

ALPHEIÓS AND ARÉTHOUSA

In memory of Italo Calvino

It was a glorious July. The midday sun, like a huge, scorching sea urchin, tried its thorns on beings and non-beings; he even managed to penetrate the forests, the Arcadian deep-shaded forests, wounding pine trees and fir trees which shed an amber tear. The divinely beautiful nymph Aréthousa, a loyal attendant of the virgin goddess Artemis, had started before dawn, in the morning dew, her daily chore of setting up lime-wigs and nets for birds; yet her hunting passion was so intense, that, without ever realizing it, mid-day came and she commenced jumping about playfully on the hot stones. She was fortunate though, for while she was rushing down the mountain slope, all sweaty and thirsty, she suddenly found herself in a green and cool place where, among poplar trees, stubbles and plane trees, flowed the waters of the river Alpheiós. They were so crisp that, as Ovid mentions in his *Metamorphoses*, “one could see and count, even in its deepest end, its pebbles”.¹ Overjoyed, the nymph Aréthousa immediately sat on the bank and dipped her exhausted feet into the cool water. Such was her relief that she did not pay attention to something that felt like a slight stroke on her soles and tip-toes. “This is how water is”, she thought, “always friendly to people”, and, enthusiastically, she rose and went into the river up to her knees. At that point, she felt the caress, all over her legs, and it was so sweet that she wanted to feel it around her whole body. Therefore, she undressed and after throwing her garments on a willow branch, she started swimming with little shrieks of joy, which soon turned into cries of terror and panic, since the water no longer caressed her body, but kept massaging it, lustfully fumbling it, with a million fingers, up to her most intimate parts. From the river’s bottom, that was now all muddy, came a dull muttering. She was out of her mind because of her terror and shame and she hurriedly swam to the bank. When she got there, she started running as fast as she could, naked.

Alpheiós (like all the other rivers for that matter) was then also a god, and a rather great one, ‘*since he was the largest, most aquiferous and the longest river of Peloponnese*’². As a God therefore, he had the ability to take any

¹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, V 569 ff.

² *Megále Elliniki Egkyklopaideia*, vol. iv.

shape or form and in this case, he transformed into a hunter in order to hunt down and capture the young huntress who was so terrified by his audacious and perhaps somewhat violent caresses. Aréthousa was taught by the man-hater Artemis to believe that all men, even Gods themselves, were but monsters that wished for nothing more but to ravish the innocent young girls out of their valuable virginity. She was now running like the wind in order to save her virginity. Alpheiós might have been slower, but he was led by the passion of his love and his endurance; for Gods and rivers are long-distance runners. Thus, there came a moment when the very fast, yet worn out, Aréthousa felt his breath on her back. She could only ask for the assistance of the Goddess and so it happened. Artemis appeared in a second and, after she transformed her into a pure spring, she opened a tunnel in the ground going all the way from Peloponnese to Sicily and sent her there, close to Syracuse, to a small island in Ortygia where even today her water springs forth.

Alpheiós, however, managed to transform into water again, dashed himself into the tunnel, crossed the sea underground³ and reached Ortygia where he finally joined⁴ with the beautiful spring, the virtuous⁵ Aréthousa, forever.

For many centuries, several moonstruck souls believed that there were Greek flowers appearing in the springtime at the Sicilian spring and that if one were to send a message in a bottle and throw it to Alpheiós, it would reach Ortygia. Far from moonstruck were those, after the fires that burnt down Heleia and Arcadia last summer; the pure waters of Aréthousa became ashen and at Olympia, its mouth churned out embers for months.



³ There is yet another, more unorthodox and therefore more charming version, according to which Alpheiós crossed the sea and mated with Aréthousa and his waters did not become salty. If I chose the version of the underground journey it is because Alpheiós in his long course, from his sources in the western slopes of mount Parnon, to his mouth at the Kyparissia bay, southwest of Agoulinitza, keeps sinking into cesspools, to rise up again a bit further down and then he sinks back down again until he joins the sea. Observing this phenomenon must have led the ancients to think of a tunnel connecting Peloponnese with Sicily.

⁴ It was a fated union, written in their names; the name Aréthousa which derives from the Greek verb *arethô* means ‘water gushing out abundantly’ while the name Alpheiós originates from the verb *alphanô*, which ‘means the one who provides affluence, the fertiliser’. Could there ever be a more matching couple?

⁵ Here the word Aréthousa is used as an adjective, meaning the virtuous one. Accordingly, we could characterise Alpheiós as *erotokritos* ‘the one defined by love’ thus paying homage to the poet who has honoured love in such an unparalleled way; I am of course referring to Vincenzo Cornaro who, under an Italian name, wrote *Erotokritos*, the most beautiful love epic in modern Greek literature.

Note: The above mentioned text consists of various versions of the age-old myth of Alpheió's love for Aréthousa. These versions however, have one thing in common: Alpheió crosses the Adriatic Sea to join his beloved in Sicily. This is of course not accidental, since the myth, in any of its versions is a symbol of the colonization of Sicily by the Greeks. One must admit here that our ancestors (if indeed we are their descendants) beautified their imperialistic aspirations, spicing them up with a nice and utterly lyrical fairy-tale that was usually based on the love of a woman. The most famous case undoubtedly being that of the voluntary abduction of Helen of Troy by Paris, which resulted to the Trojan War. There is yet another myth, a most amusing one that is also connected to the colonization of the Greeks in the West, in which a woman also plays a leading role. It is mentioned by Pausanias in his *Phôkika, Lokrôn Ozolôn* (Book X, 10.6) and it reads:

[10.10.6] Tarentum is a colony of the Lacedaemonians, and its founder was Phalanthus, a Spartan. On setting out to found a colony, Phalanthus received an oracle from Delphi, declaring that when he should feel rain under a cloudless sky (*aethra*), he would then win both a territory and a city. At first he neither examined the oracle himself nor informed one of his interpreters, but came to Italy with his ships. Although he won victories over the barbarians, he succeeded neither in taking a city nor in making himself master of a territory. He called to mind the oracle, and thought that the god had foretold an impossibility. For never could rain fall from a clear and cloudless sky. When he was in despair, his wife, who had accompanied him from home, among other endearments placed her husband's head between her knees and began to pick out the lice. And it chanced that the wife, such was her affection, wept as she saw her husband's fortunes coming to nothing. As her tears fell in showers, and she wet the head of Phalanthus, he realized the meaning of the oracle, for his wife's name was Aethra. And so on that night, he took from the barbarians Tarentum, the largest and most prosperous city on the coast. [tr. by W. H. S. Jones.]

Today's conquerors, uncultured as they are, think of different myths to justify their military interventions throughout the world prosaic myths have no allure, like those against the spread of the nuclear weapons, the war against terrorism, the restoration of democracy... Maybe those insisting on the death of poetry are right, after all...

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