

When We with Sappho

by Gregory McNamee

Poet, essayist, painter, critic, classicist: Kenneth Rexroth stayed busy throughout his seventy-six years, competently practicing his several arts, always a notch above the obscure and a notch below the famous, well enough known that his death on June 6, 1982, received brief notices in daily newspapers and popular magazines. Even then he was incorrectly remembered only as a writer of the “Beat Generation,” a taxonomic inaccuracy spawned by some forgotten reporter in the 1950s and uncritically repeated in the press, the main vehicle of the Social Lie, from that time on.

The misapprehension arose, perhaps, from the coincidence of Rexroth’s home and the friendships he formed in his later years. Already a practiced poet, Rexroth had made his way in 1927 from Chicago to San Francisco, at the time a somewhat unlikely place for anyone with artistic ambitions; those who desired literary fame and fortune instead went to New York or Paris. Presently he acquired local fame, not for his poetry and painting, but for his union organizing on the waterfront and his active commitment to anarchist politics. Only in 1941, when he was thirty-six, was his first book of poems, *In What Hour*, published. Even in his adopted hometown, where poetry has been known to rival football in public affection, it was not widely acknowledged.

After the Second World War, in which Rexroth refused to participate, the pace of literary life in San Francisco quickened. Drifters like Neal Cassady, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac arrived in the city, ablaze with ideas for the novels and poems they were to write. By then Rexroth, through hard work and good fortune, had several books of poems to his credit and had achieved some modest recognition in the literary journals on the opposite coast. In a city with as small and isolated an artistic community as San Francisco’s, it would have been strange if the two generations had not come into contact with one another.

They did meet, however, and Rexroth came to be something of a mentor to those whom the press would soon be calling the “Beats.” Rexroth criticized their manuscripts, urged refinements for publication, argued ideas and techniques, recommended books, and made helpful introductions, all the while writing poetry and prose that in tone, temperament, and substance were an age, a world apart from the newcomers’ spontaneous outpourings. And when the so-called Beats caused enough of a stir, with the publication of such influential and fashionable books as *On the Road* and *Howl*, to attract the attention of the usually aloof popular media, Rexroth was blindly placed in the new movement, much as a Salvadoran campesino with a winnowing fan becomes a heavily armed Cuban regular when seen from afar.

It was evident from the start that Rexroth took no pleasure in the role he had been assigned. Later he would write, “I will not take those would-be allies that Madison Avenue has carefully manufactured and is now trying to foist on me. If the only significant revolt against what the French call the *hallucination publicitaire* is heroin and

Zen Buddhism nobody will ever be able to escape from the lot of this tenth-rate Russian movie called 'The Collapse of Capitalist Civilization' onto which somehow we all seem to have wandered."

But misinformation has a way of being fixed once set in type. John Kennedy is remembered as a dove. Kenneth Rexroth, to our shame, is remembered, when at all, only as a beatnik, a bongo player on the far fringe of society.

The public memory of Kenneth Rexroth must be corrected to acknowledge the sharp division between Rexroth and his younger contemporaries. For in his thirty-odd books of finely crafted poetry, essays, and translations, Rexroth set himself apart from those who came after him in at least one crucial respect: his art sprang from the classical tradition of which the mind of the West is made. Given greater currency in this century by the discovery of the East, that tradition embodies a way of perceiving and reporting a world to which Rexroth was one of our last links and which, owing to the present barbarism, is unlikely to last much longer.

That tradition involves a sensibility that traces its roots to a distant past. It bases itself upon close study of the Greek and Latin classics in the original tongues, on the premise, denied by the present culture, that a civilization must have continuity and memory if it is to endure, that modernity should be not obliteration but extension. It assumes acquaintance with the major languages and literatures of Europe, a polite interest in what one's neighbors are thinking, a regard for culture as an international treasure. It holds that one might learn lessons of objective value from the civilizations of the East without having to shave one's head and don robes and beads. Above all, it upholds the individual as the source of the public good and the primary constituent of the polis, of civilized life. It argues the virtue of disobedience to tyranny and the necessity of unconditional political and economic liberty.

Reading through Rexroth's body of work, one sees these principles emerging again and again, the classical tradition as leitmotif. Whether found in his essays, or in his poetry, or in the works of the Chinese, French, Greek, and Japanese poets he undertook to translate, the tradition is alive and well, in continuous revolt against the public hallucination. As Rexroth said, echoing Archilokhos and Francois Villon, "I write to lay hands on an obdurate world, to make love to women and to overthrow the State, the Church, and the Capitalist System."

For all Rexroth's avowed purpose to reinvigorate the classical tradition—to reglitterize the waters, to "make it new"—the literature of ancient Greece occupied the greatest part of his curriculum. The cornerstone of his wide learning, the body of work he knew best—and he knew so much—classical Greek literature propelled Rexroth to his lifelong study of all tradition. There could be no stronger impetus.

II

In the winter of 1920, when he was fifteen years old, Kenneth Rexroth, in the company of an undergraduate student of the classics whose identity is unknown to us, spent a long Chicago night working away at the text of a curious, "Japanese-like fragment." This was a lyric by Sappho, that sad Greek woman of the sixth century BC, who, Rexroth later wrote, "surpasses all other Greek poets in immediacy of utterance and responsiveness of

sensibility.” Their text was a snippet preserved by the grammarian Hermogenes in order to illustrate some peculiarity of the Lesbian dialect:

amphi d'hydor
psychron <onemos> kelade d'hysdon
malenon, aithyssomenen de phyllon
koma katarrhei

This verse, a portion of the “Apple Orchard” poem sung to the glory of Aphrodite, Rexroth later published as the opening to his poem “When We With Sappho,” and as an independent translation in his *Poems from the Greek Anthology*, thus:

about the cool water
the wind sounds through sprays
of apple, and from the quivering leaves
slumber pours down.

Rexroth often recalled this encounter, his first with a lyric in the original Greek. Two reminiscences gauge his response: “That evening was one of the memorable experiences of my life, just because of the completeness of projection into the experience of that great dead Greek woman.” And: “It left me so excited that I couldn’t sleep well for nights.”

Rexroth did not come to the “great dead Greek woman” as a compulsory exercise in a Greek reading course, as do those few who ever encounter her work in the original. His discovery sprang from a more vital motive, the budding love of aesthetics and technical formalism that would characterize his mature work. Rexroth tells us, in his *Autobiographical Novel*, that he came to the Greeks first through his impassioned study of Cubism and Dadaism and their leaders: Paul Klee, Tristan Tzara, Georg Grosz, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Gottfried Benn. This study led him on a search for buried forms and archetypes and the underlying principles of artistic expression, and it pushed him to become, as such things taken to their limits must, “a passionate Platonist.” (The mature Rexroth would repudiate his boyish enthusiasm for Plato: “Although his Greek . . . still seems to me the most beautiful prose ever written by man, his ideas are extremely offensive.”) Plato’s stimulus in turn led Rexroth, always the autodidact, to procure a Greek grammar, work through the pattern sentences and paradigms, and master the basic vocabulary, and with two or three months’ hard study behind him, Rexroth was ready for Sappho, axial sun in the bright constellation of Greek lyric poets. He would always return to her and the civilization for which she spoke for inspiration, believing as he did that “the greatest poetry still speaks Greek—in the simplest tragic language, the plain confrontation of beauty and love with Time, and nothing complex about it.”

Four lines of poetry, then, led Rexroth—as similar lines led Pound, Eliot, Joyce, Aldington, H.D.—to the recovery of Greece and the ancient past of the modern mind. It is a blessing that four lines were enough, for Kenneth Rexroth and his anonymous friend, although they would not have known it in 1920, had only a small portion of the complete “Apple Orchard” poem with which to work. The full text, originally painted on an Attic amphora, was not reconstructed until 1937, in Fascist Italy, when Medea Norsia published the restored manuscript. I venture the following translation:

Leave Crete for this holy temple
Where a lovely grove of apple trees
Fringes an altar that smokes with incense
In your praise.

Shadows of roses fall on the ground,
And cold jets of water whisper in branches,
And shimmering leaves
Rain down deep sleep.

In the meadow stallions browse,
And wildflowers blossom,
And anise fills the air with fragrance.

Here, beloved Aphrodite, pour
Immortal nectar in golden cups,
Fill all with sudden ecstasy.

It is curious that Rexroth, who must have come to know the full text, never chose to expand his translation of 1920, but instead reprinted it again and again. A remembered, beloved fragment was talisman enough.

III

Let us bypass the high flourishing of classical Greek civilization—the age of Aeschylus, Pericles, Plato, Sophocles, Socrates, Thucydides. Rexroth himself did. That is, he read and mastered the works of the great authors we so closely identify with the spirit of Hellas, and his deep learning is well attested in the beautiful essays on classical literature that he wrote for the *Saturday Review* and later collected in his book *Classics Revisited*. As an artist, however, Rexroth was more concerned with the origins (Sappho, Archilochos), and the decline and ultimate chaos of late Greek civilization. And so he chose to translate the poets of the *Greek Anthology*.

In the Hellenistic twilight of classical Greek culture, when Apollo vied with Thoth and Jehovah for Greek libations and hecatombs, certain unknown Alexandrian scribes, probably acting on orders from the Ptolemys, collected a vast number of classical and contemporary epigrams and lyrics. This “best of” volume was edited again and again, with much discarded and much added over time. The final recension, today known as the Codex Palatinus, was produced in AD 980 by four German monks whose names we do not have. The manuscript lay forgotten until 1623, when Maximilian of Bavaria made a present of it to Pope Gregory XV. Napoleon’s armies carried it off to France during the Italian campaigns of 1797, and no doubt the emperor studied it as closely as he later did Homer on St. Helena, awaiting death in the company of his beloved master. One of the two volumes of the codex was restored to Germany after the Peace of 1815; the other remained in Paris. The two volumes were not published until 1911, and only professional classicists paid much attention.

It befits his wide-ranging intellectual curiosity that Kenneth Rexroth somehow found the modern European edition, long before the Loeb Classical Library saw to it that an American edition was made available, and that he quickly came to be at home with the likes of Antipatros of Sidon, Julian the Apostate, Callimachus, Martial, Petronius Arbitrator, and Asklepiades of Samos. He lived with their words, translating them into English as a personal exercise in order to save himself, as he put it, from his contemporaries—although one contemporary, the great English poet and translator Richard Aldington, was one of Rexroth's most appreciative readers, praising his translations in the highest terms. He reluctantly gave up a manuscript of those translations to a publisher in 1961. "Now they are moving away from me to the printed page," he wrote, "and I will miss them terribly."

This set of translations was published, in 1962, by the University of Michigan Press as *Poems from the Greek Anthology*. It is a landmark in at least two respects. First, Rexroth's was the only version of the anthology at that time to speak out in an authentic American idiom, saving contemporary readers from having to stumble over the Wardour Street English of earlier versions, in which Leonidas of Tarentum was made to speak in the voice of an Oxford don. And second, the publication of the *Poems from the Greek Anthology* represents the sole instance of the academy's taking Rexroth's work seriously and acknowledging that his translations, the products of an academically unordained artist, were indeed an intellectual enterprise of the highest order. Another translator, Robert Fitzgerald, also lacked the proper academic credentials; still, that did not keep him from blessing us with the best verse renderings of *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and *The Aeneid* we are likely to have.

Rexroth's selections from the *Greek Anthology* mirror the spirit of the whole, and in purely technical terms his versions are models which any translator would do well to study. As with his translations from the Chinese, French, and Japanese poets, Rexroth took few liberties with the Greek, thereby leaving the meaning of the originals intact while at the same time putting the words to a new music that does not suffer in comparison with the songs of the Alexandrians. Had Rexroth been French or Swedish, he might have been honored by his government with a medal and a nomination to some closed society of belles-lettristes for having recovered a literary monument. As it is, *Poems from the Greek Anthology* has fallen into general neglect, its history echoing that of the Greek original.

Rexroth's translation of the anthology has as its obverse a set of four plays published in 1951 as *Beyond the Mountains*. It is not one of his better-known books, although William Carlos Williams remarked of the title piece that "I have never been so moved by a play of verse in my time." Williams's comment doubtless did not please his old comrade Thomas Stearns Eliot, then busy churning out forgettable comedies of manners in stately measure.

Where the Codex Palatinus documents the decline of Greek civilization in the Mediterranean, *Beyond the Mountains* is Rexroth's attempt to recreate the collapse of Alexander's empire in the East, in what has come to be known as Gandhara, a curious culture half Greco-Roman and half Buddhist in custom and worldview. (A late Buddhist manuscript of the period, possibly from Gandhara itself, recounts an argument between an Indian king and an anonymous Greek envoy over the relative merits of Platonism and Buddhism.) Rexroth's choice of little-known Gandhara was not fanciful, for no other

civilization so closely embodies the union of Eastern and Western thought that he sought to achieve.

With the collapse of late Greek civilization came the abandonment of the conventions of classical drama—the three unities, the constitution of the tragic hero, and so forth—to be restored only centuries later, in the Italian Renaissance, with the birth of the opera. Rexroth recognized this fall, and his plays therefore operate only minimally on classical norms. His characters and the narrative frame derive clearly from Euripides, especially in the first two plays, *Phaedra* and *Iphigenia at Aulis*. (As Rexroth remarked, “the Hellenistic world was Euripidean through and through, and so is the one in which we live today.”) The chorus functions, in purely technical terms, as Aristotle dictated.

But Rexroth owes far more to the East in assembling the elements of his dramatic form, and much of *Beyond the Mountains* can be directly traced to the conventions of Japanese Noh drama. Iphigenia’s actions are not those of a highborn Greek woman, but of a Japanese *magojiro*, the masked heroine with archaic smile whose fate unfolds always unpleasantly. Hippolytus is served up as a *waki*, emasculated, drained of energy and action, almost a shadow. Berenike, the fierce woman warrior, is a *shite*, in Noh convention a character of frenzy and unbridled will. Nowhere in classical Greek tragedy are true counterparts to the Japanese to be found.

The great theme of *Beyond the Mountains*, though, is Greek: impermanence, not of humans doomed in whatever case to die, but of the dream worlds we erect and pretend will live on forever—empires, Martello towers, tombstones, thousand-year Reichs—knowing all the while that nothing lasts. In *Phaedra*, Hippolytus and Phaedra set out on their path of incestuous love with regal garments befitting their high stations; in the second scene, these have given way to the tattered robes of beggar and common whore. In *Hermaios*, a similar reversal of fortunes occurs with the fall of Alexandria-in-the-Paropamisidae to the invading Huns: Hermaios and Kalliope, brother and sister, husband and wife, king and queen, find that their glorious mountain kingdom, designed to outlast the ages, has become but a pile of smoking rubble.

To the Greek mind, Hermaios and Kalliope’s fall would have been perfectly understandable. Such things happen all the time to those who imagine themselves to be in control of their destinies, who yield to the temptation of hubris, who slight the mysterious workings of fate. But Rexroth tinkers even with this classical norm: free of the chains of empire and responsibility, Hermaios and Kalliope, far from being chastised, are now able to return to Greece, to leave their sundered palace, to abandon their divinely ordained stations and be at will to live as mere humans, as humans should live. It just so happens, however, that a pleasant outcome does not materialize. Kalliope kills Hermaios and his mistress Tarakaia, an act of empty vengeance.

A curious mix, then, *Beyond the Mountains*: a schizophrenic world evoked through the narrative strategies of two distinct traditions. The drama of action of Western provenience competes with and complements the abstract, static drama of Oriental preference. The Eastern contribution lies buried in formal technique, as deep background, but the Greek past speaks clearly on every page, in exalted language that might well have come from Homer:

Nothing left but the broken walls—
The crumbling frescoes scrawled with smoke.

Nothing left, that is, but what one can call back to life through the power of words.

IV

A current notion in contemporary physics, the epic poetry of our day, is that time is granular, meaning that somehow time has a physical nature and can therefore be as easily bent and molded as a beam of light or an electromagnetic pulse. An atomic clock placed on an airliner traveling east will record time at a different rate from another atomic clock on a westbound jet. The so-called primitive languages have recognized it for millennia, but the Euroamerican mind is just beginning to accept as commonplace that time is not neatly ordered, that it is nonlinear, that it is relative to the viewpoint of the observer.

But before the physicists—some deeply influenced by the classical tradition, such as Neils Bohr, who discovered the key to splitting the atom in an obscure passage of Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura*—came the artists. With the twentieth century an understanding was born in Western literature that history can be shaped, that the past exists in every moment of present and future time, that Odysseus can have new life in the body of a Dublin Jew and the Provençal troubadours can be made to sound their songs again in the mouths of expatriate Idahoans on the streets of London. Octavio Paz summarizes the modernist understanding with his definition of the poem as “a fragment of time that because of rhythm can be reincarnated again and again.”

Well read in the literature of his time, Rexroth knew that it was now permissible, and even expected, to keep Lyell's and Darwin's tutelary spirits on one shoulder, Theogenes's and T'ai Li-Po's on the other. Most of his poems therefore juxtapose past and present in ways comprehensible only to a modern audience. And so Rexroth was able to make use of the classical tradition in yet another way: as a tuning fork against which to test the here and now; as a rhyme in the epic of civilization. “You don't have to read Toynbee or Hegel to know that there is a systole and diastole to history,” he remarked. “What goes up comes down, what swings left swings right; a literate chimpanzee could learn this from ten years or less of reading the newspapers.” Time, Rexroth knew, follows its own rules. The centuries live together.

Consider, for example, “The Homestead Called Damascus,” a long philosophical poem that Rexroth composed between 1920 and 1925. Its principals, Thomas and Sebastian, are understood to be Rexroth's contemporaries, although their symbolic attributes are plainly drawn from the Roman Catholic calendar; Damascus, of course, is where the vicious publican Saul was headed when he was ambushed by Jehovah and became the vicious theocrat Paul. The Biblical overtones of the work are deceptive, however, for Rexroth—no Christian, although he received the last rites of the Catholic Church—does not specifically examine the checkered history of messiah-worship. Instead, he holds up all tradition for our consideration: Einstein, Flaubert, and Joyce are as much a part of the discussion as Kung-fu Tzu, Democritus, Tammuz, and Jesus.

The poem slips back and forth between Old World and New, between past and present. Thomas and Sebastian are at once by the Lion Gate of Mycenae, in the Catskill Mountains of eastern New York, within the caves of the Dordogne and on the streets of Chicago. Similarly, in “The Phoenix and the Tortoise” (1940–44), another long poem, the

focus skips about, always coherently, from modern structural geology to Plutarch to Bakunin to Shakespeare to the precepts of classical Taoism, with the understanding that in the long view everything is like everything else. “The Phoenix and the Tortoise” is Rexroth’s tour de force of learned reference, unrivaled save perhaps by Hugh MacDiarmid’s stunning poem “On a Raised Beach,” another song of love for the great tradition.

Kenneth Rexroth’s special genius was to link seemingly disparate elements of history, seemingly remote times, into a single chain. This nexus must lead to a fundamental reevaluation of history, the chief assumption of whose practitioners, Rexroth noted, “is that the primary vehicle / of social memory is the State,” and which turns out to be properly not timeline but cycle. Rexroth’s new history, fitting squarely with his understanding of the classical tradition, demonstrates that life is indeed a voyage of eternal return, that everything can be made new, that every event and every idea, in every place and every language, is accessible because we have within ourselves all experience, actual and potential.

Granular time. Kenneth Rexroth, poet and guardian of the tradition, might have made a fine physicist.

V

The classical tradition does not live on paper alone. (As E.R. Dodds, the historian of the Greek mind, has observed, “Plato did not know that he was writing for grammarians.”) It is at its worst when it is assumed to be a mere abstraction, no more than a nice idea, as when Benito Mussolini sought to recreate an Imperial Rome that existed only in books and the starry rhetoric of doddering schoolmasters.

The tradition that Kenneth Rexroth knew, cared about, lived for, abides in human actions and temperament. It is a deep understanding of the nature of mortal beings, of past events that will without exception make their way into the present. That understanding leads to the highest order of social responsibility—the responsibility that keeps good work alive, engaged, ever informing, while seeing to it that a social climate prevails in which right work of all kinds can be done. D.S. Carne-Ross, himself an outstanding classicist, hits it squarely with his observation that “the reason the artist is useful . . . is that he has access to something beyond the city, beyond politics and beyond society.” That is, through the classical tradition, the artist, the person who comprehends, has access to the world in all its past, present, and future glory. And if we keep our souls, gaining the world is the highest accomplishment to which we can aspire.