CHAPTER TEN

SNOWY HELEN AND BULL-FACED WINE:
ION AND THE LOGIC OF POETIC LANGUAGE

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Introduction

Ion’s generation is the first in Greek history for which we can claim biographical acquaintance with individual poets engaged in the development of a common verbal art. It was Ion’s distinction that he was both a participant in this project and a commentator upon it: on the one hand composing in tragic, lyric and elegiac modes, on the other hand compiling, in his prose Epidemiai, an account of his interactions with other poets and intellectuals of the time. In the absence of extensive survivals from the Epidemiai, the nature of this latter activity can only be guessed at; but it is hardly a coincidence that the most substantial surviving chunk of the work (of which more will be said below) involves Sophocles not only flirting with a boy but also discoursing on the semantics of poetic adjectives.1 Our sense, then, is of one poised between what Détienne calls exegesis and interpretation, between exploration of poetic discourse within its own communicative framework and investigation of the discourse from a distanced or quasi-objective viewpoint outside.2 This makes it especially thought-provoking that among Ion’s poetic fragments there are several examples of deliberate and self-conscious strategies for poetic expression, involving the startling or anti-traditional matching of words to referents to which they do not conventionally belong. In this essay I will present a selection of such examples to explore some of the communicative strategies that may

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1 Discussed further below. On the subject-matter of Epidemiai see especially Jacoby (1947a); Huxley (1965); Lefkowitz (1981) 67–9, 80–1.
2 Détienne (1981a) passim.
be involved when a poet engages in “semantic stretch”\(^3\) of the kind nowadays conventionally known as metaphor.\(^4\)

_Snowy Helen_

I begin with a single stray collocation of name and epithet:

\[
\textit{νιφόεσσα Ἑλένη ἀντὶ τοῦ λευκῆ. Ἰον Φρουροῖς.}
\]

_Snowy Helen: standing for white. Ion in the Phrouroi._

(55 Leurini = TrGF 19 F46 = Hsch. v 601)\(^5\)

When we face a scrap like this, stripped naked of any semblance of context, the challenge of interpretation or translation takes on stark contours. Why did Ion call Helen “snowy”? Evidently Hesychius’ gloss is only a stop-gap, and the image was more than a woolly elaboration of “white” or “pale”; but if we are to reach a more satisfactory conclusion we must tread carefully. Avenues open up before us towards two distinct kinds of interpretative strategy, which I will call the _geometric_ and the _spiralling._

The geometric strategy seeks to explain the image on the basis of a simple and regular mapping from one conceptual domain to another: on these lines it might, for example, be argued that the image of Helen is assimilated to that of a mountain, so that the light in her shining hair is matched to the gleam of the snow on the summit, or alternatively (and more evocatively) the slaughter caused by her elopement or abduction engenders horror and misery corresponding to the coldness of snow (compare the semantics of the word \textit{ῥίγος}, “frost”, “cold”).\(^6\)

The spiralling strategy, on the other hand, resists an answer reducible to such simple correspondences. The image is allusive, hinting, startling: Helen is not “snowy” in any comprehensible sense whatever, and the

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\(^3\) This usefully non-committal term is Geoffrey Lloyd’s; see most recently Lloyd (2003) 8–9.

\(^4\) I am not concerned in this article with the modern cognitive theory of metaphor (on which see Kövecses 2002), and I use the word in a pre-theoretical sense, to refer to any instance of word-use where a lexical item has been transferred to a referent in a different conceptual domain from that where it would normally be applied.

\(^5\) On the variant \textit{σελήνη} (Phot. 301.7) see Porson (1822) 301; Schmidt (1862) 230; Naber (1864–5) 1: 448 n1; Snell (1971a) 109; Leurini (2000a) 36.

\(^6\) See also Stevens in this volume for further interpretations of this fragment. Cf. Eur. _Hel._ 214–6.