The Beautiful Nation: Reflections on the Aesthetics of Hellenism

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The Beautiful Nation: Reflections on the Aesthetics of Hellenism

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An aesthetics of Hellenism affirming an exclusivity and localization of the beautiful oscillates along a political axis from domination to liberation. This article seeks to unsettle such accounts of “the beautiful nation” so as to enable other mediations of the real and the ideal, and thus a more open and heterodox vision of nation and homeland. **Keywords**: Hellenism, nation, aesthetics, politicization, mythology

The Greeks: this most beautiful and accomplished, this thoroughly sane, universally envied species of man—was it conceivable that they, of all people, should have stood in need of tragedy, or, indeed, of art?

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*

In the *Twilight of the Idols*, Friedrich Nietzsche extends his iconoclastic meditation on the looks of a great philosophical idol: Socrates. “One knows, one sees for oneself, how ugly he was,” Nietzsche declaims, and proceeds to offer a scathing critique of ugliness as “frequently enough the sign of a thwarted development . . . retarded by interbreeding,” as criminality, “a monster in face, a monster in soul,” and as general decadence. “Was Socrates a Greek at all?” he wonders, asserting that among the Greeks ugliness was not just an objection but “almost a refutation.” Elsewhere, in more serious vein, Nietzsche reflects on the impact upon the arts of a certain “aesthetic Socratism,” which reduces “the beautiful to the intelligible,” and accuses Socrates and Plato “as agents of the dissolution of Greece, as pseudo-Greek, as anti-Greek.”¹

Nietzsche is not alone in identifying Greece as a nation that enjoys a special relationship with the beautiful. “We have exiled

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beauty; the Greeks took up arms for her,” declares Albert Camus, by way of lamenting a certain loss in modern European thought. Whereas “our time,” “our Europe,” feeds “its despair on ugliness and convulsions . . . in the pursuit of totality,” negating beauty, negating “whatever she does not glorify,” the ancient Greeks had a tragic sense of “gilded calamity,” of the “stifling quality” of beauty that always implied a balancing limit, the imminent enforcement of cosmic equity. That is why, Camus insists, it is improper for “us” Europeans, incapable of experiencing such erotic sadness, to claim that “we are the sons of Greece.” At best, we are “the renegade sons”; at worst, we are moving toward “those whom the Greeks called Barbarians.” In the end, Camus reserves honorary Greekness to the artists, whom he views as “[a]ll those who are struggling for freedom to-day [and who] are ultimately fighting for beauty.”

A peculiar international struggle is thus staged in contemporary thought, fought over aesthetic terrains. Beautiful, noble, artistic Greeks are set up against monstrous, renegade, anti-Greeks or progressive Barbarians. A creative national genius is elevated and glorified, presented as paradigmatic in matters of art and knowledge.

Romanticizing the (ancient) Greek way of thinking and doing things is, of course, not uncommon in Western Enlightenment thought. The dangers that this posed and continues to pose are well known, whether in legitimating a certain successor civilization with a hard or soft imperial mission of civilizing the ecumene or neglecting the value of other civilizations or afflicting modern Greece with combined complexes of superiority and inferiority. Critics have, fairly enough, become suspicious for whom, by whom, and against whom the beautiful nation could mutate into a nasty artistic dogma or political mission. Yet, what has been less commented upon in current discussions is the transversal side of Hellenism—civilizing fantasy aside and pace Nietzsche and Camus—that articulates a sustained philobarbaric and cosmopolitan vision.

This is not to depict yet another Greek privilege but to underline a general characteristic of reflective cultural practice, one that is rooted in a particular tradition but willing to open up and reinvent itself in its encounter with other traditions, such as, for instance, the cosmopolitanism of Kublai Khan or the creative Hinduism of Mahatma Gandhi. With respect to Greek cultural practice, it is often missed that Hellenism is not an exclusively national or Western ideology, but has been historically celebrated also in opposing ideological terms, such as in certain modes of post-Alexandrian thought. As I show below, this “other” Hellenism features a culture and thought that transcends the national and monocivilizational, a form of life that respects and should be attuned to the logos of the Other, to the beauty of the Other. Typically, the syncretic
is both a peculiarly Hellenic attitude—it originally referred to the alliance of rival and irreconcilable Cretan cities in the face of outside danger—and a cause for Hellenic chauvinist repulsion, identifying cultural weakness, impurity, and ugliness.\(^5\)

The politicization of the beautiful occurs when beauty no longer passes as a “disinterested delight.” An interest over its location, individual or public use, aesthetic value or goodness renders the beautiful a political and ethical matter.\(^6\) If Nietzsche and Camus underscored an ancient Greek obsession with it, it is precisely because the Greek “longing for the beautiful” became quite early on a recurring theme of Greek political mythography. The Hellenes (which is the name the Greeks used to describe themselves) traced their genealogy to the pursuit of beauty as encapsulated in that epic Trojan expedition to recapture Helen, their spiritual eponym (\(\text{elenē, ellenː: especially striking in the “Erasmian” pronunciation}\)), the name and face “that launched a thousand ships.” At the same time, however, they remained suspicious of the power of beauty, the spell it cast over them, its ephemeral possession and tendency to flee, its impossible government.

For Hellenic thinkers, the beautiful functioned primarily as an ontological mediator “to bridge the chasm between the real and the ideal” and bring one closer to truth and “the heavenly order.”\(^7\) At least as early as Pythagoras, the “vision or theory of the most beautiful things” (\(\text{kalliston theōrían}\)) was inextricably linked to the philosophical act.\(^8\) Being a “lover of beauty in servility” and as such a “lover of wisdom without weakness” was worthy of the highest admiration and a sign of great political disposition.\(^9\)

Still, the Hellenes thought through “the wonderful,” engaged the shining envoy that is beauty in two distinctive contemplative ways, which in effect supported two contrasting political visions. The first way sought to frame the adventures of and for the beautiful in a single “national” myth, elevated to grand narrative or religious orthodoxy. This saw the beautiful—even in its evil forms—as a messenger calling men to do heroic deeds, empowering the spiritual genealogy of the bounded polis and perpetuating it as an earthly replica of the heavenly order above. The second way emphasized the importance of heteromythia, the counterstory to the dominant one, the ever-present urge to narrate anew the “national” and the political, and in this sense underscored the moving polis, the “Odyssean” rather than the “Iliadic” pursuit of beauty.

Put differently, the first way viewed the multiple formations of beauty from within confident visions of the real and the ideal, supporting instrumental rationales, applying aesthetic scales to measure the goodness and badness of phenomena from the perspective of an unproblematic political community. The second saw
these formations of beauty as mysterious and tragic, aesthetically ambivalent, blurring good and evil, and so primarily as vehicles for individual or collective self-problematization and ultimately for change and transformation. Paradoxically, both ways could trace their inspired development to different versions of Socratic philosophy: the first to the antiartistic, rational-thinking Socrates (e.g., the one depicted in Plato’s Republic); the second to Socrates the poet and mystic (for example, the one depicted in Plato’s Phaedrus).

Contemporary local and global visions are not politically inhospitable to these archaic beauty contests, manifesting today as they did then complex operations of aesthetic practice. Acts of aestheticization can, for example, turn political pursuits into a pleasurable sensual experience, and in doing so make the otherwise unbearable bearable and inconceivable conceivable, requiring, to that extent, vigilance over their power uses, tactics, and implications. But the aesthetic dimension can also be a medium for positive empowerment and emancipation, liberating sensuousness from the tyranny of reason, releasing libidinal energies and turning “labor” into “play,” making life lighter and civilization less repressive.

In similar manner, the aesthetics of Hellenism oscillate along this domination-liberation axis, and the purpose of this article is to find ways to release “the beautiful nation” from the grab of its sanctimonious lovers or unreflective aesthetes. I specifically explore how the unsettling of the Hellenic exclusivity and localization of the beautiful can leave room for a more liberal mediation of the real and the ideal; that is to say, how far it can allow for the reality of heterology and syncretism to inform and reform the ideal (Hellenic) Self, which may consequently effect a more contingent (and not necessarily territorial) experience of the “nation” and “homeland.” Or, as I put it elsewhere, to bring about an ecstatic insight, an existential freedom that enhances the experience of one’s national state as a port of call rather than a final or destinal habitat.

Such heterodox vision of nation and homeland—when not turned into naïve exoticism or transcendental dogma—might in the end be the most important political lesson that the Hellenic pursuit of beauty has to teach us. Yet, its constant innovation and “alteration” of normalized national existence presents Camus’s aspiring artists or honorary Greeks with an ever-renewed challenge.

* * *

The Hellenes never launched an expedition to Troy. If Homer is to be taken at his word, the suitors of Helen who brought together their armies to reclaim her from Troy (formally activating an oath to defend her marriage) were not known by the name Hellenes at
the time of the war. True, a certain tribe of Hellenes from the region of Hellas, “the land of beautiful women” (kalligunaika), is mentioned by Homer to be under the rule of Achilles, thus pre-saging the notion of the Hellene as an eminent lover of female beauty. But crucially, the Homeric designation reserved for the collectivity of the invaders of Troy was interchangeably Achaeans, Argives, and Danaans—not Hellenes. \(^\text{13}\) Thucydides acknowledges as much about the Hellenes lacking that “one common name” before and during the Trojan War, and even by the time of Homer which was much later. But this does not stop him, as it does not stop his contemporaries, from identifying the Trojan expedition to bring back Helen as the first common enterprise of the Hellenes, and the return from Ilium as “the return of the Hellenes.” \(^\text{14}\)

This linguistic slippage of Thucydides is not a mere anachro-nism. It is reflective of a fifth-century relaunching of Hellenic identity, an attempt to retrace its genealogy and attach to it a glorious historicity. The Hellenization of the Trojan expedition and the Barbarization of the Trojans is part of a strategy, linking the Persian wars at the time to Trojan hubris and the Hellenic victories against the Persians with ancestral mythic prototypes. Tragedies during that period narrate anew the great deeds in Troy, branding the Achaeans as “Hellenes” and the Trojans as “Barbarians,” again the latter not a term used by Homer to denigrate foreigners. \(^\text{15}\) The Trojan epic is thus appropriated to support specific political projects, like Panhellenic unity and the launching of a new eastern expedition against the Persians.

What seems to have been lost in this instrumental process, however, was a deeper reflection on the spiritual pursuit of beauty; that is to say, a meditation on the symbolic character of Helen, including her apotheosis, implicit in Homer but explicit in other Cyclic poets, as well as local cults. \(^\text{16}\) Also marginalized is the primordiality of Helen in the constitution of Hellenic identity—an identity that did not preexist “the beautiful woman” but made up through songs and stories of her heroic capture.

The mythological and etymological ramifications of the Helen-Hellene affair led classicists like Robert Graves to suggest that Helen was nothing other than the secret name and spiritual ancestor of the Hellenes. Their traditional eponymous ancestor—that is, Hellen, son of Deucalion (the Greek Noah)—is thus proposed to be a priest in the service of Helen, or Selene, or Helle (viewed by Graves as mythi-cal equivalents). The early Hellenes are thus identified with the worshippers of a divinely named Helen, and the suitors of Helen—literally those who were mindful, mnestères, of Helen—become the suitors of the Hellespont, fighting for their goddess in Troy. Progressively these worshippers and suitors developed a distinctive political culture.
out of Helen’s longing that came to dominate the region and be “mindful” of its destiny. 

By contrast, among the Hellenes of the fifth century BCE, crudely interpreting or secularizing aspects of the Helen-Hellene affair to support Persian vilification, the beautiful goddess had come to possess a quite negative reputation. Desired by many a Hellene and Barbarian, Helen was generally perceived as the cause of a calamitous war, where the Hellene finally prevailed but at the expense of losing the line of many great heroes. Hellenic political misogyny additionally read in Helen’s transgression a serious challenge to the patriarchal order. Helen crossed just too many (political) lines. Not only did she betray her marriage and place in the intersuitor settlement, she also left her native city, and adding salt to injury emigrated to Barbarian land, Phrygian Troy. Aesylus’s chorus in Agamemnon, playing on her name, described her in no uncertain terms as hell: “For, true to her name, a hell she proved to ships, hell to men, hell to city [elenas, elandros, eleptolis], when stepping forth from her delicate and costly curtained bower, she sailed the sea before the breath of earth-born Zephyrus.”

In all, in the popular imaginary of the period (as represented by classical Athens from which most of our sources are derived), Helen epitomized the Hesiodic kalon kakon, the “beautiful evil” that characterized the essence of womanhood. Thus she was rendered more of an ecumenical Pandora and less an aesthetic casus belli.

So condemned was the case of Helen in the public mind that to defend her indefensible crime became the trial of exceptional rhetorical skill, the “plaything” of sophistry. This is how Gorgias, perhaps the most renowned of sophists at the time, described his Encomium of Helen. In this short treatise, Gorgias criticizes the “univocal and unanimous” infamy that rendered Helen’s name a byword for calamity, arguing in legal style that she escaped responsibility because the things she did were the result of either divine will or forceful abduction or persuasive discourse or passionate love. But, interestingly, he also reminds the Athenian citizenry that what is forgotten in the accusative tendency is that Helen provided the ultimate cause of Hellenic unity. Her godlike beauty and the erotic desires it unleashed was the reason why “many bodies of men were brought together in one body,” seeking to do great things. Hellenes united for Helen and because of her did heroic deeds as a single body politic.

This most crucial embodiment and constitution via Helen of a uniform Hellenic entity is further underscored by Gorgias’s disciple, the famous orator Isocrates. In his Helen, Isocrates states that “we should rightly consider that it is owing to her that we are not slaves to the Barbarians. For we shall find that the Hellenes became of one mind [omonoësantas] for the sake of Helen, and united in an
expedition against them."\textsuperscript{23} Yet, in his \textit{Panegyricus}, Isocrates makes the interesting suggestion that the term \textit{Hellenes} should not apply to a race (\textit{genos}) but to a mentality (\textit{dianoia}), and so "to those who share our education and culture [tou tēs paideuseōs tēs ēmeteras . . . metechontas] than to those who share a common blood."\textsuperscript{24} Helen provided the initial raison d’être, the primordial mentality of the Hellenes, animated and sustained not through sanguine continuation but a particular kind of cultural practice, or \textit{paideuma}. For Isocrates, Hellenism becomes a distinctive educative agon, emulating that early mental state of pursuing Helen, making the Hellenes the free and great people that they were.

Linked to the Panhellenic project, the redemption of Helen offered an alternative discursive move that was more than rhetorical play. Both Gorgias and Isocrates were committed to Panhellenism and wrote Olympic orations urging Hellenic unity in order to fight the Barbarians. Gorgias was lamenting the terrible effects of the Pelopponesian War for the Hellenic world, Isocrates the Antakledian “international” order that left the Hellenic cities of Asia Minor under Persian suzerainty. For the orators, what Greece urgently needed was a military expedition against Barbarian arrogance, a new Trojan War. In this sense, the positive retrieval and reinvention of Helen served as worthy prototype around which the fatherland could again be reunited and its policy of eastward offensive legitimated. As unambiguously put by Isocrates, the abduction of Helen by the Trojans and the outrage of Hellas by the Persians were political equivalents meriting the same response; and therefore those who would fight for the liberty of Hellas would rightly attain the fame and respect of Homeric heroes.\textsuperscript{25}

Not surprisingly, the political motivation of female beauty and the parallelism of Helen with Hellas, woman with homeland,\textsuperscript{26} implicit in the Homeric epic, became more explicit in some of the other Cyclic poets. Note, for example, the following passage from the closing stages of Quintus Smyrnaeus’s epic:

\begin{quote}
Lovely as she in the form and roseate blush passed Helen mid the Trojan captives on to the Argive ships. But the folk all around marveled to see the glory of loveliness of that all-flawless woman. No man dared secretly or openly to cast reproach on her. As on a goddess all gazed on her with adoring wistful eyes. As when to wanderers on a stormy sea, after long time and passion of prayer, the sight of fatherland is given \textit{[patris ē meta dēron eeldomenoisi phaneiē].\textsuperscript{27}}
\end{quote}

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The discussion outlined so far is based on, more or less, a traditional interpretation of Homer, taking the epic poet to be the final
or undisputed authority on the story of Helen. But a countertradition concerning the matter is recalled by Socrates in *Phaedrus*, a Platonic dialogue on the ethics of beauty. Socrates reminds his interlocutor of Stesichorus’s poem that Helen never went to Troy and how this recantation gave Stesichorus back his eyesight, unlike Homer, who thought otherwise and remained blind (to truth). Socrates elevates recantation (*palinodía*) to a purification ritual that sinners of mythology employed to regain their perspective on the holy symbols, and he employs it himself as a cathartic means over his playful sophistry on the evils of the lover. Yet, through his palinodie, the Hellenic longing for the beautiful is also respirtualized and repoliticized.

Socrates points out that one cannot blame the beautiful for the evils done in its name or for its sake. The beautiful is primarily a theological issue. Being a reflection of divine presence, the ideal or that which shines forth most clearly, the beautiful is that heavenly site toward which the soul is drawn while tragically remaining prisoner to the earthly life of the senses. Thus lovers of beauty may partake in a kind of madness, holy madness, which can give them access to another cosmic dimension, to the “holy sights” and “realities” of another world that have been lost to ordinary humans “after falling to earth.”

By contrast, Socrates views the unholy “mad love of senseless souls” beholding the beautiful as being like those who fought over the phantom of Helen in Troy, those who remained “ignorant of the truth” that true beauty lay elsewhere. Put differently, Socrates warns that the love of the beautiful and the spiritual-psychological attitude one has toward it may lead to a variety of lifestyles, from a life of contemplation to a life of war:

Now he who is a follower of Zeus, when seized by Love can bear a heavier burden of the winged god; but those who are servants of Ares and followed in his train, when they have been seized by Love and think they have been wronged in any way by the beloved, become murderous and are ready to sacrifice themselves and the beloved.

To that extent, the Socratic theology of beauty offers a counternarrative to the great Trojan affair that made the Hellenes. On the one hand, it restores and recharges the divine attributes of Helen marginalized in fifth-century Athens; on the other hand, it implies that the traditional genealogy of the Hellenes, as violently glorified and epically narrated through the Trojan War, constituted a problematic political disposition or mislocation of beauty.
In this respect, Socrates follows not just Stesichorus but Herodotus, that other great heretic of Greek political mythology, who recalls how in his travels to Egypt he came across a temple of Aphrodite the Stranger and that this was nothing other than a temple dedicated to a deified Helen. The Egyptian priests informed Herodotus that Helen stayed in Egypt during the entire Trojan War and that the Greek Homeric version locating her in Troy was a “vain interpretation” (matαιον λόγον). In his Histories, not only does Herodotus declare his belief in the Egyptian version, he also claims that Homer knew about this yet ignored it since it did not suit his epic tale.32

Still, it is in Euripides’ Helen that Socrates fully acts out his palinode on beauty, a subversive tragedy based on Stesichorus’s and Herodotus’s version of the real Helen in Egypt. In this play, Menelaus is shipwrecked in Egypt after his return from Troy (as in Homer’s Odyssey) while carrying with him Helen’s phantom “captured” in Troy. After a series of tragicomic episodes, Menelaus is finally persuaded that the real Helen has always been in Egypt and the Trojan expedition a terrible mistake.

But before proceeding with a reading of the play, a few words on the special relationship of Euripides and Socrates are in order. As mentioned in classical sources, most notably Diogenes Laertius, the two had a very close friendship, which culminated in co-poetizing (συμποίεσιν) the Euripidean tragedies together.33 Not surprisingly, in Aristophanes’ Clouds Socratic philosophy and Euripidean tragedy are suggested as similar genres.34 This improbable alliance between Socratic philosophy and tragic art is something that Nietzsche makes a lot of, criticizing the duo for being responsible for the end of “great” tragedy by promoting a New Attic form of philosophical tragedy that marginalized the Dionysian and negated ecstatic insight. This is what supposedly led to the impoverishment of the Hellenic spirit as idealized by Nietzsche.35 The Euripidean tragedy is certainly highly didactic, more so than the Aeschylean and Sophoclean ones.36 But the ecstatic insight of experiencing otherness and procuring an altered state of being is very much in the spirit of Euripides’ Helen (as in his other plays), at least for an audience not content with a superficial reading of the melodrama or frustrated with the playwright(s) transgressive innovation.

Specifically, beyond the valid suggestions as to the antiwar message and “humanism” of Helen, the repoliticization and respiritualization of the pursuit of the beautiful is prevalent in three ways. Firstly, the Hellenic fallibility as to the location of beauty is radically underscored. The Greek characters foolishly fought over in vain and only captured a phantom of Helen, killed and died for a cloud (nephēlēs uperθνῆςκοντας), just upper air (aιθῆρ), an idol.
breathed from the sky (eido¯lon empnoun ouranou).\textsuperscript{37} The parallelism of Helen’s idol with the shadow of the real inside “the cave” in Plato’s Republic is striking; in the play, the phantom Helen (of Troy) is left and guarded inside an Egyptian cave, from which she magically disappears once the new real Helen (of Egypt) is revealed to Menelaus. Furthermore, unlike the shadow of beauty the Hellenes fought for in Troy, the real Helen is presented as a moral exemplar, chaste and god-fearing, respected and protected by king Proteus while awaiting the arrival of her foreign partner. It is therefore strongly suggested in the play that the Hellenes mislocated beauty, traveled to Troy and engaged in epic struggles, but never really left their cave of ignorance.

Secondly, the Hellenes are presented as being able to regain beauty only with the help of the Barbarians. Unlike the foolish Hellenes, the wiser Egyptians have always been aware of Helen’s “mystical” location. They knew that her capture is not a matter of cultural confrontation or war deeds. Still, the new Hellenic pursuit of beauty in Egypt is delightfully staged by Euripides as a pseudo-Trojan expedition; for Helen has now been obsessively wooed by another Barbarian king, the son of Proteus, and typically Menelaus thinks initially of how to capture her by overcoming his political rule. But unlike Troy, Menelaus is shipwrecked in Egypt, is powerless, and resembles a beggar rather than a king. Traditional Hellenic cunning is employed, but it has its limits, and crucially it is only by begging help from the Barbarian Theonoe, “the mind of god,” that the Hellenes escape with Helen to Hellas.

Put differently, it is only with Barbarian-Egyptian assistance—linked to knowledge of things divine, which traditionally Socrates associated with truth and reality—that the Greeks can hope to re-establish their special relationship with the beautiful. Unlike the Homeric tradition that saw them as heroic pursuers of the beautiful, the Hellenes of Euripides have to humble themselves and learn from Barbarians about the way to beauty; so, ironically, they have to learn from non-Hellenes about that which defines them as Hellenes. Contingently and effortlessly, the beautiful is handed over to the Hellenes by noble Barbarians, though there are also Barbarians (resembling fame-seeking Hellenic heroes) that resisted this reconciliation.

Thirdly, the play concludes by reminding the audience that Helen comes in different forms and shapes and that beauty is hidden by the gods in locations least expected by humans.\textsuperscript{38} This brings to the audience’s mind the ontological difficulties in distinguishing the real Helens from their phantoms. Beyond the initial suggestion about the Hellenic fallibility over the location of beauty, a tragic moral is underscored: There is a spiritual struggle to seek beauty
while the gods hide it. The promise of disclosure is mentioned, an epochal, almost messianic return of Helen to the Hellenes, as sung by the chorus. The “longing for the vanished daughter whose name is never spoken” by her mother goddess (Nemesis?), who wanders around Earth to find her, is replicated by the Hellenes’ attempt to find their most precious daughter, an attempt that becomes a cyclic event. The Hellenes’ destiny is to search and struggle for her all over the ecumene, to look for her beyond the Hellenic world and beyond Troy, until their painful struggles soften the gods, who allow her to return until the time she flees the Hellenes again, activating new spiritual pursuits.

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The Roman conquest of Greece reproblematized the Hellenic association with the beautiful. The Roman attitude toward Hellenism was ambivalent—on the one hand, displaying great admiration for Hellenic art and philosophy, and on the other hand, looking down upon the subject Hellenes and their “natural” association with these achievements.

Interestingly, the Romans also represented themselves as exceptional suitors of beauty. Ovid’s *Art of Love* belittles beauties such as Andromeda and Helen compared with “all the beauty of the world” found in Rome. Typical of ancient anagrammatics, Roma’s mystical name, read from right to left, is Amor, Love. It constantly reminds the Romans of their genealogical association with the deity of Love and Beauty, Venus, whose city her son, the Trojan hero Aeneas, founded after the fall of Ilium. Roman patriotism may be viewed from this perspective as the love of Love. In Roman literature, Rome becomes the new Troy, again a seducer of foreign beauties, yet an even more valiant city that surpassed its Trojan ancestry, overpowering the Hellenes for good. Moreover, whereas the Hellenes recaptured beauty only through cunning and treachery rather than on the battlefield, the early Romans see war and the beautiful as conceptual relatives, employing the same word, *bellum*, for both. Thus the romantic Roman risks everything for the beautiful, and every Roman war becomes, literally, a quest for beauty.

In the Latin language, the Hellenes are denied their linguistic and spiritual association with Helen and the beautiful. The Hellenes become Greeks (*Graeci*). This word, though referring to an ancient mountain tribe of Epirus associated with the Hellenes, was progressively used by the Romans in ways that dissociated the Hellenes from the domain of aesthetics, presenting them as a people dominated by false grandeur and cultural decadence. Although
Graecus is a designation that is not always used in a derogatory sense, Graeculus becomes a synonym for counterfeit nobility, describing tastelessness and untrustworthiness. Moreover, the Graecari are presented as practicing a soft lifestyle, even while occasionally being praised for their artistic native wit, from which the rustic and calculative Romans could learn. Yet, pergraecor, acting like a Greek, becomes a synonym for endless feasting, drunkenness, and debauchery.

Not surprisingly, centuries later, when the so-called Byzantines came into prominence, even though they spoke and wrote in Greek they called themselves not Byzantines (which is only a sixteenth-century Western term), nor Greeks, nor Hellenes (a term reserved for the pagan “nationals”), but retained the term Romeoi, or Romioi (a term still used among the Greeks of Turkey, as well as Byzantinophiles). Nietzsche sees Graeculization as a dissembling of Hellenism, a weakening and descent into “Greek jollity and frivolity,” which dissipated “by degrees in a pandemonium of myths and superstitions collected at random.” In other words, it was not just an imperial vocabulary but one reflective of actual cultural decadence that progressively brought about the Barbarization of the Hellenes.

In the meantime, eastward, the Hellenization process that started with Alexander’s expedition brought about new and different changes to the meaning of Hellenism. The “art of Hellenism” is relaunched, though not without resistance, as a creative mixture of cultures and languages, rather than a purist Attic or Macedonian way of life. On the whole, this epoch has been undervalued in Western literature as an orientalization of Hellenism, a syncretism combining Alexandrian decadence and Barbarian custom, though this position has been recently reassessed.

On the religious front, the Hellenism of this period was perceived by orthodox Judaism and later by Christianity as the embodiment of Gentile culture, the unreconstructed pagan immorality and its misplaced emphasis on the beauty of the body rather than the soul. Hellenism was therefore held responsible for introducing “practices which run counter to the law,” establishing temples of the body—gymnasiums next to the citadel—that even seduced priests to run in the sports and neglect their religious duties. In other words, there was serious doubt among many monotheists about Hellenism’s moral ends, but no doubt over its popularity.

During this period, however, there is also many a creative synthesis in the meeting of Hellenism and Judaism, such as in the work of Philo Judaeus, an Alexandrian Jew well-versed in Greek philosophy and writing in Greek. Philo’s radical reinterpretation of Genesis is influenced by Stoic thought, reading in the Fall nothing less than a loss of the cosmopolis:
If we call that original forefather of our race not only the first human but also the only citizen of the world [cosmopolitan], we shall be speaking with perfect truth. For the world was his city and dwelling-place. No building made by hand had been wrought out of the material of stones and timbers. The world was his homeland where he dwelt in security . . . exposed to no attack amid the comforts of peace unbroken by war. 49

According to Philo, fallen, postcosmopolitan or racially divided humans preserve only some “faint marks” of “the beauty of the first-made human.” 50 For this beautiful cosmopolite encompassed the “word of god,” which “surpasses beauty itself, that is beauty as it exists in nature.” 51 Like Socrates, Philo locates the most beautiful in the divine logos, yet redefines its pursuit—or struggle to return to the bliss of the cosmopolis—as the painstaking study, interpretation, and application of the holy scriptures. The Judaized Hellenism of Philo is a new syncretic breed that derived its inspiration from different textual sites than traditional paganistic Hellenism, serving as a forerunner to Christianity.

Philo followed the neo-Pythagorians, who identified the true lover of beauty and wisdom as the lover of God. Or, as Iamblicus put it: “Stirring up the love and eagerness for beautiful things, and all these as a means of training virtue—not any single virtue—but that kind of virtue that detaches us from human nature and leads us to the divine essence, to knowledge and obtaining of divine virtue.” 52 This has been followed in the Christian tradition, where the term philokalia has been used for the mystical agon of the holy fathers. Philokalia means the “love of the beautiful, the exalted, the excellent, understood as the transcendent source of life and the revelation of Truth” through which “the intellect is purified, illuminated and made perfect.” 53

This pursuit of beauty and virtue is the kind the early Christian fathers, like Augustine, were seduced by and converted to (and that Nietzsche loathed). Augustine had a very low regard for Greek culture, its obscene myths and tragedies, with the notable exception of Socrates and the Platonists, whom he saw as proto-Christians. He was much more respectful of the moral character of the Romans, save their paganism. 54 In Socratic fashion, Augustine came to realize that beauty was elsewhere, as confessed in his spiritual autobiography, when initially dwelling in “that horrible pit,” and before his heart started seeking the face of the Lord and to “thirst after [His] pleasures.” 55 For Augustine, supreme beauty becomes—literally—the supreme good (summa bonum), the true philosopher, the lover of God, and the true homeland our Holy Father. Thus, “[W]e must flee to our beloved country [patriam]. There the Father is and there is everything [et ibi pater, et ibi omnia]. Well, where is the ship you ask and how do we flee? By becoming like unto God.” 56
In this passage, Augustine quotes Plotinus—though rather creatively—who following Plato sees the life of virtue as “a flight to god,” an erotic escape toward “stupendous beauty.”57 As Plotinus put it:

[I]t is right to say that the soul’s becoming something good and beautiful \( \textit{agathon kai kalon} \) is its being made like to god \( \textit{omoio-thênai eînai theo} \), because from him come beauty and all else which falls to the lot of real beings. Or rather, beautifulness is reality, and the other kind of thing is the ugly, and this same is the primary evil; thus the qualities of goodness and beauty are actually the same.58

Likeness to God is akin to the good struggle to return to one’s “dear homeland.” But it is precisely “on the way” to the beautiful/homeland that Plotinus departs from Augustine. Whereas Plotinus—still open to the pantheistic routes to the One—explicitly identifies the journey home as an Odyssean journey, for Augustine it is an orthodox struggle along the dogmatic Christian route. Augustine appropriates the ascetic side of Plotinus—his notion that the soul must strive to “become godlike and beautiful to see god and beauty.”59 But he marginalizes and depoliticizes Plotinian mysticism—and ultimately Plotinian Hellenism—that saw in earthly beauties not a sinful condition but an Odyssean pedagogy, a didactic voyage into beauty’s manifold trials on the way to being like god and reaching one’s \textit{esoteric} homeland.

For Plotinus, unlike Augustine, Hellenism is a highly ethical-philosophical culture that is antithetical to Gnosticism. The Gnostics are accused of insulting earthly beauties in their attempt to reach “the beauties of the higher world.”60 That is contrary to the “ancient Hellenic School”; that is, the Platonists, who “knew all these and knew it clearly, and spoke without delusive pomposity of ascents from the cave and advancing gradually closer and closer to a truer vision.”61 By romanticizing otherworldliness, misunderstanding Plato’s qualified theory of the soul’s flight toward divine beauty, the Gnostics engaged in unhealthy, unhellenic excesses, like the complete rejection of the body and the pleasures and trials associated with it. Thus, for Plotinus, the Gnostics are failed Hellenes, in discourse rejecting Hellenism while being—unknowingly—indebted to it in more ways that they imagine. In short, it is the cult of Hellenism that provides the right balance between secular and sacred beauty, which protects the mystic against Gnostic fundamentalism (subsequently in the form of Christian dogmatics) and leaves room for a heterodox, yet spiritual, pursuit of the beautiful.
The modern revival of Hellenism has been used to support the Western humanist ideals as well as the Greek national ideology. Yet it has been employed to develop critiques of these as well, namely in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger, among others. It is not the aim of this article to retrace this well-known story. In this section, I briefly assess some contemporary explorations and revisions, in the form of alternative meanings of Hellenism pursued while invariably reflecting on the Hellenic longing for beauty. What I have in mind here are literary figures like George Seferis, Konstantinos Cavafy, and Nikos Kazantzakis.

Seferis, for example, seeks not only to dissociate Hellenism from the modern state of Greece but even suggests that the latter can undermine the former: “Greece becomes a secondary affair when one contemplates Hellenism. Whatever in Greece prevents me from contemplating Hellenism, let it be destroyed.”

Seferis’s aesthetic and allegorical Hellenism certainly leads him to daring conclusions, identifying a Barbarian genealogy of the Hellene, specifically deriving from the Linus-song (the Semitic refrain ai lenu, “alas for us,” which becomes Greek ailinos), a hymn to the “slain youth” that was sung, according to Herodotus, in Phoenice and Cyprus. This is literally the first entry in Seferis’s Diary following his first visit to Cyprus (a place that he identified as more primordially Hellenic than Greece)—a thought that seems to have found its way into his poem “Helen,” inspired in that same visit to Cyprus (a poem that closely follows and quotes from Euripides’ Helen). The lamentations of the “lyric” and “tearful” nightingale “on sea-girt Cyprus, consecrated to remind me of my country” become the lamentations of the Hellenes and their terrible suffering “for a linen undulation, a filmy cloud . . . an empty tunic—all for a Helen.” From this perspective, the Hellene could be viewed not just as the Greek national or her self-identified diaspora but the one who laments the human tragedy of misplacing beauty.

As stated in his Stockholm Nobel Address, Seferis saw his poetic endeavors as an Odyssean journey of self-knowledge “within this mysterious flow: Greece.” This vision of the nation as a flow—mysterious, sensuous, cultural—rather than a fixed territorial entity is also prominent in the poetry of Cavafy. Cavafy underscored the importance of being Hellenic, rather than a Hellene: “I too am Hellenic [Ellēnikos]. Notice how I put it. Not Hellene [Ellēn], nor Hellenized [or Hellenified; Ellēnizōn], but Hellenic.” Better than any other, Cavafy identifies the Hellenic way with the
sensuous polis, “the beautiful and severe Hellenism,” as “an aesthetic pursuit . . . with its overriding devotion to perfectly shaped, corruptible white limbs.”

Cavafy’s poetry looks down upon the “official” melodramas of a return to Hellenism, such as the imperial Julianic ones, preferring instead the everydayness of Hellenicity, the daily pursuit of earthly beauty, and one that emphasizes the non-Helladic contribution to Hellenism. As Beaton put it, for Cavafy “what is called ‘Hellenic’ and praised so highly is as much the creation of Syrians and others as of Greeks.”

Cavafy’s rejection of national-territorial exclusivity in matters Hellenic is further underscored in his positive view of the Barbarian and his elusive contribution to Hellenism. In his famous “Waiting for the Barbarians,” Cavafy views the importance of the Barbarian not just as a legitimating Other to the Hellene (the superficial interpretation of the poem) but as the carrier of a new language, a fresher outlook meant to reinvigorate a Hellenic city in decline. Or, to put it in terms of the Odyssean journey to Ithaka, the homeland-to-be is crafted on the way, the nation enacted out of nondomestic knowledge, the everyday experience of foreign markets, pleasures, schools, and cultures.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you’re destined for.
But don’t hurry the journey at all.
Better if it lasts for years,
So you’re old by the time you reach the island,
Wealthy with all you’ve gained on the way,
Not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her you wouldn’t have set out.
She has nothing left to give you.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won’t have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
You’ll have understood by then the meaning of Ithakas.

Kazantzakis, too, reflects on the meaning of Ithakas. He sees in the Odyssean archetype “the Captain of Greece,” yet in the nostalgia of homecoming not a legitimation of Ithaka but rather a fragmentation of it, “the destruction of fatherland [patridokatalutē].” Ithaka, like Crete, like Greece, is only a stenemenē patrida, a “narrow fatherland,” and that is why Kazantzakis’s Odysseus has to escape its confines, embark on new journeys in search of a more spacious nation.
As plotted in Kazantzakis’s magnum opus, his modern *Odyssey*, Odysseus leaves Ithaka disappointed soon after his return, abducts Helen from Sparta, who, too, feels restricted in the false peace, security, and virtue of her native country, and sail together to “mix with barbarians” and beget a new people. The journey with Helen is a “sacred journey,” a sail “into the open seas without country.” Yet Helen flees once again, and Odysseus keeps sailing with her memory, trying to establish his new country and in the process meeting the “great masters” (under different guises, Buddha, Christ, Don Quixote, Nietzsche, Lenin, among others) before he reaches the icy desert of the South Pole. It is only there that the Captain of Greece gains a new cosmic perspective on Helen, that she is “all the spirits and castles of the world,” but that she cannot be limited and settled in one single topos, that soon “her heart desires other things and another way.” So, in the end, to the Greek envoys who embarked on their own long journey to find Odysseus—their Captain and Sage—and to take back his new Law to Greece, Odysseus has no edict to offer, no words to give, but only smiles.

* * *

Hellenism has been articulated and appropriated as the national ideology of the modern state of Greece (Hellas). Yet it has been gradually redefined to include Romeic features as well (i.e., Eastern Roman and Christian Orthodox ones), with all the ideological antitheses, contradictions, and complexes that this entailed vis-à-vis Western European civilization, its glorification of classical Hellenism and orientalization of Byzantinism. From a popular perspective, the Hellenic old and new longing for the beautiful has been merged and repackaged as a global commodity; that is, not just a national but a world heritage and bequest to humanity (the opening ceremony of the 2004 Athens Olympiad, guided by a flying Eros, is a case in point). To that extent, Hellenism has never been an “ordinary” nationalism, but different from the Andersonian conceptualization of the nation as a limited imagined community. Within Anderson’s categorization, Hellenism might be closer to a religious imagined community, one whose self-identified and honorary members dream of a day their community is coterminous with the planet and humankind.

Not surprisingly, Hellenism and its “good” and “beautiful” pursuits (art, democracy, philosophy, athleticism, and the like) have been allied with a variety of political projects, be they German Fascist, Western humanist, or internationalist. Still, though less discussed, Hellenism has had a deep impact on—as well as been redefined through—the alternative cosmopolitan and theosophical
cultures of the post-Alexandrian Hellenists such as Philo and Plotinus, among others, and inevitably on and through all those who follow in their footsteps today. Consider, for example, the Druze, for whom Socrates and Plato are not just philosophers but major prophets, thus spiritually committed to this brand of classical Hellenic theory and lifestyle in a quite different manner than, say, Western Philhellenists or Greek Christians.

Was Hellenism ever completely “native,” as Nietzsche would have us believe? That is to say, was Hellenism a form of life and thought that was totally separate and strange to the Egyptian, Semitic, and Pythagorean values that Nietzsche sees as an “anti-Hellenic development” and the cause of “the decline of Greece”? Quite apart the ideological and political crudeness of this position, the metamorphoses of Helen in comparative mythology in the Near East and beyond underscore crucial commonalities and borrowings among the different civilizations. The Hellenic “longing for the beautiful” is not that exceptional, after all.

Of course, Nietzsche also blames Socratic thought for turning the beautiful into the intelligible, rendering it a matter of tortuous dialectics, changing it from a Dionysian experiential to an Apollonian intellectual pursuit. Nietzsche is certainly right in stating the dangers of Apollonianism, the affirmation of individuality, associated with the “egotistical ends of nations” and the rationalization of their pursuits. Where he is not right, I believe, is in his insistence that “aesthetic Socratism” is one-dimensional and is responsible for destroying the Dionysian, the tragic sensibility of beauty, its multifariousness, uncertainty, and mysteriousness that functions to transfigure national and individual existence.

I have suggested above that, contrary to this view, the Socratic palinode on the Hellenic mislocation of beauty rejects the practice of a “final” political mythology, promotes new mythologies of the beautiful, and outlines human redirections as well as limitations of beauty pursuits. I have also suggested that the philosophical suspicion and barbarization of aesthetics that Socrates promoted made it possible to develop alternative and syncretic understandings of Hellenism, “Odyssean” dispositions that found their way into a variety of literatures and lifestyles in different epochs. From this perspective, the value of the Odyssean aesthetic is in the potential it has to keep reconfiguring Hellenic identity. Hellenism is thus no longer approached as a national or cultural state of being but as a flow of being or becoming. Hellenism becomes yet another spiritual vessel—and so nothing unique—on the elusive journey to self-knowledge, to that esoteric homeland where the beautiful and the ugly are finally reconciled.
I would like to thank Alex Danchev, Yiannis Papadakis, Necati Polat, and Rob Walker for their critical comments and suggestions. Unless otherwise stated, for the classical Greek and Latin sources I used the Loeb Classical Library bilingual editions (Heinemann/Harvard University Press), but have occasionally modified the translations.


5. For the early Cretan meaning of the syncretic (*sugkhrētismos*), see Plutarch, *Moralia*, p. 490B. For an example of positively acknowledging the blending of Hellenic and Barbarian custom and thought, teaching “the lessons he learnt from the Barbarians,” consider Pythagoras—reputedly also the first to use the term *philosopher*—as described in Iamblicus, *On the Life of Pythagoras*, p. 21 (Thessalonica: Zitros Publications, 2001). For an example of the Athenian-Periclean chauvinist attitude, taking pride of not copying the culture of others but “rather being a model for others,” see Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 2.37.1.


10. Reflecting on the self-alienation of humanity under Fascism, Walter Benjamin proposes that this has been precipitated by turning politics into aesthetics and to such an extent that humans “can experience [their] own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.” Thus he suggests the need to politicize art, which at the time he identified with the embrace of the Communist ideology and rejection of “l’art pour l’art.” See Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in his *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana Press, 1992), pp. 234–235.


13. Homer uses *Hellenes* once, and *Panhellenes* once; see the *Iliad*, respectively at 2:683–685 and 2:550. In the *Iliad*, Hellas is depicted as a region, probably of Thessaly, and specifically as “the land of beautiful women”: 2:683 and 9:447. References to Hellas in the *Odyssey*, depicting a much wider area (1:344; 4:726, 816; 15:80), have been rejected by Aristarchus of Samothrace, head of the Alexandrian Library, in his critical recensions of the different Homeric versions available in the second century BCE.

14. See Thucydides, note 5, 1.3 and 1.12.2.

15. For a discussion of this point as well as the development of the Hellene/Barbarian binary, see Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition Through Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).


20. On the duality of Helen and similarities to Pandora, see Meagher, note 16, chap. 3.


22. Ibid., p. 4.

23. And it was on that occasion “for the first time that Europe erected a trophy in honour of a victory over Asia.” Isocrates, *Helen*, pp. 67–68.


26. The Greek word *patris*, “homeland,” is etymologically linked to the word *pater*, “father,” and so can be translated as “fatherland.” Still, it is preceded by a female article, *ē* *patris*. It is quite common among the Greek diaspora to refer to Greece as *ē meētera patrida*, that is to say, literally, our “mother-fatherland.”


29. Ibid., pp. 249D–250A.

30. As suggested in Plato, *Republic*, p. 586C.

31. Plato, note 28, p. 252C.


35. This is the general proposition in Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*. Yet, Nietzsche strangely interprets Euripides’ celebration of Dionysian power in Euripides’ *Bacchae* as a belated recognition of the Dionysian by the playwright. Nietzsche, Birth, note 1, pp. 76–77.
36. This has been suggested by a number of classicists, such as N. T. Croally, *Euripidean Polemic: The Trojan Women and the Function of Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
38. Ibid., pp. 1688–1692. There is also a suggestion that a certain heavenly/cloudy island guarding Attica should bear her name; ibid., pp. 1670–1674.
39. Ibid., pp. 1301–1368.
41. Notably in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, where the Trojan identity is acknowledged but has also to be set aside for Rome to flourish (12:820–828). Similarly in Horace’s *Odes* 3:3, where the Romans are advised not to attempt to revive ancient Troy. For Caesar’s pilgrimage to Troy, see Lucan, *The Civil War (Pharsalia)*, 9:950–999.
42. See, for example, Cicero, *Flaccus*, 10:23.
44. See, for example, Plautus, *Mostellaria*, p. 22.
47. See, for example, Sextus Empiricus’s proposition that there are two kinds of Hellenism, the purist and the syncretic, in his *Against the Professors*, 1:176–240.
50. Ibid., p. 145.
51. Ibid., p. 139.
60. Plotinus, note 57, 2:9.17.
61. Ibid., 2:9.6.
62. Interestingly, all three authors (Seferis, Cavafy, and Kazantzakis) have surnames of Turkish origin; see Dimitris Tompaidis, *Ellēnika Ἐπώνυμα*
Tourkikēs Proeleuseōs [“Greek surnames of Turkish origin”] (Athens: Epikerotita, 1990). In itself, this is not surprising, given the social and linguistic intermixtures of the region, but perhaps more disturbing for the Greek cultural purists. They are not, of course, the only literati who have creatively reflected on Hellenism and its Self/Other relationships, nor is this restricted to literature. For one recent meditation from a social-anthropology perspective, see Yiannis Papadakis, *Echoes from the Dead Zone* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005).


65. “Helen” was published in the *Logbook III* poetic collection, which was dedicated “To the people of Cyprus, in memory and love”; republished in George Seferis, *Complete Poems* (London: Anvil Press, 1995), pp. 177–179.

66. I basically wish to underscore here the poetic inventiveness of Seferis and his daring willingness to look outside the conventional limits of Greece to understand Hellenism. But I would also agree with critics that saw in Seferis’s nostalgia for a lost or utopian Hellenism often a looming cryptonationalism, “a diplomat in poetry as in life”; see, for example, Vangelis Calotychos, *Modern Greece: A Cultural Poetics* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), pp. 176–189, and Gourgouris, note 63, pp. 201–226. Still, in the end, as problematic as this may sound, it is precisely his obsessive ethocentricity that made possible his sustained and creative meditations on Hellenism.

67. Quoted from Gourgouris, note 63, p. 221. His Turkish surname, Sefer, actually means journey, or expedition.


70. See Keely, note 68, p. 174.

71. By contrast, Cavafy has no mercy for the Barbarian pretender, the self-promoting and bogus philhellene.

72. I concur here with, among others, William V. Spanos, who reading the poem as “the celebration of a barbaric multiplicity” over “an exhausted purist civilization.”

[Cavafy] was a Greek who lived in and breathed the air of the diaspora, but more particularly than that, was at the crossroads of civilization in its origins, attuned to the fecund plurality of history, peoples, languages, cultures, mores. . . . As Cavafy’s great poem, “Waiting for the Barbarians,” makes reasonably clear, he knew long before *Black Athena* made the point, that the racial and cultural purity attributed to classical Greece by Europeans and by vventiloquized Greeks of the European Enlightenment was not simply a myth, nor the assimilated result of a totalitarian interpretive violence against the differential dynamics of that Mediterranean people. He knew that this myth was also, and perhaps
most telling of all, a prophecy which, in promising the harmony and order of racial and cultural purity, also promised a deadly decadence: the entropy of thought and language understood as the banalization of life.


75. Ibid., pp. 476, 483.
77. Ibid., 24:558, 581.
81. See, for example, Meagher, note 16.