

Two Poems by Pierre Haroche

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These two poems were inspired by ancient myths. In the *Theogony*, Hesiod describes the origins of the world and the gods. It is the oldest known text to mention the name “Europa.” In the *Timaeus*, Plato recounts the story of Atlantis, as told by the poet and statesman Solon.



Hesiod

When the world was young
Places did not exist
Earth heaven ocean
Stood side by side
In every direction
Humans lived all together
Their surroundings were the same
And their days were alike
The horizon veiled no unknown
And there was no ignorance
For there was nothing to discover
Nothing to imagine wish or hope for
Everything was there once and for all
And time itself seemed asleep

Then one morning ocean stirred
Waves rose up
And shot their spray into the air
The horizon became a seething mass
An opaque fog covered the land
A terrific tremor was felt
And thousands of children ran
Laughing down the mountains
Three thousand river gods
Three thousand water nymphs

And the children took possession of the world
And the children redrew the world
Humans joined them and ran beside them
Humans asked them who they were
And the children answered
Singing them their names

And on that springtime morning
A morning that every morning
Is nostalgic for
Every corner of the earth
Sounded a name echo
And it was like a crystal rain
Enchanting the landscape
As wherever a name was heard
A world appeared in its image
And humans loved these names
And held them like treasures
And humans loved these worlds
And started to call them their own

And in that precious moment
Of which every moment is heir
At that unique instant
When the world became many
You were already there
One among thousands
Unaware of your destiny
Unaware of everything
But with your open eyes

Europe

Solon

In a time whose knowledge
Has sunk into the abyss
Of human memory
In a place where the eye
Now sees nothing
But the dull kiss
Of ocean and heaven
There once was
The proud island of Atlantis

Winds and waters carved
This land so well
It seemed a palace
Sculpted by the titans
Atlantis was made up
Of ten vast peninsulas
Separated by narrow inlets
Spiralling around a central land
Their inhabitants developed
Distinct arts customs and laws
Proximity among the lands
Kept them in perpetual commerce
And perpetual rivalry
But narrow land bridges
And the barrier of water
Prevented the peoples
From subjugating their neighbours
So the ten kingdoms
Could never rest
On lasting hegemony
And constantly sharpened
In their emulation
Their techniques and sciences

The ten kings called one another brother
And met every year
In a sanctuary
On the central land
At the top of a mountain
There they dressed in dark blue robes
Lent each other
A pledge of friendship
Honoured ten sacred bulls
In a circular enclosure
And deliberated on common affairs
And disputes among them

One day a king named Minos
Weary of the perpetual balance
Between the ten kingdoms
Set out to seek
Beyond the seas
A glory that would place him
Forever above his peers
He built a vast fleet

And carried his ships
In every direction
And such was the excellence
To which the Atlanteans
Brought their sciences
That the fleet of Minos
Felt no pain imposing
Its trading posts and colonies
From Libya to Tyrrhenia

Seeing the wealth and slaves
Minos drew from his conquests
The other kings were jealous
And feared that this advantage
Would give Minos
Definitive hegemony
They in turn built
Powerful ships they launched
To attack every region of the earth
And soon all of humanity
United in servitude
Paid tribute to the Atlanteans
And the ten kings
Spent so much time at sea
Punishing rebellious subject cities
They neglected their annual meetings
And the sanctuary of the bulls
Soon fell into abandonment
Only a young priestess
Daughter of King Minos
Well versed in the study
Of the sky and constellations
Took care of the sacred bulls
And the annals of the ancient union

It was then that dark clouds
Gathered their threatening shadows
And brought floods
That ravaged Atlantis
The enslaved cities
Seized their chance
And all rose up at once
Finally the earth shook violently
And in the space of a single day
And a single fatal night

The fleets of the Atlantean kings
And the island itself
Were swallowed up
And disappeared beneath the sea

At the top of the central sanctuary
The young priestess had seen it coming
Reading the stars
But no one believed her
Everyone calling her mad
So she left the island
Much to the sorrow of her sisters
On the back of a sacred bull
Who managed to swim away
The priestess and the animal
Were picked up on a boat
By merchants who agreed
To take them to Crete
The oldest of Minos' colonies
The only one to remain loyal
To his royal family
And there she learnt the cruel fate
Of her beloved people
And of her lost homeland

And so in Crete alone lives on
The memory of Atlantis
Of its greatness and of its fall
And it is also in Crete
That a century-old priest
I met on a journey
I made there in my youth
Told me at night
In the secrecy of initiation
The one and only true story
Of Princess Europa

Pierre Haroche is a lecturer in International Relations and International Security at Queen Mary University of London. He has recently published a commented anthology of literary texts on the idea of Europe, titled Le goût de l'Europe (Mercure de France, 2022).

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