

THE KING OF ASINI

George Seferis

Ἄσινον τε . . . ILIAD

All morning long we looked around the citadel
starting from the shaded side there where the sea
green and without lustre – breast of a slain peacock –
received us like time without an opening in it.
Veins of rock dropped down from high above,
twisted vines, naked, many-branched, coming alive
at the water's touch, while the eye following them
struggled to escape the monotonous see-saw motion,
growing weaker and weaker.

On the sunny side a long empty beach
and the light striking diamonds on the huge walls.
No living thing, the wild doves gone
and the king of Asini, whom we've been trying to find for
two years now,
unknown, forgotten by all, even by Homer,
only one word in the *Iliad* and that uncertain,
thrown here like the gold burial mask.
You touched it, remember its sound? Hollow in the light
like a dry jar in dug earth:
the same sound that our oars make in the sea.
The kind of Asini a void under the mask
everywhere with us everywhere with us, under a name"

Ἄσινον τε . . . Ἄσινον τε . . .

and his children statues
and his desires the fluttering of birds, and the wind
in the gaps between his thoughts, and his ships,
anchored in a vanished port:
under the mask a void.

Behind the large eyes the curved lips the curls
carved in relief on the gold cover of our existence
a dark spot that you see travelling like a fish
in the dawn calm of the sea:
a void everywhere with us.
And the bird, a wing broken,
that flew away last winter
– tabernacle of life –
and the young woman who left to play
with the dog-teeth of summer
and the soul that sought the lower world gibbering
and the country like a large plane-leaf swept along by the torrent of the sun
with the ancient monuments and the contemporary sorrow.

And the poet lingers, looking at the stones, and asks himself
does there really exist
among these ruined lines, edges, points, hollows and curves
does there really exist
here where one meets the path of rain, wind, and ruin
does there exist the movement of the face, shape of the

tenderness
of those who've waned so strangely in our lives,
those who remained the shadow of waves and thoughts
with the sea's boundlessness
or perhaps no, nothing is left but the weight
the nostalgia for the weight of a living existence
there where we now remain unsubstantial, bending
like the branches of a terrible willow tree heaped in
unremitting despair
while the yellow current slowly carries down rushes
uprooted in the mud
image of a form that the sentence to everlasting bitterness
has turned to stone:
the poet a void.

Shieldbearer, the sun climbed warring,
and from the depths of the cave a startled bat
hit the light as an arrow hits a shield:
'Ασίνην τε . . . 'Ασίνην τε If only that could be the king
of Asine
we've been searching for so carefully on this acropolis
sometimes touching with our fingers his touch upon the
stones.

Asini, summer '38—Athens, Jan. '40

Keeley-Sherrard translation.

--