

Hera

OR EMPATHY

Hera OR EMPATHY

A WORK OF UTOPIAN FICTION



WILLIAM LEISS

❧ A Cangrande Book ❧

A Cangrande Book™

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Three years before I ... had created a fiend whose unparalleled barbarity had desolated my heart, and filled it for ever with the bitterest remorse. I was now about to form another being, of whose dispositions I was alike ignorant; she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate, and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness. He had sworn to quit the neighbourhood of man, and hide himself in deserts; but she had not; and she, who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal, might refuse to comply with a compact made before her creation

Even if they were to leave Europe, and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror.

Mary W. Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818)

In natural systems, there is no guilt or virtue, only success or failure, measured by survival and nothing more. Time is the judge. If you manage to pass on what you have to the next generation, then what you did was right.

Barbara Kingsolver, *Pigs in Heaven* (1993)

W I L L I A M L E I S S

HERA, OR EMPATHY

For eight Great Danes – elegant Bree, sweet-tempered Clio, and meek Sappho; the incomparable Cangrande Magnus and his daughter, clever Yoko; gorgeous Marco, charming and doomed; the gentle giant Theo and silly Lily:

Unbidden, memory hovers above a place of unfathomable sorrow, where it stirs the traces of their being, abrading daily the wounds that cannot heal, the price I pay for the love of dogs.

Hera

OR EMPATHY

Book One of *The Herasaga*

A NOTE FROM THE SUB-COMPILER

The reader of the following pages may be curious as to how they came into my hands. You may well wonder why anyone would trouble himself to preserve these scraps of paper when they might have been put to some better use in the night's fire, warming his miserable supper and holding the leering wolves at bay. And I could forgive you for that thought, for you were not present when my mother Hera entrusted them to me and swore me to the task of preservation.

I fear inciting your annoyance should I neglect to enlighten you as to the origins of the records I have so unimaginatively compiled here. As a young girl, my mother delighted in her discovery of the early series of miniaturized digital voice recorders, so easily concealed in hair or jewelry, now so ubiquitous in interpersonal commerce (not to mention lawsuits for libel and slander!). The transcription software, automatically converting the captured vocalizations into searchable text files, was already at that time remarkable for its fidelity. Even at a tender age Hera had a sense of her destiny, so fully vindicated with the passage of time. She urged her sisters to adopt the personal journal format of her invention, where annotations were appended to the records of daily conversations, thus providing contextual remarks and considered reflections.

You may well ask, "Who is this person? We are unacquainted with her reputation—and with yours. No doubt every mother's son, reflecting upon his genesis, considers the one who brought him into the world to be remarkable to a degree, thus in passing flattering himself. What aspect of her life or fortunes plucks her from the crowd and thrusts itself forward, commanding our undivided attention?" To which queries I concede you are owed an answer.

I offer you a single extract from the record that follows, comprising a conversation between us, recorded by me some two years ago:

“Because we sisters [*Hera is speaking*] were designed as natural beings by an act of another’s conscious will, I was obsessed with the religious story of creation as a way of understanding us, who we are, why we came to be engineered by our parents, and what it all meant for our lives and the way we should lead them. Like Frankenstein’s monster, I thought at first I must get this explanation from my creator—my father. Like that poor creature in Mary Shelley’s story, I also then came to the conclusion that I must make my father understand what I was going through, in my mind, and to convince him to accept my side of the story, so to speak. I wanted to get him to complete his work *by accepting me as I was*, not as he had designed me to be in his own mind, prior to my coming into being and consciousness.

“I thought I had to explain myself to him and to get him to see the real story, which was not about the so-called ‘program’ he and our mother had invented with their friends, but rather about who and what we—as the embodiment of another’s dream—were in and for ourselves, to use a philosophical expression again. Where I got stuck, where I was really bogged down for years, was in believing that for the sake of my own salvation I had to get inside my creator’s mind because it seemed to me that was where the answers lay—in his intentions and expectations. I admit I was influenced by his eminence as a scientist and, later, by the extraordinary care he exercised in re-engineering the Second Generation. It took me far too long to see that this was a dead end.”

“That reminds me of how Mary Shelley’s story concludes, mother. Do you remember that awful scene

close to the end, when the creature is found by the ship's captain, standing over the corpse of Dr. Frankenstein, grief-stricken and in despair? After all the cruel transactions between them, he remains bound emotionally to his creator to the bitter end. I remember the words he speaks: He refers to Frankenstein as 'the select specimen of all that is worthy of love and admiration among men.' What inept words these are when used to describe the man who had denied him the chance to overcome his profound loneliness by having a mate of his own kind! He was in thrall to his master and couldn't break free; Frankenstein's death was simultaneously his own self-inflicted sentence of doom."

"That's precisely where my story diverges from Shelley's, Marco. I came at last to the realization that my sisters and I must wrest our own future path out of our creator's hands. I concluded that it didn't really matter after all what my parents intended. We weren't bound by the terms of whatever bargains they had made, either with themselves or with others. We were capable of setting our own terms. And to do this we had to consign Franklin's *Memorandum* to the rubbish heap and look only inside ourselves to find our destiny."

"You never did succeed in getting Franklin [*her father*] to understand why it was so important to you to figure this out and go your own way, did you?"

"I really have no idea whether I did or not. What I do know for sure is that I spent far too much time and effort obsessing about all this, being fixated on it. Good Lord, when I recall those conversations now, all the many occasions during which I badgered him—poor man!—into sitting and listening to my excursions into the Book of Genesis, which he hated so! Finally the truth dawned on me: We sisters were the story, not him. We had within us the power to redefine the nature of the Faustian bargain

vives these

he and my mother had made.”

“Well, I’m not sure you were entirely wrong in obsessing about the Biblical creation myth, or in making him listen to your exegesis of the Book of Genesis. I still think you made a good case in your arguments about crossing the line—which I heard you articulate on several occasions, including when you were rehearsing them with me.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that! What he had done, in effect, was to burn down the ancient edifice, the structure of myth common to all the world’s monotheistic religions, that tells of our being brought into the world by God’s will, by a purpose and will independent of humankind, one that we all serve. My sisters and I arose from those ashes like the Phoenix, the bird-figure of ancient Greek myth that regenerates itself again and again in its own funeral pyre. We are the new-born ones, fully creatures of this earth, children of a mastery of the biochemistry of that extraordinary molecule, DNA.”

For the rest of the story you will have to consult the object that lies before your eyes, quarried from the mines in which I labored on your behalf: Book One of *The Herasaga*. When we last spoke before my embarkation, my mother handed me a hard drive, its contents indexed and chronologically ordered, holding many wonderful snapshots of our adventures together, as well as many tens of thousands of pages in electronic files—chiefly from her own journals, she being the most assiduous chronicler of the lot, but including also files from her sisters, father, and yours truly. She said to me, “Dear Marco, you will need more occupations for your mind, in addition to your duties, as you sail through the starry night toward the Red Planet and, I pray fervently, safely back again. Forge a coherent narrative for me from these scattered files. For if no archaeology sur

troubled times, the mute remnant of our lives you create there may be the only testimony to my kind's allotted time on our beloved earth."

Reporting her words obliges me to acknowledge that it was Hera herself who was the actual compiler, and I a mere sub-compiler. Even in this reduced role I fear my incompetence is on display. For when I reviewed the final text I had assembled for you, I confess I was chagrined. After all, a competent prefacer seeks to seduce the reader with the allure of secrets to be uncloaked later. What busy mind would bother to read on had the lowly scribe, whose only mandate was to assemble in good order the documents entrusted to his care, blurted out in the preliminaries his narrative's darkest secrets? What lover of romance would suspend disbelief to follow a plot's improbable path if all uncertainty were made to vanish at the starting gate? And yet for me to decline all revelatory obligations would be a far worse offense.

So I confess here of my own volition, that in calling the one who commissioned this work my mother, because for most of my life I have used that appellation in concourse with her, I may scandalize the reader who, unprotected by my dissembling, later stumbles upon the truth. Here then is what lies ahead in this chronicle: Hera—my stepmother, in a manner of speaking—plotted in meticulous detail, first the murder of my father, and second the banishment and exile of my natural mother, and oversaw the successful execution of those plans. If I now say to you that I acquiesced in the second of these crimes, and that I would have ratified the first with enthusiasm had I been capable of doing so, you will think me either mad or bewitched. So be it. In forewarning you I have discharged my duty. Read first, I beg you, and then judge my condition.

Although I bear the markings of one who is a half-breed, I, too, once emerged as an actor in our family drama. Thus

when my mother solicited me to assume the task of authorship, I was, in theory, well positioned to promote myself to the role of omniscient narrator, at least for those episodes that postdate the onset of my involvement in them. I might have become the all-seeing, keen-eyed reporter of our fortunes. Alas, I found in myself neither the courage nor the talent to discard the compiler's yolk and its puerile cut-and-paste methodologies learned in kindergarten. Thus my sorry pastiche stands before you. And if you find the tale to be obscure and the characters' motives inexplicable, I reply, all obliquity found therein must be marked down to my account. If you now remark that the characters I have propped up before you remain glued to my pages, lifeless and wooden, I say do not attach your obloquy to them all, but only to me.

As I was then, at twenty-five years of age,

MARCO SUJANA
 Commander, Technical Operations
 On board *Colonizer 1*
 Mars Settlement Mission, AD2055

POSTSCRIPT: I have prepared a website where some pictures of the locations described in the following narrative may be found: www.herasaga.com

