

**I**T IS DIFFICULT, truly, to be reconciled to sky-high injustice.

Consider: The names of Achilles, Prometheus, and Heracles immediately evoke a spontaneous reaction. Because of the pen of Camus, Sisyphus became an allegory of our lives. But about Atlas, not a word. He does not speak to our hearts and minds. He is an exile from the imagination, an outcast

of gods and of men. A remarkably small number of sculptures, frescoes, and

poems have been devoted to him.

I think the main reason for this neglect is an immobility that is not very attractive; his frozen, silent suffering. Atlas's brother Prometheus, fastened to

his rock, splendidly cursed the gods. The one possible action for those who are fettered is speech. Prometheus understood this very well: he moved the ether, and the ether carried the thunder of his curses.

Odysseus, Jason, Theseus, and so many other long-distance runners of mythology became the heroes of dramas. Never Atlas. It was Aristotle who

closed the doors of art to him; in the *Poetics* Aristotle<sup>1</sup> remarked that there is

no tragedy without action, although tragedy is still possible without personalities.

The whole character of Atlas, his entire being, is contained in the act of carrying. This has little pathos, and moreover it is quite common. The titan reminds us of poor people who are constantly wrestling with burdens.

They

carry chests, bundles, boxes on their backs, they push them, or drag them behind, all the way to mysterious caves, cellars, shacks, from which they come out after a moment even more loaded, and so on to infinity.

Atlas supports the heavenly firmament. This is his punishment, his curse and profession. No one is grateful to him for it. No one praises him, no one even encourages him. We have become used to it. This is how it should be.

We say: someone must do it.

We don't know how he looks. Scholars have devoted so much attention to examining the internal life of the earthworm, the rat, the domestic goose; but

they are silent when asked about Atlas's behavior. Does he ever shift his weight? Are his eyelids tightly clenched together? Is the sound from his chest

a hoarse breathing, or a moan? Salty drops run down his face: sweat or tears? Many maintain that Atlas is not distinguished by a lavish imagination, and most likely this deters people—there is nothing sensational. Because we know so little about him, let us state cautiously that cunning, a penchant for intrigue, the hatching of plots and coups d'état were not granted to him by nature. But can we reproach him for this? After all, the structure of the world is woven from contradictory elements that mutually support each other: evil and good, inertia and movement, intelligence and dullness. What is he thinking? Men sentenced to heavy labor have neither the strength nor desire for thought. With great probability one can suppose that a plan like that of Samson never dawned in the head of Atlas. Samson was put in prison, waited for his sentence, and so had time to forge his revenge. Atlas does not have time. He has only eternity. Atlas endures. Some say, it is good this way.

He managed to free himself from the oppression of fate only once. The story is known, so we will tell it in a considerably abbreviated version. It was like this: Heracles had to obtain a golden apple from the garden of the Hesperides for King Eurystheus. The garden was not far from the permanent station of Atlas; moreover, the Hesperides were his daughters. Complicated transactions depending on trust are best arranged within the family. Heracles promised to take the place of Atlas during his absence, in exchange for friendly help in getting the desired fruit.

Atlas's journey to the garden of the Hesperides was certainly his most marvelous experience. He walked lightly—a winged column—through a world rid of the burden as if it was made of dew, of azure air, and light. He felt the wonderful weightlessness of all things. For the first time the accursed sky seemed ethereal, distant, and indeed beautiful.

When he returned to Heracles, intoxicated and happy, he naively offered to take the apple to Eurystheus himself. The cunning hero agreed. He asked

Atlas to hold the vault only for a moment because he had to shift the pillow on top of his head. It was done—and at this point the unscrupulous hero left

the titan. Everything returned to the old cosmic order.

The whole story is not very edifying morally, and socially it is even distasteful. No one knows why it is told to children. Also, it is difficult to understand why the hero of the beautiful metope at Olympia, “Atlas

Bringing

the Apple of the Hesperides,” is the deceitful Heracles, the one who is guilty.

He is represented as a handsome man and an athlete, while Atlas, on the other hand, is shown as a rather rough-hewn, clumsy hulk. Implacable time

has damaged the metope, and the figure of Atlas has suffered the most.

Later the motif was taken up by generations of architects, and in the temples of Agrigentum<sup>2</sup>, Atlas was given the subordinate role of a cantilever

—a male caryatid. His mythological dimension was reduced. Once again he

was treated unjustly—it was forgotten, it seems, that supporting the heavens

is something completely different from serving as an ornament of a façade.

He was given the ambiguous, abject function of holding up balconies and stairs in the palaces of lazy aristocrats and wealthy parvenus, not to mention

banks, police headquarters, and ministries of public cruelty.

His solitude is desertlike. Neither day nor night brings him relief. Like all those who fulfill an unattractive duty for a long time, he is beyond the limits of our compassion and understanding. The only companion to Atlas is

his burden.

It is not even certain if he would be happy to learn that in a recently discovered Hittite epic, a distant cousin has been found with the sonorous name of Upellura<sup>3</sup>. He, too, carries. This may be verified in reports of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. Unfortunately, these appear in very limited editions and are not intended for manual laborers.

Gods, titans, heroes—O what a fascinating and rich gallery of psychological deviations! Their world swarms with monomaniacs, paranoiacs, melancholics, schizophrenics, not to mention such gentle

deviations as alcoholics and erotomaniacs. Against this colorful background,

Atlas appears as a faintly etched figure. He is the catatonic of mythology.

A

catatonic, and a porter.

And yet I think he deserves a better place in human memory. Nor am I certain that he was justly refused the status of a symbol. After all, Atlas represents a very large part of humanity. With minimum good will on our part, and with imagination, he could become the patron of those who are terminally ill, patron of those condemned to life in prison, those who are hungry from birth to death, the humiliated, all those who are deprived of rights, whose only virtue is mute, helpless, and immovable—up to a point—  
anger.