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Barbara Hahn: The Jewess Pallas Athena

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The Jewess Pallas Athena

AFTER all had been destroyed, demolished, and obliterated, a voice arises: “Mutter Rahel / weint nicht mehr. Rübergertragen / alles Geweinte” [“Mother Rahel / weeps no longer. Hauled over / all the weeped things”]—a poem by Paul Celan from the cycle *Fadensonnen* [*Thread-suns*] of 1968.¹ Rahel weeps no longer; no one is there who could mourn as Rahel mourned her children. “No longer”—a temporal posture that governs Celan’s poetry, sets it in an uncanny time, without relation to the Now. It is past, unalterable, and related to a position that also no longer exists. “Hauled over / all the weeped things”—to another place, a space the Now cannot reach. “*Rübergertragen*,” in the original, recalling “*übertragen*,” to translate. Paul Celan—a translator, from German into German, from a German that was exterminated along with the people who spoke it, into the German of those responsible for this extermination. A translator, who recollects in Hebrew names a history that has disappeared into this “no longer”: Rahel and Esther, Sulamith with her ashen hair,² and finally a figure who has no name. A figure in whom languages, cultures, traditions clash:

WENN ICH NICHT WEISS, NICHT WEISS,
ohne dich, ohne dich, ohne Du,

kommen sie alle,
die
Freigeköpften, die
Zeitlebens hirnlos den Stamm
der Du-losen besangen:

Aschrej,
ein Wort ohne Sinn,
transtibetisch,
der Jüdin
Pallas
Athene
In die behelmteten
Ovarien gespritzt,
und wenn er,

4 • The Jewess Pallas Athena

er,
foetal,
karpatisches Nichtnicht beharft,
dann spitzenklöppelt die
Allemande
Das sich übergebende un-
Sterbliche
Lied.

[IF I KNOW NOT, KNOW NOT
without you, without you, without a You,
they all come,
the
freebeheaded, who
lifelong brainlessly sang
of the tribe
of the You-less

Aschrej,
a word without sense,
transtibetan,
into the Jewess
Pallas
Athena
into her helmeted
ovaries squirted,
and when he,
he,
fetal,
harps carpathian nono
then the Allemande
made lacework for
the nauseous inherited im-
mortal
song.]³

A song in three languages, a song in dialogue with a You, overlaid with a He, a nameless instance that destroys the dialogue. Thus two triangles, one formed from I, You, and He, and the other from three languages: Ger-

man, the basic language of the poem, Hebrew, and French, present in a word that in itself recalls another language and another land: Allemande—a German dance. Just as the start of the poem dances and twirlingly repeats itself: “If I know not, know not, without you, without you.” But the song that begins here is soon broken off. It collides with a “word without sense,” “Aschrej”—a word like a cry, a word from the Hebrew. Luther translates it with “blessed be they” or [“wohl denen”]. One can also translate it with a single German word: “*Heil*.” For it is a “word without sense.” The murderers took it up, *Heil Hitler*, and transformed it into a death sentence.⁴ A word from the language of the You-less, who sang a different song, a song without translations and therefore past. You-less, monolingual, constructed from senseless words.

The tribe of the You-less injects its words, rather than giving them to a You, rather than making room with its calling for a You. It injects them into the helmeted ovaries of “the Jewess Pallas Athena.” In Greek mythology, Pallas Athena with her double name wears a helmet upon her head and a shield across her breast. Ovaries, however, she does not have. She was neither born of a mother nor can become one. She is the daughter of her father, Zeus, from whose head she sprang, and which, in some traditions, split asunder, so that in thunder and lightning she could come into the world. When her mother is mentioned, it is only as someone who has been killed. Athena’s mother had been swallowed by Father Zeus, who thus robbed her of the power to give birth. Athena, this daughter without a mother, interrupts all female genealogies and founds no traditions. Pallas Athena, the warrior, the thinking woman, whose symbol is the owl, is a unique occurrence. A point without history, with no before and no after.

The “Jewess” is something quite different. Since the end of the eighteenth century an erotically charged word with a meaning that depends on exclusion. It signaled a danger for the German man and threatened a “corruption of German culture”; it stood for the foreign, the ominous, the other. Celan’s poem shatters this context. Ovaries have no erotic connotation. Ovaries designate the fecundity of women, and women were targeted by the National Socialist genocide because they could be mothers. They were sterilized—squirting in the ovaries—so that they could no longer hand on life. And they were murdered, so that never again would a Mother Rahel weep for her children.

The “Jewess Pallas Athena.” This shocking phrase demolishes an anchor of National Socialist ideology: the supposed contradiction between “Semitic” and “Indo-European”—what German philology calls “Indo-germanic.” Beyond this opposition, something in common is asserted that encompasses both the culture of ancient Greece and the Jewish tradition. What appear to be entirely contrary meanings can suddenly be thought together, meanings that had been lost in the clichéd images of the “Jew-

ess.” Two traditions interweave, and to monotheistic Judaism is joined a culture that understood Wisdom, Knowledge, Art, and Memory as feminine nouns. Sophia and Mnemosyne, the Muses and Theoria. A culture in which feminine words and female figures bear memories just as Rahel, Esther, and Sulamith recall the Jewish people for Celan.

This history of a commonality is destroyed by the tribe of the You-less, and with that a culture disappeared that had been constructed as much from Judaism as from Greek antiquity. It becomes a dead, a vanished culture, that can no longer hand anything down. Yet Celan’s poem, published in 1968, hands down a song, renders a mortal song immortal. An immortal song that also bears the memory of two writing women whose names are not mentioned. It can be read as a Kaddish, as a prayer of mourning for one who also wrote her transtibeten songs and embroidered or spun Tibetan carpets with a carpeted Tibet: Else Lasker-Schüler, who died in 1945 in Jerusalem.⁵ A Kaddish as well for one who wrote as if the Jewess Pallas Athena were a writer: Margarete Susman, who died in 1966 in Zurich. She developed a theory of “the Occident,” composed of three elements: Greek antiquity, Judaism, and Christianity, a theory of “European culture,” which she called an “extremely masculine culture,” because it was riven by the battle of the sexes, torn between man and woman.

PALLAS ATHENA: FIGURE OR CONCEPT?

*Auch dich erkenn ich, Pallas Athene!
Mit Schild und Weisheit konntest du nicht
Abwehren das Götterverderben?*

*[You too I see there, Pallas Athena!
Even your shield and your wisdom could not
Ward off the fall of the gods?]*

—Heinrich Heine, “Die Götter Griechenlands”

A transfer of power. In Heine’s poem “The Gods of Greece” (1826), new gods have dethroned the old; now “The virgin a god made fruitful / And the miracle-working divine Son” rule, and Juno, the former queen of the gods, must give way. Pallas Athena, introduced directly following this transfer of power, was unable to prevent the victory of Christendom. Despite her “shield and wisdom” she could not oppose it. In Heine’s poem the transit between antiquity and Christendom is what she marks. In a strange way. For there are discrepancies in the poem’s world of images

that make the status of Pallas Athena ever more complex. The poem begins with a first-person figure who studies a “light-blue” evening or night sky, across which clouds drift. In cloud shapes, these ephemeral images, the figure discerns the gods: Zeus/Jupiter, Hera/Juno, Pallas Athena, Aphrodite/Venus, Apollo/Helios. Gods with changing names at home in Greek and Roman antiquity. Their images flow into each other the way their names do; they are as unstable as the drifting clouds. But not Pallas Athena.

In the poem, her name is not translated from Greek into Latin, and she is the only god to whom the first-person figure addresses a question: “Auch dich erkenn ich, Pallas Athene! / Mit Schild und Weisheit konntest du nicht / Abwehren das Götterverderben?” [“You too I see there, Pallas Athene! / Even your shield and your wisdom could not / Ward off the fall of the gods?”] She alone, the untranslatable one, she alone with her double name is introduced as a figure who might have prevented the triumph of the new gods. She alone is given definite attributes. All the others change just as their names and cloudy images change. She is equipped with “shield and wisdom.” An “and” linking heterogeneous elements. The shield stands for defense, while wisdom by contrast is not metaphorical. Nor is the shield unambiguously coordinated with wisdom, so that the connection between the two poles remains vague. As vague as the introduction of the figure of Pallas Athena. She is the goddess who does not make the transition into Roman antiquity, into Latin. And therefore she is spared something essential: “Ich hab euch niemals geliebt, ihr Götter! / Denn widerwärtig sind mir die Griechen, / Und gar die Römer sind mir verhaßt.” [“I have never loved you, you ancient gods! / For the Greeks are repulsive to me, / And how I hate the Romans.”] Under the Romans, the occupiers of the Mediterranean, the rebellion of Bar Kochba was suppressed. Under the Romans the triumph of Christendom began. Pallas Athena, however, the untranslated goddess did not accompany this transition. In Heine’s poem she remains in ancient Greece; she was not involved in the conflicts between the Roman Empire and the Jews. And something more supports her unique position. The heavens of polytheistic antiquity are not supplanted in Heine by the monotheism of Christendom. Rather, the new religion is present in two or even three divine figures—in the divinely fertilized virgin and the godly son. The genealogy of the ancient world is thus continued and Christendom integrated into the changing names and shapes of antiquity. Only Pallas Athena resists this integration. Her virginity is unmarred by any impregnating god. She was born from a god, but not fertilized by one. A strange figure, entirely at home in neither of the different pantheons. Strange, too, in the question that the “I” directs to her. An addressable instance. An instance that

arises in the question posed to her? As does God in the monotheistic religions? As does the Jewish God?

Only at the very end of Heine's poem do unchangeable, eternal instances appear, removed from the mutability of the gods: "Und siegreich traten hervor am Himmel / Die ewige Sterne" ["And triumphant on the field of heaven emerged / The eternal stars"].⁶ The "eternal stars," images that, unlike the clouds in the poem, cannot be read. Constellations that render no image. That are no image. Like the God in monotheistic religions? Like the Jewish God? Read in this way, the figure of Pallas Athena forms a bridge to the religion that Heine does not mention. And so a bridge as well to Paul Celan's poem. The unique and paradoxical figure of the "Jewess Pallas Athena" can produce new contexts. Not only in Heine's poem. She seems to establish a hidden continuity that links historical persons to mythical figures. Two of the women writers that will be read in what follows were called by friends and readers "Pallas Athena": Rahel Levin and Hannah Arendt.⁷ A third, Else Lasker-Schüler, called her friends by this name. A fourth, Bertha Badt-Strauss, wrote in her autobiographical notes that she had grown up with "Aunt Athena" in a house on whose living room wall hung a picture of the Athenian Acropolis, directly across from a tapestry showing Jerusalem.⁸ All four women were Jews.

THE GERMAN PALLAS ATHENA

On 31 July 1834 there appeared in the *Zeitung für die elegante Welt* a double text: two printed pages with the title "Rahel," and a review, also two pages long, of *Rahel: Ein Buch des Andenkens für ihre Freunde* [*Rahel: A Book of Reminiscences for Her Friends*], the three-volume collection of Rahel Levin's letters that had just been published. The Germans are a nation, one reads here, that can boast of few great writers. Few men and even fewer women, particularly in comparison with France and England. But suddenly there was "an event in German cultural history" to celebrate, "Rahel, a marvelous gift from heaven, the German Pallas Athena": "She was a Jewess and so blessed by this birth with all that a higher education could grant such a being. The natural sensitivity of her fellow tribesmen and unprejudiced skeptical nature multiplied her intellectual gifts to infinity. She stands there as the veritable child of the north, as Protestant in the highest sense, as a true German woman with a German heart and every German characteristic."⁹

A series of almost synonymous qualities: Jewess and German are here not in opposition; the one appears to strengthen the other. And both find their culmination in the "gift from heaven," a harmony from Greek an-

tiquity, a Jewish name and the attributes of a German. If a Jewish woman can be the German Pallas Athena, contraries have been united. This new figure of a secularized mythology is modeled to the smallest detail on its antique precedent: She is “a child of the north,” just as Pallas Athena is a child of Zeus. And though she does not, as Athena did, lend a city her name, she is nonetheless the “daughter” of a city, of Berlin. She is a “virgin” who founds an intellectual tradition but no familial genealogy. In the fourfold determination “Rahel, the German Pallas Athena,” a concept of history and tradition culminates: “She is the epitome of the whole sweep of German history, the German woman from the recent past in her most developed form and highest potential.”¹⁰

Here, Heinrich Heine’s poem finds a clear echo. But more than that. Heine is introduced in the review as the only explicit addressee of Rahel Levin’s letters. *Rahel*—so the *Book of Reminiscences* is called here—will lie on a table in the “Hotel d’Espagne in Paris” and there it will find a reader. A reader because Heine has already made his admiration for the writer of these letters public. His texts contain a place for her. He had dedicated his collection of poems *Die Heimkehr* [*The Homecoming*] from 1826 to “Frau Privy Counselor Friederike Varnhagen v. Ense.” But in the preface to the *Buch der Lieder* [*Book of Songs*] of 1837 he translates this dedication into a different sort of naming: “The book arrived at the right time to give comfort. It is as if Rahel knew what sort of posthumous mission was hers. She believed that things would improve, and waited; but as the waiting knew no end, she shook her head impatiently, glanced at Varnhagen, and quickly died—in order all the more quickly to rise again. She reminds me of the legend of that Rahel who climbed from the grave and stood crying in the road as her children were carried off into bondage.”¹¹

The poems were dedicated to Rahel, then, and no longer to Friederike Varnhagen von Ense. By establishing the author “Rahel,” and her “posthumous mission,” the bourgeois person “Friederike Varnhagen von Ense” has moved into another history. The Jewish tradition, obscured by the latter name, can reappear in the mission for which “Rahel” stands. A mission that links the time of ancient Judaism with the future. And thus she now emerges from the only tradition that had been without negative connotations in Heine’s poem “The Gods of Greece.”

“PALLAS” AND THE JEWS AS “ENEMIES”

In the autumn of 1943 Gottfried Benn was working on an essay that bore the title “Pallas”—without Athena. It begins in the following way: “Athena, who leapt fully armed and shining from Zeus’s brow—blue-

eyed, the motherless god. Pallas—delighting in battles and destruction, Medusa’s head on her breastplate, the somber, joyless bird of night upon her helmet . . . Pallas, beyond Sappho and Mary, once almost overpowered in the darkness of a cavern, always helmeted, never impregnated, childless goddess, cold and alone.”¹²

A curious text. The first of its two parts is dominated by the distancing and mocking paraphrase of a book whose title and author are never named.¹³ The second develops a theory of begetting that extends to intellectual productivity. This dual movement of acceptance and rejection is indicated as early as the first sentence. “Pallas” the title runs, that name alone, but the text itself begins: Athena, apostrophized as a masculine “god.” Through an intermediary step that is introduced, like all the others, with a dash, the passage swerves through Venus back to Pallas, who stands between Sappho, the writing woman, and Mary, the mother of Christ. Pallas, “cold and alone,” an intermediary instance. “Cold and alone” she enters the text, “again armed and alone” she leaves it. But in the interim, embedded in a long reflection, she appears once more. This time neither cold nor alone:

“A feast of Dionysus, wine against corn, Bacchus against Demeter, phallic congestion against the nine-month magic, the aphorism against the historical novel! A piece of writing is accomplished, paper covered with typescript, thoughts, sentences; it lies on the table. One returns from other realms, circles, professional spheres, the brain loaded with issues, overflowing, repressing every flight and every dream—one returns hours later and sees the white sheet on the table. What is this? An inanimate something, vague worlds, things garnered in anguish and exertion, thought up, grouped, checked, revised, a pitiful residue, loose ends, unproved, weak—tinder, decadent nothing. The whole thing devious, a disease of the race, a somber birthmark, a confusion of connections? Then Pallas approaches, never perturbed, always helmeted, never impregnated, a slight, childless goddess sexlessly born of her father.”¹⁴

An incomplete scene of writing. How exactly it is that something arises from nothing is not explained. But read in terms of its last sentence, the masculine and feminine oppositions begin to move. Intoxication, moment, the lightning of insight on the one hand, slow growth and tending on the other—in the creative process the two sides that here have been so carefully segregated seem to touch. And precisely in the figure of Pallas. By approaching—in a movement in the present tense—the two contrary times of intoxication and duration are transformed into modes of another time, iridescent between never and always, in which the feminine—stripped of all its foreignness—seems to be subsumable under the masculine.

Suddenly this instance is identified. Because suddenly an “I” speaks,

surrounded by the “Acheans.” It addresses a “You”: a “You alone!” And again Pallas enters, the childless and, at the end of the text, the motherless goddess. She is the one who creates something. Without father and without mother. In a productivity outside all genealogies. A productivity that manifests structure—but how? From nothing?

In Benn’s text the pivot from nothing into something is staged quite precisely. The text begins in the present tense. Suddenly the flow of writing is marked by a crescendo of cursive temporal adverbs: “*not yet*,” “*Today! This!*” that culminate in a repetition: “It is evening.” In this timeless scenery Pallas discerns as if in a landscape both antiquity and Christendom bound together before her: “that before long, reckoned by the hours of the gods, another would stand in this place, proclaiming the resurrection of the dead.”¹⁵

Pallas herself finds no place in this future, she is transposed into the preterit. Something arose, positioned just between Antiquity and Christendom: “Among the stars she saw the Horn of Amalthea, the Cretan goat that suckled her father as a child.” A father whose father swallowed a stone instead of the offspring he meant to kill, a father whose mother entrusted the care of her child to an animal. A father who, free from mother and father “came to behold himself, interpreting himself and thinking and introvertedly returning his own essence to himself in utterances and works.”¹⁶

Pallas, having witnessed a begetting without genealogy, the genesis of a work without gender, can now leave the text. Something has been created. By Zeus or by the poet. But certainly by a masculine “I.” A creative process in which two aspects are missing: not only the woman as productive instance, but also Judaism as the third component of a cultural context. A short, almost unnoticeable word spans the bridge to another text by Gottfried Benn, a short word that points to an exclusion. To the exclusion of Judaism from the description of a culture. It is the attribute “slight” [schmal], applied to Pallas in the middle of the texts: the “slight childless goddess.” In Benn’s poem “Englisches Café” [English Café] from 1913 the word occurs twice; the only word that is repeated:

ENGLISCHES CAFÉ

Das ganze schmalschuhige Raubpack,
Russinnen, Jüdinnen, tote Völker, ferne Küsten,
schleicht durch die Frühjahrsnacht.

Die Geigen grünen. Mai ist um die Harfe.
Die Palmen röten sich. Im Wüstenwind.

Rahel, die schmale Golduhr am Gelenk;
Geschlecht behütend und Gehirn bedrohend:

Feindin! Doch deine Hand ist eine Erde:
Süßbraun, fast ewig, überweht vom Schoß.¹⁷

[ENGLISH CAFÉ

The whole slight-shoed thieving pack,
Russians, Jewesses, perished peoples, distant coasts,
creeps through the Spring night.

The violins green. May is round the harp.
The palms blush red. In the desert wind.

Rahel, the slight gold watch on her wrist;
Sex sheltering and brain menacing:
Enemy! Yet your hand is an earth:
Sweet-brown, almost eternal, blown over the womb.]

Slight, then—like Jewesses? Who creep through the night with their slight shoes and slight watches like the slight Pallas. Bound like Pallas into a structure of repetition. But then, a name—Rahel. An unusual interruption, since Benn’s poems almost never display proper names. Rahel—not an innocent name; it is certainly not accidental. The rhythm of the text would have allowed other names, “Esther,” or “Sarah.” That Rahel appears can be read as the echo of an historical figure who, like Pallas, had no children but, like Sappho, wrote. Who left behind letters closer to the aphorisms in Benn’s essay than to a historical novel. Rahel, the “enemy,” because she once again disturbs the order Benn had established for the writing process. Rahel, the Jewess, because in her name the meanings of these words intersect: a mixture of erotic and intellectual fascination. Where does she belong? Neither on the side of the mothers nor on the side of those who create. She is in between, a joint that does not bind brain and sex and certainly does not reconcile them. A productivity that cannot be harnessed into Benn’s model. A provocation between traditions and cultures. Like Else Lasker-Schüler? This poem was written at the time Benn was working with her.

Else Lasker-Schüler, long since in exile when Benn wrote his text “Pallas,” transports the figure of Pallas into quite other contexts. She takes her to Palestine and gives her as a name to her women friends: “Won’t you please add to Rosa Bertens—Rosa Bertens: Pallas Athena with Blood Roses in her Hair,”¹⁸ so she wrote to Kurt Wolff.

The Jewess Pallas Athena. This figure stands here at the outset of a path. She accompanies German-Jewish history, from its start in the middle of the eighteenth century to the time after 1945 when Jewish women driven out of Germany dared to look back. Look back on a country in which

they had been raised, whose language and culture they had shared. A country from which they had flown and to which they could never come home again.

Another strand runs beside this historical reconstruction that concentrates on women writers. A theoretical reconstruction of culture that investigates the different connotations of this word, so freighted with contradictory meanings: Jewess. Since the Enlightenment, when it began to exert historical influence, to the twentieth century, when it became for some a reference point in terms of which their historical reconstructions and theoretical speculations could be oriented, and became for others a metaphor of exclusion and repression. Throughout the entire book these two strands cross each other. Writing women who developed theoretical models of culture in their texts provide the threads that guide the movements of the book.

The Jewess Pallas Athena. The formula embodies the question of the constituents of a culture that characterized Germany from the end of the eighteenth century to 1933. What determined it? Did it provide space for concepts that did not participate in the reduction of tradition to its antique and Christian strands? Who developed such theories and who received them? The book will not attempt to provide a survey. Rather, it is divided into constellations in which similar figures and similar positions continually reappear. The result is a network of references, sometimes difficult to decode, sometimes almost lost to sight. For the search for and the question of “Jewesses”—this uncomfortable category—constantly leads to the edge of tradition, to the boundaries of what is still legible today.

A network of relations or perhaps a “weave”? Pallas Athena is the goddess of weaving, as well. On 21 February 1831, Rahel Levin Varnhagen sent her sister-in-law Friederike Robert a package of tablecloths and napkins. In the accompanying note, she writes, echoing Homer: “If you have even the smallest portion of the pleasure that I get from honoring you, it will appear to you as beautiful as a weave from Pallas-Athena.”¹⁹