variously invented and inventive—still entails rereading cultural rites-in-sites. This endeavor may merit intensified re-cognizing, interrupting, and resuming.

(Parergon. Hence I hope to tie understanding Frazer not just to Pausanias—then but to Panourgia—today, to experience his anthropological aftermaths otherwise.)

As for Frazer, one wonders. Could he, launching his Lebenswerk, already have been bent on recapturing over time and space “place” (itself a topos)?
Was he pre-attuned to milieux; in and as polysensoria-for-readers? Peut-être. Regardless, Frazer-in-French (in 1921) kept oscillating between his Golden Bough and his Pausanias, long after the latter was finalized in 1898, possibly because the former, now overshadowing everything, required renewal of its “MacGuffin”—as Alfred Hitchcock (a still tardier “Victorian” than Frazer, coincidentally born within a year of Frazer’s publishing his Pausanias) might have remarked.28

(Parergon. “MacGuffin” [the name, like Frazer’s, is Scots] is Hitch’s celebrated designation of drummed-up pretexts for dazzlingly polysensory assemblages in hybrid arts of narrative film.29 Although The Golden Bough germinated before movies existed, it too sports a MacGuffin [dummy-motive]: the ritual slaying of the priest-king and ex-slave of Nemi [locus: Italia—on which more anon].) Frazer’s Pausanias required no MacGuffin—no contrived excuse for strung-along extravagance—because Pausanias really did witness Greece; and Frazer really did retranslate his work and adumbrate archaeological knowledge (largely German) gathered in Pausanias’s long aftermath, or wake.30 (Plus que Parergon. The German for “after” means “ass”—an important pun in Nietzsche’s cases of caustic critique; but that too is another interpretive his-story.) The Golden Bough, I suspect, was less either “mystery” (per Stocking) or “whodunit” (per R. Fraser)—both appealing propositions—than “suspense”: the name of the genre motivated (in K. Burke’s sense) by a MacGuffin (in Hitchcock’s sense).31 Detective work on this possibility could yield an alternative aftermath to this essay: a postponed encore plus que parergon—which, come to think of it, may be precisely what Frazer’s Golden Bough and his Pausanias reciprocally became, increasingly. Frazer’s works, like cultures’ histories, kept interrupting themselves and each other. That cyclic quality may explain some scholars’ attraction to his still-translating corpus.32

Plus que Pausanias

In the meantime, patient readers deserve reminding that Frazer’s Pausanias scrupulously certified antique Greek sites-for-rites. And his Golden Bough inventively imagined one ancient Italian site-cum-rites—(those slayings at Nemi)—that Frazer could not exactly have “translated,” because no direct account existed. Still, that same Pausanias professed to having seen what became comparative anthropology’s scene-of-scenes: “Pausanias states that the hand-to-hand duel between the priest[-king] and his [slave] successor was held ‘in my time’”; and he remains to this day “the only commentator to imply having witnessed the contest.”33
This business of Nemi as memory-place is wondrously entangled; R. Fraser calls it a “veritable collector’s gallery of such fables as Pausanias had found littering the minds of the Peloponnesian Greeks.” Manifold “sub-cults” attributed to Nemi include (1) the refuge there of Orestes in the aftermath of killing Clytemnestra and (2) the “translation of the resuscitated Hippolytus” (i.e., his rematerialization there after father Theseus cursed him to die in the aftermath of the episode with Phaedra [Theseus’s wife] who was smitten by her stepson [Hippolytus]). All such legendary knots deserve parerga, if that is the apt term. Nothing in Pausanias or his own aftermaths (Frazer, Bachofen, Benjamin, Panourgía, this traveler) is other than digressive!

Indeed, Frazer’s introduction to Pausanias mentions abundant allusions his predecessor “lets fall to places and objects of interest in foreign lands”; one key Passage (arcade?) is flagged by Frazer as follows: “In the neighborhood of Rome the bubbling milk-white water of Albula . . . attracted his attention, and beside the sylvan lake of Aricia he appears to have seen the grim priest pacing sword in hand, the warder of the Golden Bough.” Yet, perhaps nervously, Frazer’s next sentence questions the reliability of Pausanias’s similar allusion: “The absurd description he gives of the beautiful and much-maligned Strait of Messina would suffice to prove that he never sailed through it.” Ambiguity was something Frazer apparently tolerated to a remarkable extent. Nor, ironically, did he ever abandon primary sources of inspiration because of it. Some Victorian!

Further Resumptions (Still Saluting Kenneth Burke)

There is nothing whatsoever new in my insisting that Frazer was more, much more, than a non-fieldworker; he was in fact a hardworking, place-inscribing traveling-translator. One prior “appreciation” of Frazer merits copious quotation (in Benjamin’s fashion):

In 1898 Frazer published a masterpiece of scholarship, his six-volume edition of Pausanias’s Description of Greece . . . Frazer reprinted the introduction and selections from his commentary as Pausanias and Other Greek Sketches in 1900 [the year, I might mention, of Nietzsche’s and Wilde’s deaths and of the publication of Freud’s Traumdeutung], and reprinted it again as Studies in Greek Scenery, Legend, and History in 1917. This little book is not so much a commentary on Pausanias as Frazer’s own guidebook to Greece. . . .
The dominant imaginative organization of *Pausanias and Other Greek Sketches* is what Kenneth Burke would call the scene-act ratio, similarly the imaginative core of *The Golden Bough* (Pausanias had *seen* [or wrote that he had, which claim Frazer reported in his *Pausanias*] the grim priest in his sacred grove at Aricia!). . . . Certain scenes at certain times have fitnesses for certain acts: “It was when the sunset glow was on Humettus that Socrates drained the poisoned cup,” “the scene, if it indeed be so” of the sacrifice of Iphigenia at Aulis “was somewhat bleak and cheerless as I saw it under a leaden sky on a dull November afternoon.” . . . The imaginative reconstruction [in striking distinction to Pausanias’s own imaginative reconstruction] of the performance of the mysteries in describing the great Hall of Initiation at Eleusis is typical: “Suddenly the curtain rose and revealed the vast hall brilliantly illuminated, with the gorgeously attired actors in the sacred drama moving mazily in solemn procession or giddy dance out and in amongst the forest of columns that rose from the floor . . . , while the strains of grave or voluptuous music filled the air. . . .” If Frazer’s vision seems to have more in common with the Radio City Music Hall than with anything that could have transpired at Eleusis, it is nevertheless an equivalent for him of the initiatory experience.36

Inspired largely by K. Burke’s approach to ritual-rhetoric, Hyman’s insights nevertheless err (as Burke, I feel, might have agreed) by slighting imaginable analogies between ancient rites and Radio City.37 Should one glibly discount this possibility? After all, what conceivably “could have transpired at Eleusis” surely surpassed the “esoteric.” Indeed, Frazer himself imagined broadly everyday publics in page upon page directed at rites and festivals of Demeter and Persephone:

On the whole then, if, ignoring theories, we adhere to the evidence of the ancients themselves in regard to the rites of Eleusis, including under that general term the Great Mysteries, the games, the Festival before Ploughing (*proerosia*), the Festival of the Threshing floor, the Green Festival, the Festival of the Cornstalks, and the offerings of first-fruits, we shall probably incline to agree with the most learned of ancient antiquaries, the Roman Varro, who, to quote Augustine’s report of his opinion, “interpreted the whole of the Eleusinian mysteries as relating to the corn which Ceres (Demeter) had discovered, and to Proserpine (Persephone) whom Pluto had carried off from her.

With customary, ecumenical intertextuality, Frazer continued:

Drowning men clutch at straws, and we need not wonder that the Greeks, like ourselves, with death before them and a great love of life in their hearts,
should not have stopped to weigh with too nice a hand the arguments that told for and against the prospect of human immortality. The reasoning that satisfied Saint Paul and . . . sorrowing Christians, standing by the deathbed or the open grave of their loved ones, was good enough to pass muster with ancient pagans, when they too bowed their heads under the burden of grief, and . . . looked forward into the darkness of the unknown. Therefore we do no indignity to the myth of Demeter and Persephone—one of the few myths in which the sunshine and clarity of the Greek genius are crossed by the shadow and mystery of death—when we trace its origin to some of the most familiar, yet eternally affecting aspects of nature, to the melancholy gloom and decay of autumn and to the freshness, the brightness and the verdure of spring.  

A plausible hunch is that Eleusis was in part “popular.” Conceivably, I would add, no “music hall” (even Rockette-bedizened Radio City), is altogether un-mystery-ous!  

(Cancelled Parergon. Resist digressing into Hitchcock’s “Mr. Memory,” his music hall MacGuffin. Silence, Mnemosyne. Forget The 39 Steps!)

Echoes of Excuses and Resonances of Resumptions

Ackerman’s biography speculates that Frazer’s blend of ethnology and travel-translation had a real beginning—a “cause,” perhaps a “birth”:

The intervention of [Robertson] Smith changed Frazer’s ideas about Pausanias . . . and led to The Golden Bough . . . By 1885 . . . Frazer had found his subject. . . . Others, most notably [Edward] Tylor and Andrew Lang, had anticipated him here. Frazer’s special contribution lay in the use he made of his deep and wide knowledge of classical antiquity, which permitted him to extend greatly the field of comparison. No one had ever before focused so intensively on the “primitive” elements of the religions of Greece, Rome, and the eastern Mediterranean and had juxtaposed these on so large a scale with the religious activity of “savages” (as Frazer and his contemporaries often called preliterate peoples). Frazer seems to have understood early on—in the mid-eighties, while working on Pausanias—that he had lighted upon something unusual and important, and once he did, he never looked back.

This attempt to state facts plainly is admirable; but it is also a fact that Frazerian facts (and facts about Frazer) remain profusely gnarled. Evidentiary intricacy, basic to comparative interpretation, deserves rereading
“toward the panoply’’; Frazer’s panoply included “Greece” (not to mention Bali), repeatedly reinterpreted as different eras emerged.41

So let’s review. Frazer first planned “simply” to retranslate—with-commentary Pausanias. He eventually achieved this goal to an extent even his seasoned publisher had failed to foresee: six tomes! The project, Ackerman nicely remarks, wound up consuming “nine and a half years—the length of the siege of Troy”; yes, plans (including successful ones), as they (nearly) say, “ging aft aw’ry.”42 And Frazer’s plans—his Heracles-ian methodicalness and obsessive scholarship notwithstanding—constantly went thataway. With this aspect of Sir James, many readers today—modernist, postmodernist, belatedly either, or post-both—might sympathize.

It is a fetching fact that one of anthropology’s touchstone texts, The Golden Bough—which helped spawn the writings of Edward Westermarck, Malinowski (a Nietzsche reader too), and more—sprouted (fructified, “rhizomed”) in the crotches, as it were, of a Pausanias project.43 Yes, the Geburtz, if birth it be, of “social anthropology”—whose first professional chair in the world’s then-global empire fell officially to Frazer (in 1908, the very year Claude Lévi-Strauss was born)—was induced by interludes (parerga) that swelled into a dominant opus. Frazer’s hybrid learning, moreover, is manifest not just in The Golden Bough but in far tidier items of his bibliography. Examples are (1) “The Language of Animals,” a folkloric study that crisscrossed “levels” of civilization and primitivity, yet downplayed that invidious distinction, and (2) “Gender in Language,” an evolution-questioning essay with a nondogmatic disclaimer: “How the change from subjective gender to what may be called objective gender took place, if it took place at all, we can only conjecture.”44 But what might Frazer’s transdisciplinary bravado imply nowadays for meaning-in-cultures (and meanings-in-death)? Does its unfashionable rotundity preclude any role for his corpus in reasserting comparative anthropology’s rightful place alongside alternative modes of critical interpretation?

Wondering, I here launch a few “reading navigations” from my little excursion into Frazer’s Grece and further.45 These skirmishes (which begin to feel as though they portend volumes) are offered as installments on fuller Frazerian “fables.” First, I sample smidgens of his Pausanias, where documentary data manifestly beget imaginative fling. (The same, I claim, goes for The Golden Bough, but in a more riddled way.) Second, I snip sizable slices from his ethnographic assemblages on cross-dressing. Out of the intersensory “force” of Frazer’s style, I suggest, its “form evolved”—like a leaf (my metaphor is Goethean).46 Nor, I take pains to insist, did Sir James altogether neglect Bali (my own fieldwork area).
(Parergon. Resolved to emulate Frazer’s Britannica assignments given by Robertson Smith, I employ the same slice of alphabet (“P” and “T”). Despite this radical restraint, or ascesis, I half hope [like Frazer or Bachofen or Benjamin] to squeeze everything in.)

Fragment “P”: Pausanias

Frazer cultivated an ethic and aesthetic of comparative description less “thick” than lumpy, sensate, and elegiac-yet-ironic. Ackerman ties Frazer’s characteristically contrarian opinions to a stylistic tic: “Having begun by denying the authoritativeness of his authorities, [Frazer] proceeds to enforce his ironic position through a number of rhetorical devices. One of his favorites is the strategically placed modifier (e.g., ‘The Circassians will tell stories to a sick man, while banging with a hammer on a ploughshare which has been thoughtfully placed by the sick man’s bed.’).”

Another literary commentator, R. Fraser, forcefully denies any superficiality to this rhetorical turn: “The method by which Frazer achieved such refraction of matter into sensibility is his style, which has often been misunderstood. Ackerman . . . refers to it somewhat dismissively as ‘literary’ without realizing that its literariness is part of the point.” For Frazer, Fraser adds, “all discourse was a form of literature, and literature itself no badge of shame even for (perhaps especially for) the would-be empiricist.” Indeed in 1982, I used Hyman’s similar point to unsettle presumed literary-ethnographic divides in other anthropologist-authors as well. But that was “then-s”; and this is “now-s.”

Overlapped intertwining of Frazer’s Pausanias and Golden Bough may help clarify his descriptive sensibilities. To put complex matters in an acorn, Frazer wed (1) positivistic compulsion for empirical compilation with (2) artistic convictions that only imagined flings can inhabit (or become inhabited by) intersensory experience. One could call Frazer’s partner-side “Paterian,” if only to credit his aestheticist flair when zooming in on clusters of cultural practice. Frazer’s alloyed attitude—hard-nosed evidence married to empathetic fancy—is patent in his Pausanias’s opening in Piraeus, whose arsenal-arcade (readers may recall) I cited above. Return with me now to that short phrase—“there were ship-sheds there down to my time”—as we scrutinize Frazer’s appended commentary: seven packed pages (forty-nine lines each) adjudicating evidentiary disputes:

Mr. Kalkmann [in Pausanias der Perieget] concludes that Pausanias cannot be describing Piraeus as it was in his own time, but must have copied his
description of it from an old book or books which depicted Piraeus as it had been in happier days before the Roman sack. But between the time of Strabo and the time of Pausanias a century and a half elapsed, during which Greece enjoyed profound peace and basked in the sunshine of imperial favor. It is rash to assume that during this long period Piraeus remained in precisely the same state of ruin and desolation to which it had been reduced by Sulla’s sack more than two hundred years before.52

No strata of data are neglected: “The colossal statue of a Roman emperor (Claudius?) and a good bust of Augustus have also been found at Piraeus, attesting to some extent the returning prosperity of the port. . . . Extensive remains of Roman baths were brought to light by excavation close to the harbor of Zea in 1892 . . . actually built over the remains of some of the ancient ship-sheds.”53

Only after two hundred lines of compressed detail does Frazer finally indulge in a comparative aside, *Golden Bough* fashion:

The only remains of ancient ships which have been found at Zea are some plates of Parian marble representing great eyes. Pollux tells us . . . that the ship’s name was painted beside its eye. Philostratus describes the picture of an Etruscan pirate ship painted blue with fierce eyes at the prow to frighten the enemy. . . . Modern Italian sailors sometimes still paint an eye on the bow. . . . Every craft owned by a Chinaman, from a sampan up to an English-built screw steamer, has a pair of eyes painted on its bows, that it may see its way and spy out sunken rocks, shoals, and other dangers of the deep.54

That duly noted, Frazer snaps back to the site at hand; he interpolates every intercolumniation conceivably stretching from antiquity to Pausanias’s day, down to the sails and canvas gear and slit-like openings “lest the tackle should suffer from damp.” Frazer cinches things with uncustomary crispness: “Such was, in outline, the great arsenal of the Piraeus.”55

Commentary, however, is far from done. With no change of paragraph, Frazer shifts gears into glaring verbiage—conspicuously archaizing (even in 1898). I do not exaggerate how his rhetoric struts its switched registers, jolting readers into the transtemporal scene. To capture Frazer’s literary “special effect,” behold the full Passage: “Such was, in outline, the great arsenal of the Piraeus. *Thither on the burning days of summer, one may suppose*, crowds were glad to escape from the blinding glare and stifling heat of the streets, and to promenade in the cool, lofty, and dimly lighted arcade, often stopping to gaze with idle curiosity or patriotic pride at the long array of well-ordered tackle which spoke of the naval supremacy of
This shuddering metamorphosis from circumstantial minutiae to illusions of “being there” (earmarked “one may suppose”) is followed by mid-page annotations for all seven pages, plus one last paragraph of text intimately conjoining empirical fact and fancy.

Conjoined as well are traveling temps (two of them): Frazer’s time of translation (“we may notice”) and Pausanias’s time of descriptive evocation (“It must have been a heart-stirring sight”):

Lastly, before quitting the war-harbors of Athens, we may notice the Choma, a quay near the mouth of the harbor on which, when an armament was fitting out for sea, the Council of the Five Hundred held their sitting daily till the squadron sailed. When all was ready, every captain was bound by law to lay his vessel alongside the quay to be inspected by the Council. The inspection over, the fleet weighed anchor and proceeded on its voyage. It must have been a heart-stirring sight to witness the departure of a fleet for the seat of war, as gallant ship after ship passed, in long procession, through the mouth of the harbor and stood out to sea, followed by the gazing eyes and by the hopes and fears and prayers of thousands assembled on the shore.

Frazer’s “interpretive ethic,” as I deem it, crafted duple modalities from assorted scholarships routinely separated since. His virtuoso prowess—accumulating diverse testimony (material, mythological, ethnographic, literary, biblical)—earns, or wins, him the reward, or prize, of convergent aesthetic effect. Frazer therewith grants readers, or bestows on us, the vantage of (in this case) an antique Greek eye (gaze?), nose, ear, and tongue.

By such devices dumb data were made by Frazer to speak, so to speak. Yet even in his exponentially archaeology-based Pausanias commentary, Frazer’s introduction observes that this long-ago traveling expert witness was himself double-voiced—as were those Greeks inhabiting places Pausanias inscribed. Thus, from far away and far before, Frazer indeed “translates” duplicitous anthropoi. Throughout those temps perdus, the natives now interpreted were interpreters too—and possibly ironic as well, in their fashion. Frazer fosters this impression playfully when depicting paintings, themselves representations, that Pausanias had described (represented) along with a “fragment from the comedy of The Painter by Diphilus” that portrayed “the long-shore sharks” (figurative ones) “who lay in wait on the quays of Piraeus”: “For in the passage in question one of the fraternity tells us how, whenever he spied a jolly tar just stepping ashore, ready for a spree, with a bulging purse and an expansive smile on his sun-burnt face,
he used to rush up to him, shake him warmly by the hand, drop a delicate allusion to Savior Zeus, and proffer his services at the sacrifice. The bait took, and soon he was to be seen heading for the sanctuary with the sailor man in tow.58

Readers, believe me (a more recent traveler than Diphilus, or Frazer), Piraeus, if only in this respect, hasn’t changed much: hoodwinkers still abound, as do be-duped “believers” (and possibly “thick describers”). And an “arcade,” bulging purses and all, the place called Piraeus certainly remains.59

Fragment “T”: The Golden Bough

Again, Frazer’s lattice-like oeuvre interweaves empirical givens (data) with fact-derived fanciful flings. His detractors like to spread rumors that decades of augmenting the Bough merely compensated for absent documentation of the Nemi episodes “ringing” his madcap excursion. Such views have reinforced disciplinary divides of empirical and interpretive from Frazer’s day to ours.

With more room, smaller print, or thinner paper—all means Frazer himself urged on publishers to accommodate expansions—I could augment my efforts to quash anew such fruitless divisiveness. Yes, I might then track Nemi’s ritual-slaying (Frazer’s “MacGuffin”) to other parerga within the “cycle de la ramée d’or,”60 including (1) its Balder component—anticipated in Walter Pater’s “Duke Carl of Rosenmold” of 1887—61—and (2) its handling of Hippolytus and Phaedra, cued to Frazer’s translation of Ovid’s Fasti.62 His commentary there offers fresh glosses on that legendary twig plucked by Aeneas “and carried with him as a sort of passport on his journey to the world of the dead.” Frazer also foregrounds a Phaedra-factor (“notus amor Phaedrae, nota est iniuria Thesei”)—artfully encapsulating truly tangled affairs that are but briefly attested in his Pausanias: “Phaedra, wife of Theseus, made advances to his son Hippolytus, which were repulsed. She accused him of having made advances to her, and [Theseus] prayed to his father Poseidon, to punish Hippolytus. Poseidon sent a bull out of the sea to frighten Hippolytus’s horses, and the young man was killed.”63

Ovid elaborates on Euripides by conveying the deceased to Nemi: “Hippolytus fell from the car, and, his limbs entangled by the reins, his mangled body was whirled along, till he gave up the ghost, much to Diana’s rage. . . . Thrice [Aesculapius] touched the youth’s breast, thrice he
spoke healing words; then Hippolytus lifted his head, low laid upon the ground. He found a hiding-place in a sacred grove and in the depths of Dictynna’s own woodland; he became Virbius of the Arician Lake.”

This passage underscores how Nemi became for Frazer more than a “survival” in Tylor’s sense; rather it represented, legendarily, a gathering place for transtemporal aftermaths of ritual deaths. (To that rhythm of “works and lives” my essay is paying homage.) All roads, times, and resurrections lead to Rome’s nearby Arician grove, where translation grows rooted: radical.

Despite my “plan” to defer resuming Frazer’s rememorializing of Nemi, readers here are not altogether spared. A similar “sacrificial” ordeal (or opportunity) awaited “wayfarers” venturing into Frazer’s mazeways—his labyrinth, as he finally deemed it in The Golden Bough’s literal aftermath: “At the best the chronicle may serve as a warning, as a sort of Ariadne’s thread, to help the forlorn wayfarer to shun some of the snares and pitfalls into which his fellows have fallen before him in the labyrinth of life.”

That metaphor makes every reader a “Theseus” (père d’Hippolyte, mari de Phèdre)—led by the thread of Frazer’s prose through tome upon tome saturated with evidence and licensed to imagine.

Consider just volume 5 (Adonis, Attis, Osiris), with its copious coverage of transvestism and gender ambiguity—topics as alive today as Frazer himself is dead. One relevant section, “Some Customs of the Pelew Islanders” (with thematic subtitles, “Priests Dressed as Women,” “Prostitution of Unmarried Girls,” etc.) opens by encapsulating J. Kubary’s Die Religion der Pelauer. From Borneo and Sarawak, it travels over space and time, winding back to Greece, with occasional rest stops: as-if being-theres. The trajectory passes through sundry sources (most strikingly, Lucianic satires), eventually digressing on genital croppings. Let’s read!

Frazer guides our “book voyages” with synoptic cues in their margins (a device of English-language comparative compendia at least since Purchas His Pilgrimes in 1625). He begins steering us thusly: “In the Pelew Islands a man who is inspired by a goddess wears female attire and is treated as a woman. This . . . may explain a widespread custom whereby men dress and live like women.”

Pages range far and wide—Patagonians, “vagabond conjurors” of Ram-bree, the Vallabha sect—but remain tethered to points of departure: “Among the Ibans or Sea Dyaks of Borneo the highest class of sorcerers or medicine-men (manangs) are those who are believed to have been transformed into women. Such a man is therefore called a ‘changed medicine-man’ (manang bali) on account of his supposed change of sex.”
This focal case launches another distant leap as far as Northeast Asian shamans, some of whom “become a woman with the appearance of a man, and as a woman he is often taken to wife by another man, with whom he leads a regular married life. Extraordinary powers are attributed to such transformed shamans. . . . They excel in all branches of magic, including ventriloquism.”70 “Conversely,” Frazer notes, “a woman inspired by a god may adopt male costume”—a switch he instantiates with Uganda. We pass to classical enactments of “the theory of inspiration by a female spirit” entailing an “assumed change of sex under the inspiration of a goddess.” Variegated evidence consolidates around imitations of Hercules “who disguised himself as a woman to escape the pursuit of his enemies”:

So the Lydian Hercules wore female attire . . . as the purchased slave of the imperious Omphale, Queen of Lydia. If we suppose that Queen Omphale, like Queen Semiramis, was nothing but the great Asiatic goddess, or one of her Avatars, it becomes probable that the story of the womanish Hercules of Lydia preserves a reminiscence of a line or college of effeminate priests who, like the eunuch priests of the Syrian goddess, dressed as women in imitation. . . . Similarly at the vernal mysteries of Hercules in Rome the men were draped in the garments of women; and in some of the rites and processions of Dionysus also men wore female attire.71

Frazer advises against assuming that one solution applies to all cases of an “obscure and complex problem”: “the religious or superstitious interchange of dress between men and women.”

His survey next sketches shifting correlations between transvestism and other customs—for example, circumcision: “Among the Nandi, a tribe of British East Africa, before boys are circumcised they receive a visit from young girls, who give them some of their own garments and ornaments. These the boys put on and wear till the operation of circumcision is over, when they exchange the girls’ clothes for the garments of women . . . [which] the newly circumcised lads must continue to wear for months afterwards.”72 Such matters, Frazer shows, can be reciprocal by gender: “Girls are also circumcised among the Nandi, and before they submit to the operation they attire themselves in men’s garments and carry clubs in their hands.” These practices are “intended to disguise the wearers against demons”—an idea that points toward certain usages surrounding not genital croppings (circumcision) but life’s cropping (death): “We may compare the practice of the Lycian men who regularly wore women’s dress in mourning, for this might be intended to conceal them from the ghost, just as . . . some peoples of antiquity used to descend into pits and remain there.
James A. Boon

... whenever a death had taken place in the family.” Yet other connections, again reciprocal, grace a Sumatran tribe: “If parents have several sons and desire the next child shall be a girl, they dress the boys as girls. On the contrary, when they have many daughters, they dress the girls up as boys.”

Frazer reiterates that no single explanation suffices; he rejects his own conjecture in Totemism and Exogamy “that the wearing of female attire by the bridegroom . . . may mark a transition from mother-kin to father-kin.” Transvestism, then, attaches to “a variety” of motives, a “principal” one of which gathers force over his pages: “the wish to please certain powerful spirits or to deceive others.”

The pervasive theme of fooling spirits may be The Golden Bough’s descriptive Grund, virtually. Abundant ethnographies adumbrate this topic, and Frazer’s distillations of them seem his most assured. Let me cite one instance from elsewhere in the volumes that perchance depicts Bali—whose Hindu inhabitants (I note with an ethnographer’s authority) do not circumcise but do (occasionally) cross-dress:

The people of Bali, an island to the east of Java, have periodical expulsions of devils on a great scale. On the day appointed the people of the village or district assemble at the principal temple. Here at a cross-road offerings are set out for the devils. After prayers, . . . the blast of a horn summons the devils to partake of the meal. Afterwards . . . the bystanders . . . spread in all directions . . . crying, “Depart! go away!” . . . hasten[ed] by a deafening clatter on doors, beams, rice-blocks, and so forth. . . . When the last devil has taken his departure, the uproar is succeeded by a dead silence, which lasts during the next day also. The devils, it is thought, are anxious to return to their old homes, and in order to make them think that Bali is not Bali but some desert island, no one may stir from his own abode. . . . Wreaths of thorns and leaves are hung at all the entrances to warn strangers from entering. Not till the third day is this state of siege raised, and even then it is forbidden to work at the rice-fields or to buy and sell in the market. Most people still stay at home, striving to while away the time with cards and dice.

“To make them think that Bali is not Bali.” Frazer’s kernel of skillful evocation nicely captures ritual-rhetoric behind ceremonies of Nyepi—drawn from a fine empirical “sketch” in 1879, by Rutger van Eck. Reliably relaying this best evidence of its day, Frazer also manages to enliven sensory matters anecdotally, much as he did Pausanias.

Such augmentation is “vintage” Frazeriana: its veritable “trademark” (both metaphors are apt). It is worth sampling another of Frazer’s passes
Birth of Anthropology Out of a Pause on Pausanias

at Bali—whose inhabitants (I also note ethnographically) customarily cremate, and extravagantly. In this instance Frazer reports only indirect data—indeed, seemingly superficial “displacements”—pertinent to this key Hindu practice. Yet despite the fact that he never pursues Balinese culture contextually, evidence adduced is no less empirical or apt (or extravagant!). By functionalist standards Frazer inadequately elides Hindu rites with those of noncremating Kangean Muslims. But in this case his notorious skidding across cultures achieves insights that seem (to me) “positively” inspired. Here is a Passage of Frazer that I (a Balinist) commend comparatively to any empathetic gaze:

In the East Indian island of Bali, the mice which ravage the rice-fields are caught in great numbers, and burned in the same way that corpses are burned. But two of the captured mice are allowed to live, and receive a little packet of white linen. Then the people bow down before them, as before gods, and let them go. In the Kangean archipelago, East Indies, when the mice prove very destructive to the rice-crop, the people rid themselves of the pests. . . . On a Friday, when the usual service in the mosque is over, four pairs of mice are solemnly united in marriage by the priest. Each pair is then shut up in a miniature canoe . . . and escorted to the seashore just as if it were a real wedding. Wherever the procession passes the people beat with all their might on their rice-blocks. On reaching the shore, the canoes, with their little inmates, are launched and left to the mercy of the winds and waves.

Yes, I personally have eye- (and ear- and nose-) witnessed similar ceremonies in Bali. Yet, “being there,” I failed to imagine the practices so intimately or, despite Frazer’s objectionably sentimental manner, exactingly. I also applaud a kind of “contagion effect” (it’s almost magical!) when Frazer zooms in on those “little inmates”—we nearly hear them squeak!—left to the “winds and waves.” Also magically (perhaps), Frazer’s phrases about Kangean rituals help readers feel similarly “up close and personal” to aforementioned rites in Bali. Something subtle resonates here between Balinese and Kangean usages—one in a ritual register of cremation, the other in a ritual register of marriage—both depicted as deflected into prophylactics for a rodent scourge! However antithetical Hindu Balinese and Islamic Kangean doctrines appear, their practices can converge on mock-honorifics of mice. Frazer seems to sense affinities of ritual sensibility between practitioners of two religions whose dogmas alone are asunder. His adroit description juxtaposes playful fragments, as disciplinary functionalism would not.
Final Elipses

So there you have it: a similar style of “imaginative fling,” earned rigorously by Frazer in Greece, illuminates cultures selectively distilled in his Bough—including Bali. Ironically, Frazer’s ungainly corpus can satisfy contemporary tastes for transgressing disciplinary divisions: anthropology, history, literature, classics, religion, media arts, critical theory. (This does not make him “postmodernist,” or proto-so, any more than I am that for noting it.) Moreover, attending to Frazer’s travels and translations may help cancel stock segregations in patently professionalized “method”: for example, Frazer-bookish / Malinowski-outdoorsy; Frazer-derivative / Tylor-primary; British-empirical / French-intellectualist; interpretive/deconstructive; Boasian/Durkheimian/Frazerian/.80 Diverse epistemological slants—whether modernist, postmodernist, neither, or blends—merit broaching, occasionally at least, in incongruous rapprochement (another habit of Kenneth Burke).81

Arguably then, Frazer’s pursuits—born out of Pausanias (with first Persephone and then Phaedra as midwives)—warrant partial resurrection in our “new” millennium: just after Frazer’s own (juxtaposed to it), and only two past that of Pausanias, whose “description” covered the one preceding. Such spans of time—bridging four [4] millennia!—seem susceptible of travel-translating still. Yes, travel-readers of disparate critical proclivities may benefit from lingering a while in eccentric texts earlier festooned as “Frazerian anthropology” (an official knowledge-mélange).

Once upon a longtemps ago, well before voyaging Greece-ward, I observed that a certain discipline’s root word was not Latin homo (singularly this or that) but Attic anthropos: “plural, evasive, darkling, paradoxical.”82 Since then, seriocomic anthropoi have been profoundly apotheosized in Neni Panourgía’s alluring “anthropography” of Athens—in all that fair city’s worldly and historical flows. One day it dawned on this little ole anthropos that Panourgía’s spirited sensibilities resonate with Frazer-in-Greece, supposedly elegiac, but actually ambiguous. That suspicion (or hunch) I now feel called to nurse in conclusion.

With slim space remaining (and no option of smaller print or thinner paper), I thus end amid Panourgía’s intricately contradictory voices, devised to interrogate notions of “native” as radically as any scholar I can remember. Her text engages and enacts meta-phoren [“trans-lation,” tilted back to Greek] never at rest, never home, even to the topos (common-place) of the grave [taphos]—that is, “death.” I might quote Panourgía’s own “description of Greece” at that description’s gloamings:
This study, then, has been about two things. First it has explored how the praxis of anthropology and ethnography can be a matter of everyday life. . . . And it has been a reflection not only on the navigation of the living through a life that can only lead to death, but even more, on the possibility that the difficulty of incorporating death itself (much like ethnography and anthropology) into everyday life might be the total and complete [hers is hardly a postmodernist study!] act of resistance [epimythion] to its finality.83

Greek practices reread by Panourgia´ (including herself-translated)—transform stark polarities of death and undeath into true “difficulty.” Which, we mortals might mull, is ephemeral: life or death (or birth)? Or which, if any, is existential “wink”—and ironically so. Frazer may well have wondered something similar. As R. Fraser suggests: “For, if in Robertson Smith a ruthless evangelical honesty contrives to undermine the sanctity of the biblical text, in Frazer the idealistic premises of Humean empiricism turn in on themselves to make doubt itself an impossibility. To the end Frazer remained skeptical, even of his own skepticism.”84 Being skeptical even of skepticism may have affinities with “attitudes” (K. Burke) open to difficulties of “incorporating death itself . . . into everyday life” (Panourgia´).

Obdurately reread, Scotsman Sir James provides (or so I propose) premonitions of Athénienne Neni. Like Panourgia’s ever-hyphenating identities in many-sided parerga, Frazer’s comparative Greece-going and globe-girdling encountered topoi of “death” alongside many opposites: “birth,” “immortality,” carnivalized “death of death” (a mainstay in certain “theographies”—my term). Frazer recaptured rites—themselves conceivably not altogether un-ironic—that resist any finality, including death’s or life’s. This elusive theme is manifest in The Golden Bough—which fittingly provides now a final flourish after a “fragment” devoted to it. Citing Frazer here, I hope to lay to rest lingering prejudices that, properly, his Pausanias and the anthropology (Golden Bough) interrupting it would better have been “separated at birth.” Toward incontrovertibly blurring and twinning the two, my essay’s (nearly) last word emerges from echoey lamentations crowning reflections on “Death and Resurrection”:

There are two kindred sets of observances in which the simulated death of a divine or supernatural being is a conspicuous feature. In one of them the being whose death is dramatically represented is a personification of the Carnival; in the other it is Death himself [the death of Death]. . . . Amongst some of the Saxons of Transylvania the Carnival is hanged. Thus at Braller on Ash Wednesday or Shrove Tuesday . . . At the “burial
of Carnival” in Lechrain, a man dressed as a woman in black clothes is carried on a litter or bier by four men; he is lamented over by men disguised as women in black clothes. . . . Similarly in Schörzingen, near Schönberg, the “Carnival (Shrovetide) Fool” was carried. . . . After the procession the Fool was buried under straw and dung.

In Greece a ceremony of the same sort was witnessed at Pylos by Mr. E. L. Tilton in 1895. On the evening of the first day of the Greek Lent, which fell that year on the twenty-fifth of February, an effigy with a grotesque mask for a face was borne about the streets on a bier, preceded by a mock priest with long white beard. Other functionaries surrounded the bier and two torch-bearers walked in advance. The procession moved slowly to melancholy music played by a pipe and drum. A final halt was made in the public square, where a circular space was kept clear of the surging crowd. Here a bonfire was kindled, and round it the priest led a wild dance to the same droning music. When the frenzy was at its height, the chief performer put tow on the effigy and set fire to it, and while it blazed he resumed his mad career, brandishing torches and tearing off his venerable beard to add fuel to the flames.85

Join me, readers, in hearing, seeing, and virtually smelling Frazer attesting the “death of death”—especially in Greece, while he was “being there”—well before his own beard grew, figuratively or actually, venerable.

(Parergon. My interpretive plan, gone customarily awry, was to have traced Frazer’s explicitly labyrinthine panoply to topoi of thanatos. Alas, having dallied too long in Piraeus [plus parerga], I retain scant space for shadowy Phaedra, although her aftermath loops back, via Hippolytus, to Frazer’s Nemi, which place anticipates: Panourgía, Neni. For, Nemi became the fancied “grave” [taphos] of travel-translation. Here Hippolytus, whose 1962 movie incarnation [Tony Perkins, American] loved Phaedra [Melina Mercouri, Greek] “like they did in the good old days” was reputedly reborn—a fact conceivably fundamental in interpreting Frazer, believe it or not.)86

Regardless, Frazerian skepticism—even-of-skepticism—inspired possibly by flaming effigies of ritual practice (and also possibly by Phaedra)—possibly retains as well considerable promise as critical-comparative ethichum-aesthetic. In Frazer’s style of constitutive doubt, even death, if dead, can be resurrected! Whether such interpretive irony too derived from Greece is a suspicion (or a hunch) whose confirmation is perhaps best left to experts or to “natives”—Pausanias, Panourgía, Phaedra, Hippolytus, . . .—dead or alive, or reborn . . . which means “translated.”87