The Talking Heads of Stone

by CHARLES L. MEE

A COUPLE OF SPEAKING GREEK PORTRAIT BUSTS ARE FOUND HERE AND THERE

AGAMEMNON
I see that there are acts
that will set an empire on a course
that will one day
bring it to an end.

Because, we see from the histories of empires
none will last forever
and all are brought down finally
not by others
but by themselves,
from the actions that they take
that they believe are right or good
or necessary at the time to do.

Sometimes they are brought to ruin
by no more than the belief
that something must be done
when in truth
doing nothing would have been the better course.

To be sure,
an empire
cannot refuse to defend itself from absolute devastation
and so it will arrange to have the capacity
for self-defense.
It will preserve itself first from extinction
and, as well, from lethal damage or great harm
and then, too, from hurt and ill-treatment
that could, if left unattended, lead to serious injury,
and, so by degrees,
an empire will reason itself to a need to be immune even
from insult
responding, finally,
to the anxieties and nightmares
that arise from within,
and so: striking out
at the phantasms of its own dreams.

Of course, it will know that a nation must protect its borders
and, in order to do that,
must secure its periphery
and so it will come to attend to conditions just beyond its
outermost bounds
and thus, by increments,
its interests will grow,
until they will have been extended beyond an ability to defend them.
They will have created new enemies along the way.
They will have created the causes of wars
where there were none before.
Even if an empire begins with no ambition
with no desire for conquest
no wish to grow
even so, it will feel it must grow or die
and so it grows
and thus it dies.
Ruin, it would seem,
is inherent in the nature of empire.

Might this fate be avoided
or at least
postponed?
Might something else be done?
Are there no precepts to follow in this murky,
unpredictable world?
Often, it seems,
men of affairs think that moral laws
offer no useful guide to behavior
that they are not meant for the practical business of the world
forgetting
that moral laws are nothing more nor less
than the accumulated folk wisdom
of millenia of human experience.
And so it will happen
that some moral law of an unforgiving nature is violated—
a law against boundless desire,
or cruelty
a law against coercion
or indifference to the humanity of others
a law against initiating violence
or being required,
in the pursuit of some goal,
to commit an act that anyone might see
is heinous
something finally is done that is so deeply wrong
that the world must rise and crush it
in order for the world itself to go on.

We may have felt some qualm about our behavior along the way
but we will have dismissed it
thinking it is a secondary thing
lesser,
insignificant in the context of the great demands
we have placed upon ourselves
and yet this qualm we feel
will have been sent to us by our deepest wisdom.
It is a warning to us.
We ignore it at our peril.

HOMER
There are times you will see a black maidenhair fern
in shady places
or sometimes near the trunks of trees
on the banks of ditches
in wet ravines
in turf bogs
on the high rocks
on rotted wood
or in a meadow
each one of these has its own affect
whether in a dream
or in the waking world
You might see two boys playing with a bird
an old woman feeding a cat
hour glasses
combs of horn
buttons
silk stockings of the colors of the orient
shoes of Spanish leather
rolls of parchment
a bundle of tobacco
an orange gathered from the tree that grew over Zebulon’s Tomb
a sitar
birds nests from China
prisms
a stone taken from a vulture’s head;
a large ostrich egg on which is inscribed the famous battle of Alcazar
in which three kings lost their lives;
the skin of a snake bred from the spinal marrow of a man;
jasmine
narcissus
scarlet ribbons
a toothpick case
an eyebrow brush
a pair of French scissors
a quart of orange flower water
four pounds of scented snuff
a tweezer case—
enamed
an amber-headed cane
a tailor’s bill
lessons for the flute
an almanac for the year 1700
petrified moss
petrified wood
Brazil pebbles
Egyptian bloodstones
hummingbirds
pieces of white spar
a piece of the stone of the oracle of Apollo
Bucharest salami
a Turkish powder horn
a pistol
a giant’s head
a music box
a quill pen
a red umbrella
some faded thing
handkerchiefs made of lawn
of cambric
of Irish linen
of Chinese silk
and each one of these
may make you wonder
whether it signifies the past or the future
or is only meant to
fill you with a longing
for such moments of life
in the afternoon
and the wish
that they should go on forever.

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