
Richard Berengarten

Volta

. . . now that dusk falls . . .

King sun, rosy cheeked, day's sovereign coin,
you touch me, and my skin becomes a cornea,
my spine an optic nerve, and my body trembles
half dazzled by the pool of gold you pour
over this sea and city, and I'm blinded.
Here once stood rows – and still I know they stand –
of houses and streets, belonging to another city,
not this one you have utterly transformed.

We walk along the waterfront. The night
fishermen's boats are ready to set out,
motors chugging, paraffin lamps in the bows,
and the whole town's out for the promenade,
lovers arm in arm, and young men swaggering,
mothers and fathers, children eating ice-cream,
old men watching from tables at pavement cafés,
and the darkening hills move closer, like friendly animals.

Sweet evening skyglow, spread on hills and bay,
your arm grazes mine now, as if by accident,
like the touch of this young woman who walks beside me
with heavy hips, small steps and swinging gait,
jet hair swept back, delicate throat and shoulders
deep summer bronzed, and her olive brown eyes laughing.
I drink you, shimmering light, like wine, like music,
as her ancestors have drunk you thousands of years.

Porous city, her name is *Eleftheria*,
and though your scars are grey flecks in her eyes,
still, at this hour when light and light's inflections
play subtly in her face as speech or song,

hers is the ancient right to walk this quayside
as instrument and guardian of your light
collecting it in the wells of her deep pupils,
and hers, the darling freedom, to tread you like a dancer.

Darling evening, light thousands of years old,
clear throated singer, lovely as this woman,
how can I not adore the grace you cast
this city and its people in, a mould
that sculptures all it touches, the whole world?
I have become your slave, if not your citizen.
And thirsting to drink you wholly, I would fill
every pore with your radiance, her freedom.

Richard Berengarten

Notes

The poem comes from the sequence *Black Light*, which is set in Greece and dedicated to the memory of George Seferis (Los Poetry Press, Cambridge, 1984; reprinted in *For the Living: Selected Longer Poems, 1965-2000*, Salt Publishing, Cambridge, 2008, pp. 147-176).

The title 'Volta' is a modern Greek word, βόλτα. The expression 'πάμε βόλτα' [*pame volta*] means 'let's take a turn', 'let's go for a walk/ stroll'. The word βόλτα is also used to mean, more precisely, the 'βραδινή βόλτα' [*vrathini volta*], 'evening promenade'. This is a custom equivalent to the Italian *passeggiata* and the Serbian, Czech and Slovak *korzo*. Between certain hours of the evening, around dusk, everyone in the town goes out for a walk and saunters or strolls up and down the main street. The idea of turning is embedded in the Greek word and usage: βόλτα is of Latin origin (*volgere*, to turn) – as are *passeggiata* and *korzo*. The custom used to exist in widely different cultures, including for example, Portugal, and among Yiddish-speaking communities.

The epigraph 'now that dusk falls' (τώρα πὸν βραδιάζει) is from a poem by George Seferis, 'In the Manner of G.S' ('Μὲ τὸν τρόπο τοῦ Γ.Σ. '), in George Seferis, *Collected Poems 1924-1955*, bilingual Greek-English edition, tr. Edmund Keeley & Philip Sherrard, Jonathan Cape, London, 1969, pp.110-111).

Eleftheria is a girl's name. It also means 'Freedom'. *Ἐλευθερία ἢ θάνατος* [*Eleftheria i Thanatos!* – 'Freedom or Death!'] was the cry of Greeks going into battle in the national liberation struggle in the 19th century, and also the defiant last call of prisoners standing before Nazi execution squads in the Second World War.

The first line contains an embedded hint of the etymology of the Greek word meaning sunset: the expression 'ὁ ἥλιος βασιλεύει' [*o ilios vasilevei*] means, literally, 'the sun ('Helios') is setting.' The verb βασιλεύει [*vasilevi*] has the same origin in ancient Greek as the English word/name 'basil', and it means 'king'. So the etymological idea is that the sun is 'kinging / majestyng / gloryng' – i.e. the sun is 'reigning / in his kingship / in his glory / in his majesty'.

RB

interLitQ.org