The Parthenon in poetry

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> Ὅταν δέ τις ἵσταται παρὰ τὸ μνημεῖον τοῦ Λυσικράτους, λίαν παράδοξος εἶνε τῆς Ἀκροπόλεως ἡ ἄποψις· βλέπει τις τὴν κολοσσικὴν ἀνατολικὴν πλευρὰν τοῦ βράχου μετὰ τῆς βαθείας αὐτοῦ κοιλάνσεως καὶ οὐδὲν ἑλληνικὸν κτίσμα, οὐδένα τῶν ἐπ' αὐτῆς ναῶν, ἀλλὰ μόνον τὸν περίβολον τῶν μεμελασμένων τειχῶν μετὰ τῶν ἐπάλξεων αὐτῶν οὕτως, ὥστε ἡ Ἀκρόπολις παρουσιάζεται αὐτόχρημα ὡς ἡ Rocca di Setine τῶν φραγκικῶν χρόνων, ὡς θέαμά τι μεσαιωνικόν.[1]

This awkward view of the Acropolis that one gets when standing by the choregic monument of Lysicrates, as described here by Gregorovius, has an uncanny truth about it, difficult if not impossible to imagine today. Indeed, if the above description refers to a specific viewpoint from which most of the buildings inside the Acropolis were not visible, it is also true that it could successfully represent, in a metaphorical sense, attitudes towards the Acropolis and its monuments – especially the Parthenon – from late antiquity until the 17th century. For if today the importance and symbolic value of the Parthenon are firmly established in Greece and abroad, things have not always been so. To be more specific, the monuments on the Acropolis are hardly ever mentioned at all after, roughly, the 2nd century AD, and even before that admiration should not always be taken for granted. For Plato, for example, the Periclean building programme was not only an extravagant waste of money on public display, but also an

[1] Ferdinandos Gregorovios, *Ἱστορία τῆς πόλεως τῶν Ἀθηνῶν κατὰ τοὺς μέσους αἰῶνας ἀπὸ τοῦ Ἰουστινιανοῦ μέχρι τῆς ὑπὸ τῶν Τούρκων κατακτήσεως*, μετ. Σπ. Π. Λάμπρου, Τόμος Β΄ (Athens 1904), p. 521.

example of how art can be used to corrupt the citizenry.[2] Much later and in a different tone, Plutarch praises the monuments erected during Pericles's ambitious building programme in a way that brings to mind modern criticism.[3] Pausanias, on the other hand, although he visited the Parthenon, says surprisingly little about it except for the detailed passages he devotes to the famous statue of Athena in the temple. Pliny too only mentions that same colossal statue.

In any case, as the fame of Athens gradually wanes and seems to be totally forgotten after the 4th or 5th century AD, so too the Parthenon disappears from writers' view. Depictions of Athens during the Middle Ages bring to mind Gregorovius's description quoted above: it is represented as a Flemish city by Léon Gaucherel, or as a German fortress by Hartman Schedel, or again as a port with buildings that justify the title André Thevet gave to his engraving: *Imaginary View of Athens, 1575* – and the Parthenon or the other monuments on the Acropolis are nowhere to be seen.[4] It is well known of course that the temple did not fall into disuse. Prominent on the hill and still intact, it became the Christian church of God's Holy Wisdom around the 5th century, later known as Παναγία η Αθηνιώτισσα.[5] After the conquest of Constantinople by the Crusaders the Parthenon becomes the Latin Cathedral of Our Lady. Later still, two years after the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans, the Sultan Mehmet II visits "the church of the mother of God", which he admires, and the ancient temple duly becomes a mosque a few years later, in 1460. We can

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[2] Plato, *Gorgias*, 518-19.

[3] Plutarch, *Life of Pericles*, XIII.3.

[4] These imaginary depictions of Athens can be seen conveniently in Savas Kondaratos, "The Parthenon as cultural ideal", in: Panagiotis Tournikiotis (ed.), *The Parthenon and its impact in modern times* (Athens: Melissa 1994), pp. 31-3. (The volume is also published in Greek, by the same publisher, as *Ο Παρθενώνας και η ακτινοβολία του στα νεώτερα χρόνια.*)

[5] Although the name "Αγία Σοφία" is not certain, it may indicate a confusion with the original dedication of the Parthenon to the goddess of wisdom, Athena. See A. K. Orlandos and L. Vranousis, *Τα χαράγματα του Παρθενώνος* (Athens: Academy of Athens 1973), p. 31.

say then, that the history of the Parthenon up to the 18th century is a history of change and adaptation to new requirements, and the beholders, mostly unaware of its ancient fame, speak about the monument in terms of its function. And although the monument's transformations seem to conceal the original Parthenon from the eyes of its viewers – most of them at least – it is also true that it is those same transformations that have kept the monument alive.

The written sources that refer to the Parthenon follow the monument's changes of face. There are two passing references to the monument in the 5th century about the statue of Athena being in the Parthenon, and then, after almost eight centuries of silence, passing references only are found from the 12th century onwards. But here again, the Parthenon is no longer mentioned as such. References are made to it as "the church" with such variants as "the church of the Mother of God" (933 – Osios Loukas); "the church of the Virgin" (St Nikon of Sparta); "Μήτηρ Θεού η Αθηναΐς" (Metropolitan Nicholas Hagiotheodorites (1160-75); or "the church of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in which an ever burning oil lamp, never goes out", described by the Icelandic pilgrim Saewulf.[6] When the Parthenon is converted into a mosque, it becomes, accordingly, "the most magnificent mosque in the whole atlas of the globe. In civilized countries no sanctuary exists to equal it", in the words of the Turkish traveller Evlia Çelebi in 1667.[7] Indeed the first time that the Acropolis was ever named as such in the era after Antiquity was in the middle of the 15th century by Cyriac of Ancona, the first person to look upon Athens's ancient monuments with classical understanding – this is why Kenneth Setton calls him the founder of modern archaeology. The

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[6] See Robert Ousterhout, "'Bestride the very peak of heaven': the Parthenon after Antiquity", in: Jenifer Neils (ed.), *The Parthenon from Antiquity to the present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005), pp. 293-329 (pp. 308-10).

[7] For a detailed list of written sources referring to the Parthenon under its various names and functions from the 5th century up to 1800, as well as the relevant extracts, see the important study by Anastasia Demetriades Norre, "Studies in the history of the Parthenon" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 1966), pp. 215-310.

name Acropolis was unknown in the Middle Ages and even though the Catalan Don Pedro IV of Aragon, in 1380, looked upon it as "the richest jewel in all the world" – furnishing the first piece of art criticism in the West – it was known in official Catalan documents as *Castell de Cetines* and by the Burgundians as the *Château de Sethynes*.[8] Indeed, up until the 17th century, the Acropolis was widely known as the Castle or the Fortress, and it is only after this date, when visitors to the city become more conscious of the historical and aesthetic value of the monument, that they begin to use its ancient name more systematically.

Such a surprising lack of interest in the archaeological or aesthetic value of the Parthenon is actually confirmed in poetry. As I stated above, the Parthenon is hardly ever mentioned in documents, let alone in literature, and the one poem to have reached us from the Middle Ages, which looks upon Athens through the eyes of a lover of antiquity, is provocative in its blatant lack of acknowledgement towards the monument. The author is Michael Choniates, who was metropolitan of Athens between 1182 and 1205. Choniates admired the city for its illustrious history and its glorious monuments and was hoping to find something of the long-lost glory of Athens and its citizens in the city and people of his time. It seems though that he quickly became disillusioned, and his letters and other writings testify to his disappointment that nothing has survived of the once world-famous city of art and knowledge. The poem he composed, "Verses of the most wise metropolitan of Athens, Kyr Michael Choniates, on the original reconstruction of the city of Athens", reflects these feelings:

Ἔρως Ἀθηνῶν τῶν πάλαι θρυλουμένων
ἔγραψε ταῦτα ταῖς σκιαῖς προσαθύρων
καὶ τοῦ πόθου τὸ θάλπον ὑπαναψύχων.

[8] As Setton explains, "both names are only the obvious corruption, in the typical Latin fashion of the day, of the Greek phrase εις τας Αθήνας, in which the sigma of the article has become the initial letter of the proper name". See Kenneth M. Setton, *Catalan Domination of Athens, 1311-1388* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Medieval Academy of America 1948), p. 187.

Ἐπεὶ γὰρ οὐκ ἦν οὐδαμοῦ φεῦ προσβλέπειν
αὐτὴν ἐκείνην τὴν ἀοίδιμον πόλιν,
τὴν δυσαρίθμου καὶ μακραίωνος χρόνου
λήθης βυθοῖς κρύψαντος ἠφαντωμένην,
ἐρωτολήπτων ἀτεχνῶς πάσχω πάθος,
οἵ τὰς ἀληθεῖς τῶν ποθουμένων θέας
ἀμηχανοῦντες τῶν παρόντων προσβλέπειν
τὰς εἰκόνας ὁρῶντες αὐτῶν, ὡς λόγῳ,
παραμυθοῦνται τῶν ἐρώτων τὴν φλόγα. [...]
οἰκῶν Ἀθήνας οὐκ Ἀθήνας που βλέπω,
κόνιν δὲ λυπρὰν καὶ κενὴν μακαρίαν.
Ποῦ σοι τὰ σεμνά, τλημονεστάτη πόλις; [...]
Ὄλωλε σύμπαν τῶν Ἀθηνῶν τὸ κλέος·
γνώρισμα δ' αὐτῶν οὐδ' ἀμυδρόν τις ἴδοι. [...]

Love of Athens, of ancient legend,
depicted these things, with shadows playing
to cool the ardour of my longing.
For since, alas, was nowhere to be seen
in its own right that celebrated city
which Time long aged and incalculable
has hidden, in oblivion's depths obscured,
I suffer literally the passion of the lovestruck,
who, when the true sight of those they long for
among those present they find no way of seeing,
looking on their likeness, as in pretence
soothe the flame of their desires. [...]
dwelling in Athens, I see Athens nowhere,
only drab dust and empty blessedness.
Ill-fated city, where is your majesty? [...]
– perished, the whole renown of Athens,
not even a faint token of it may one see. [...]
(tr. Paul Magdalino)

The speaker, a thinly veiled Choniates, longs for the ancient city he can no longer see. His feelings are described as the frustration of the love-struck who, being unable to meet the actual object of his desire, finds consolation in the sight of its image. (It is said that this poem commemorated a painting of ancient Athens which Michael had commissioned.) Ancient Athens is gone for good and

nothing is left behind of its ancient glory. Time has turned everything to dust. Being unable to see anything of the ancient city of the Athenians, the speaker considers that he will be forgiven for raising a graphic/written idol of her.

The poem, probably the earliest of its kind at least in Greek, introduces some very important elements that will be detected in the poetry devoted to monuments many centuries later: the frustrated eroticism of the viewer, the realization that Greece's glorious past is now lost and beyond grasp, the wish to reproduce an image of this lost world, knowing at the same time the limitations of word or image to fully incarnate what is lost. But this dynamic interaction of love, longing and artistic creation has been discussed extensively.[9] What I want to underline here is the following paradox: how could Choniates complain in line 19 "ποῦ σοὶ τὰ σεμνά, τλημονεστάτη πόλις" or lament that: "Ὤλωλε σύμπαν τῶν Ἀθηνῶν τὸ κλέος· γνώρισμα δ' αὐτῶν οὐδ' ἀμυδρόν τις ἴδοι", doing so from inside the very monument that came to be at the centre of everybody's view and attention from the 18th century onwards? This is not to say that Choniates was not aware of the ancient monument, but his attitude helps us understand the shift of emphasis: the importance of the monument as a building that served its purpose and not as a work of art set apart from its context and cherished for its own sake. A comparison between this text and Renan's famous *Prière sur l'Acropole* (written 1876, published 1883 – based on his visit in 1865) vividly shows, I think, the stark contrast between the Parthenon of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages and the Parthenon after the 18th century:

> The impression which Athens made upon me was the strongest which I have ever felt. There is only one place in which perfection exists, and that is Athens, which outdid anything I had ever imagined. I had before my eyes the ideal of beauty crystal-

[9] For a detailed discussion of the poem see Christopher Livanos, "Michael Choniates, poet of love and knowledge", *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 30 (2006) 103-14.

> lized in pentelic marble. Up until now I had thought that perfection was not to be found in this world. [...] The sight of the Acropolis was like a revelation of the Divine. [...] The whole world then appeared to me barbarian. [...] But here you had a whole people of aristocrats, a general public composed entirely of connoisseurs, a democracy which was capable of distinguishing shades of art so delicate that even our most refined judges can scarcely appreciate them. Here you had a public capable of understanding in what consisted the beauty of Propylaea and the superiority of the sculptures of the Parthenon. This revelation of true and simple grandeur went to my very soul.

These lines come from what is perhaps the single most famous text on the Acropolis and the Parthenon. It epitomises and crystallises perceptions of the Parthenon as expressed in the late 18th and the 19th centuries in travel writing, architectural treatises and aesthetic dissertations related to ancient Greek art. Indeed, it was generally agreed that the temple is ideal and divine in its beauty and in the skill involved in its sculptures. Everybody saw it as the product of a democratic city-state and the work of free people. The monument became intimately connected with the landscape in which it belongs, and it was seen to maintain the perfect balance between nature and art. Travellers particularly become more personally involved in their responses. Long lyrical passages often expressed sadness about the ruined state of the monument, a certain nostalgia for its lost glories and an emphasis on the power of imagination to reconstruct the ancient world.[10] But nothing of what happened after Plutarch and before Winckelmann could have prepared us for such worldwide acclaim in modern times. And the reasons that led to this change of heart are intimately connected to the changes in the relationship between Greece and the West after the 17th century and particularly in the reappraisal by educated people in the West of Athens as an important city and the

[10] See Fani Mallouchou-Tufano, "The Parthenon from Cyriacus of Ancona to Frédéric Boissonas: description, research and depiction", in Tournikiotis (ed.), *The Parthenon and its impact*, pp. 162-99.

recognition of its rich cultural heritage.[11] These reasons could be summarized as follows:

- A change in the political, social and cultural horizons of the West led to a new appreciation of ancient Greek values as opposed to the Roman cultural tradition. For its new face, Europe was searching for a new mirror to look into and Athens fulfilled this role.
- The rediscovery of Athens took place through its monuments: their description, measurement and aesthetic appreciation became the prime concern of important architects and painters such as James Stuart and Nicholas Revett, who undertook the pilgrimage to Athens for that purpose.
- Travellers who visit Athens are more and more aware of the history and value of the monuments they see and describe. Although accuracy of description and depiction is not achieved right away, there is an increasing emphasis on the observation of the monuments for their own sake.
- Winckelmann's aesthetic writings seal the way through which antiquities and Greek art in general are perceived and his approach to ancient art is detectable in all sorts of writing, from architectural treatises to literature.
- Last but not least, the symbolic weight of the Parthenon becomes intrinsically connected with the Greek struggle for independence and Greek nationalism. From the arrival of King Otto, and Leo von Klenze's inaugural speech on the

[11] The volume edited by Tournikiotis devotes many chapters to the shifting attitudes towards the Parthenon. A most important book that deals with great care and detail with the rediscovery of Greece in the 17th century and discusses all the factors that contributed to it, is by Nasia Yakovaki, *Η Ευρώπη μέσω Ελλάδας. Μια καμπή στην ευρωπαϊκή αυτοσυνείδηση, 17ος-18ος αιώνας* (Athens: Estia 2006). See also the short but dense and witty narrative of the history of the Parthenon by Mary Beard, *The Parthenon* (London: Profile Books 2002); also contributions 9, 10 and 11 in Neils (ed.), *The Parthenon from Antiquity to the present*; and William St Clair, "Imperial appropriations of the Parthenon", in: John Henry Merryman (ed.), *Imperialism, art and restitution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006), pp. 65-97.

> Acropolis Greek freedom and Greek values have always been somehow linked to the ancient monuments, and in particular the Parthenon, which became "the heart of the Race", as Palamas later put it.[12]

It is at this point in time that poetry on the Parthenon begins to be composed, when the monument stops being a useful building and is elevated to a work of art. The poems on the Parthenon, in their vast majority, belong to the tradition of Idealism, or else Romantic Hellenism. Inspired by Winckelmann, by Stuart and Revett, and by important travellers such as Chateaubriand, they all share an admiration for ancient Greek culture and place its art at the pinnacle of civilization. The ideal, the beautiful, the cult of whiteness, democracy, and freedom are key words here.[13] A random glance through many poems, especially those of the 19th and early 20th centuries confirms this. For Louise Colet, who contemplates the Parthenon from afar at first and closer later, the hill on which the Parthenon is built is:

> Comme un trépied géant un roc a large cime
> Qui porte avec fierté le Parthénon sublime! [...]
> Le voilà ce temple sans tache,
> Blanc comme un vêtement sacré!
> Comme la neige qui s'attache
> Au front du Parnasse éthéré!
> Éblouissante colonnade
> Que Zéphire va caressant:
> Le voilà tournant sa façade
> Aux feux du matin rougissant![14]

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[12] See, characteristically, the description by A. Miliarakis of the official ceremony on the Acropolis on 28 August 1834 to welcome Otto, the new King of Greece, in *Εστία* 18 (22 July 1884) 461-7. It includes the inaugural speech of Leo von Klenze, in which the connection of the glorious past with the aspirations of the new King is clearly made through the monuments on the Acropolis and the ideas they represented.

[13] See, for example, St Clair, "Imperial appropriations", pp. 82-6.

[14] Louise Colet, *Ce qu'on rêve en aimant* (Paris: Librairie Nouvelle 1854), pp. 117-41.

Her long narrative poem, "L'Acropole d'Athènes" won the French Academy prize in 1854 and was followed closely in style and content by Ioannis Kambouroglou in his own long poem "Ακρόπολις", submitted for the Voutsinaios Poetry Competition (1870) of the University of Athens and published in 1871:

> Αφέλεια και εμπειρία,
> νους εις άπειρον εισδύων,
> σπουδή της φύσεως βαθεία
> και ηθικόν τι μεγαλείον,
>
> Όπερ την ύλην ωραΐζει,
> ακτίνας βάλλον δι' αυτής
> και την ψυχήν εξευγενίζει,
> ιδού η τέχνη. Δυσπιστείς;[15]
>
> Naivety and experience,
> mind that penetrates the infinite,
> deep study of nature
> and a moral grandeur,
>
> that embellishes matter,
> dashing sunbeams through it
> and ennobles the soul,
> here is art. Do you doubt it?

For Ch. A. Parmenides in his "Ωδή εις τα ερείπια της Ακροπόλεως" (1858), the temple and the other monuments on the Acropolis are "Έργα μεγαλοφυΐας, / Έργα έθνους ελευθέρου" (Works of genius, Works of a free nation).[16] G. Lampelet ascends the Acropolis and exclaims, on seeing the Parthenon:

> Στην έκλαμπρή σου όψι, ω Παρθενώνα,
> Ψυχής θεϊκής ύμνε μαρμαρωμένε,
> Γονατιστός ο νους μου ζη στα χρόνια

[15] I. Kambouroglou, *Η Ακρόπολις* (Athens: Ilissos 1871).
[16] Ch. A. Parmenidis, *Νέα ποιήματα* (Athens: N. Filadelpheus 1858), pp. 145-9.

Που υφαίνουν τον χρυσό σου τον αιώνα,
Και τη ζωή τους πλάθει, ω δοξασμένε,
Ω αλήθειας κι ομορφιάς σύνθεσι αιώνια![17]

In front of your majestic façade, o Parthenon,
You, petrified hymn of a divine soul.
My mind, prostrated, relives the years

That weave your golden Age,
And it reshapes their life, o glorious one,
O eternal composition of truth and beauty!

And in her poem "Στον Παρθενώνα", Athina Tarsouli claims that:

Στα πολυκαιρισμένα σου τα μάρμαρα,
χαράχτηκαν αιώνων πεπρωμένα
κι' όλα τα μυστικά μιας Τέχνης άφταστης,
από Αρμονίες και Ρυθμούς γραμμένα.[18]

In your worn-out marbles,
the destinies of centuries have been engraved
and all the secrets of an unequalled Art,
written with Harmonies and Rhythms.

All and all, as Richard Etlin has pointed out, "the superlatives accorded to the Parthenon were not limited to an appreciation of its supreme beauty; rather, they were extended to include the highest possible manner of aesthetic experience, which was the 'sublime'."[19] And they also usually encompassed moral qualities. This brings us back full circle to Renan's *Prière sur l'Acropole*, a circle that keeps turning, though, considering that such attitudes towards the Parthenon continued to be expressed well into the 20th century. The poems presented here should be seen against

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[17] In Karolos Moraitis, *Μεγάλη ανθολογία Ελληνικού σονέττου* (Athens 1987), p. 340.
[18] In D. Lampikis, *Ελληνίδες ποιήτριες* (Athens 1936), p. 50.
[19] Richard A. Etlin, "The Parthenon in the modern era", in: Neils (ed.), *The Parthenon from Antiquity to the present*, pp. 363-95 (p. 370).

this background of idealizing attitudes, and they are chosen because they display an originality of thought and expression in an otherwise familiar context, or because their groundbreaking, radical attitudes create an interesting counterpart to the overwhelmingly idealistic approach to the monument. One of the earliest such examples is "The Parthenon" (1857) by Herman Melville.

Melville travelled in Europe and the Levant over a period of eight months, from 11 October 1856 to 6 May 1857. In the diary he kept of those travels he made interesting and original comments on the places and monuments he visited, and especially the Parthenon.

> Acropolis – blocks of marble like sticks of Wenham ice – or like huge cakes of wax. – Parthenon elevated like cross of Constantine. Strange contrast of rugged rock with polished temple. At Stirling – art & nature correspond. Not so at Acropolis.
> Imperceptible seams – frozen together. – Break like cakes of snow. –
> *Feb 10th* [...] Pavement of Parthenon – square – blocks of ice. (frozen together.) – no mortar: – Delicacy of frostwork.
> *Feb 11th* Wednesday. Clear & beautiful day. Fine ride on box to Pireus. Acropolis in sight nearly whole way. Straight road. Fully relieved against the sky – [20]

They show his acquaintance both with Byzantine history and with Greek literature and tradition, as well as his familiarity with the, by now, well-established discourse relating to the Parthenon and its perceived qualities. They may also echo the guidebook Melville carried with him during these travels, Murray's *Handbook for travellers in Greece*, which, like most guides and travel literature at the time, popularized the idealizing tradition of Romantic Hellenism in the perception and interpretation of ancient art. This can be seen in the four poems that Melville wrote

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[20] Herman Melville, *Journal of a visit to Europe and the Levant*, ed. Howard C. Horsford (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1955), pp. 170-1, 172, 173.

about the Parthenon: "Greek Architecture", "Greek Masonry", "The Apparition" and of course "The Parthenon", all included in his collection *Timoleon* published in 1891.

In "The Apparition" he compares the impact of the Parthenon on the visitor who approaches Athens to the miraculous appearance of the Cross that caused Constantine to become a Christian.

THE APPARITION

(The Parthenon uplifted on
its rock first challenging the view
on the approach to Athens.)

Abrupt the supernatural Cross,
Vivid in startled air,
Smote the Emperor Constantine
And turned his soul's allegiance there.

With other power appealing down,
Trophy of Adam's best!
If cynic minds you scarce concert,
You try them, shake them, or molest.

Diogenes, that honest heart,
Lived ere your date began;
Thee had he seen, he might have swerved
In mood nor barked so much at Man.

Wrongly assuming that Diogenes was not alive when the Parthenon was built, he claims that the Cynic would have had a different view of man had he seen the monument. More importantly, we may want to consider the impact of the temple on the poet himself. The parallel of Constantine and Diogenes is set there to suggest indirectly the extent of Melville's own change of heart at the sight of the Parthenon. Words such as "uplifted" and "challenging" that introduce the poem confirm the suspicion that the poet's experience can be seen in terms of an epiphany too, and that he himself was smitten by the divine apparition of the temple. Only that in the case of Melville the loyalties went the other way

round. As Cohen points out, "Melville's travel journal indicates that he found in Greek architecture sustaining concepts, somewhat offsetting the dearth of such sustenance in what he had seen when he visited the Holy Land."[21]

But if "The Apparition" preserves the idealizing perception of the Parthenon and the idea that when seeing the relics of the past one can become a different person, can be reshaped into a better individual, the originality of "The Parthenon" lies to a great extent first, in the perspective it introduces, that of a learned tourist who has come to visit Greece, and second, in its subtle, almost imperceptible, irony. This is not to say that there were no other learned visitors, but that such visitors did not usually write poetry but travel accounts; and those who write poetry, irrespective of whether they have travelled to Greece or not, follow a different pattern, usually attempting to offer long narratives of the monument's history over the centuries or sad reflections on its fate and fall. Therefore, Melville is the only poet who brings the style of travel literature into a poem. But what exactly does this mean? Let us read the poem first:

THE PARTHENON

I.
Seen aloft from afar.

Estranged in site,
Aerial gleaming, warmly white,
You look a suncloud motionless
In noon of day divine;
Your beauty charmed enhancement takes
In Art's long after-shine.

II.
Nearer viewed.

Like Lais, fairest of her kind,
In subtlety your form's defined –

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[21] *Selected poems of Herman Melville*, ed. Henning Cohen (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press 1964), p. 247.

The cornice curved, each shaft inclined,
While yet, to eyes that do but revel
And take the sweeping view,
Erect this seems, and that a level,
To the line and plummet true.

Spinoza gazes; and in mind
Dreams that one architect designed
Lais – and you!

III.
The Frieze.

What happy musings genial went
With airiest touch the chisel lent
To frisk and curvet light
Of horses gay – their riders grave –
Contrasting so in action brave
With virgins meekly bright,
Clear filing on in even tone
With pitcher each, one after one
Like water-fowl in flight.

IV.
The last Tile.

When the last marble tile was laid
The winds dies down on all the seas;
Hushed were the birds, and swooned the glade;
Ictinus sat; Aspasia said
"Hist! – Art's meridian, Pericles!"

The poem is divided into four sections, which allow different views of the monument. This is a very photographic approach and it has its own long history in travel literature. Indeed, as Yakovaki informs us, from the 17th century onwards an unnoticed and almost unfelt aspect of the early descriptions of Athens is its image through binoculars or *lunettes de longue vue*. Babin, for example, is among the first to use binoculars to observe Athens from a distance. George Wheler (1682), the travel companion of

Jacob Spon, goes as far as writing with sarcasm about those who had ignored Athens and its monuments so far: "Maybe they were looking from the wrong side of the lenses", he says.[22] Overall, the space of the city and its monuments become for the first time, through the use of binoculars and the framing possibilities they offer, objects of European representations, long before the first lithographs.[23]

What Melville's poem also presupposes is a photographic lens, and this was beginning to become popular among foreigners in the 19th century. Indeed, at the time of Melville's visit to the Acropolis, in 1857, the art of photography already had a history of eighteen years, since the first daguerreotypes were taken in 1839 by the Canadian Joly de Lotbinière. More importantly, among the most acclaimed photographers of the Parthenon in the 19th century was William James Stillman, an American whose original views of the monument sealed what is now considered to be the golden age of photography in Greece. His album, *The Acropolis of Athens illustrated picturesquely and architecturally in photography* was published in 1870.[24] Although it post-dates Melville's visit, it comes before the actual publication of his poems on the Parthenon, and it is not impossible that the photographic eye that lies behind "The Parthenon" is inspired by Stillman's work.

The poem incorporates, as mentioned above, a large amount of aesthetic discourse on the Parthenon. Its view from afar (as well as following the traditional trajectory of the foreign visitor) underlines its otherworldly character suggested by words and phrases such as "estranged in site", "aerial gleaming", "suncloud", "motionless", "divine". The monument appears to the view as in an epiphany (cf. "The Apparition"), and line 4, "in noon of day divine", frames the impact of this first impression. The fact that

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[22] Yakovaki, *Ευρώπη*, p. 296.
[23] Yakovaki, *Ευρώπη*, p. 301.
[24] For the importance and originality of Stillman's work, see Andrew Szegedy-Maszak, "'Well-recorded worth': Photographs of the Parthenon", in: Neils (ed.) *The Parthenon from Antiquity to the present*, pp. 331-61.

the Parthenon is "estranged in site" suggests both its unique character that makes it stand out and apart of the actual landscape that surrounds it, but also confirms the fact that, in many instances in travel writing, the monument was indeed seen out of context. Its admiration was related to ancient Greece, and travellers often failed to link it to the contemporary city of Athens that provided its context, preferring to reconstruct the ancient world that gave birth to such a majestic monument. But in Melville's poem, this link with Antiquity is extremely original in its own right.

As we can see in section II, the poet is approaching the monument and, before actually zooming on the frieze, he is close enough to grasp its structure and parts as a whole. And to that whole he attributes the sensual characteristics of a woman. It is worth pondering, then, the reasons that led the poet to make this association and its possible significance. In what ways can a temple and a woman be compared? A common, general feature of poets' perceptions of the Parthenon is a more or less explicit amount of eroticism (compare Choniates's frustrated feelings). Melville's originality lies in the person he chooses to compare the Parthenon with. Lais was famous in antiquity for her exceptional beauty and this could be a first point of convergence. Both become representative of the ideal in their kind. What is more, Melville may well be suggesting that just as Lais is using artificial means to improve her natural beauty, so too the Parthenon depends on optical illusions that enhance its impression on the viewer. In other words, both Lais and the Parthenon show in what ways art can enhance and perfect natural beauty. It is worth commenting, however, on the fact that Lais was not simply a woman of extreme beauty, but also a courtesan. Is this an indication that Melville admired women of this kind for their culture and their education? The fact that the final and ultimate pronouncement on art is made by Aspasia, another courtesan, may confirm this. But Henning Cohen also talks about a possible "deliberately meretricious quality in Lais's beauty appropriate to the poem".[25]

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[25] *Selected poems*, p. 245.

Melville may have in mind here all those travellers or "pilgrims" that paid visits to the monument contributing to its "prostitution", an association that is not altogether out of place.[26] If this is indeed the case, then Melville's poem is unique in introducing this association of tourism and debasement, one that will be vehemently criticized by Calas in his "Acropolis".

* * *

In any case Melville's perception of the Parthenon is that of a learned tourist who can appreciate what he sees and be inspired by it. And he certainly keeps the serene detachment that characterizes all non-Greek poets when facing the famous monument. For the Greeks, on the other hand, the Parthenon revealed a more complex problem. Their poems display quite clearly the struggle to cope with the remains of a glorious past as they try to justify their own artistic essence in relation to it. Despite the rebirth of Athens through neoclassical architecture and planning, archaeological excavations and restorations of monuments, as well as the use of a purist idiom, the *katharevousa*, in the hope of emulating if not resurrecting Ancient Greece, the Greek poets of that period emphasize in a number of poems about ancient monuments their frustration or deception – and the ruin motif is used extensively to suggest the glories of the past and the present miseries of Greece. An important poem by Spyridon Vasileiadis, "Ο Παρθενών" ("The Parthenon"), stages those issues clearly, introducing at the same time the artist's predicament in the face of such a majestic

[26] Melville's address to the tourist in his poem "Attic landscape" supports this reading: "Tourist, spare the avid glance/ That greedy roves the sight to see:/ Little here of 'Old Romance,'/ Or Picturesque of Tivoli." Athens was also accused of being adorned like a courtesan, and twice at least in its history the Parthenon actually became the setting for this kind of activity: during the visit of Demetrius and during the Ottoman period when the Erechtheion became a harem.

monument.[27] I believe that Vasileiadis and 19th-century Greek attitudes in general owe a lot to the tradition of writing about monuments in French literature – and the most characteristic example here would be Du Bellay's *Antiquités de Rome* (1553-7). This collection, the only one as far as I know to concentrate solely on ancient monuments, introduces a large corpus of vocabulary and imagery which is found in so many Greek poems of the 19th century – particularly the concern about whether the work of a poet can restore in writing what time has destroyed.

"Ο Παρθενών" is a long narrative of four sections in which the poet tells the story of the Parthenon throughout the centuries. The contrast between antiquity and Vasileiadis's own time is made clear from the very beginning and is kept throughout the poem as Vasileiadis emphasizes how the ancient glories are lost, leaving Greece in its present state of ruin and desolation with artists that cannot be compared in any way to their ancestors. What I want to highlight here, however, is an interesting paradox that makes itself felt as we read this poem: on the one hand Vasileiadis only sees in the Parthenon dead marbles that can no longer be bought back to life, but on the other hand, it is writing *about* the Parthenon or even *on* the Parthenon that gives the troubled poet hopes of immortality.

> Το όνομά του καθώς χαράσσει
> εις τας πλευράς σου ξένος θνητός
> κ'εκεί ο χρόνος το προφυλάσσει
> κ'επιτυγχάνει ούτω ν'αρπάσση
> αθανασίαν σεμνήν αυτός,
> ούτως επάνω ωραίου φύλλου
> γράφων την τύχην σου την πικράν
> ως εις το στήθος λευκού σπονδύλου
> ζωήν να ζήσω είθε μακράν. (I, stanza 7)

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[27] For a detailed discussion see Liana Giannakopoulou, "Perceptions of the Parthenon in Modern Greek poetry", *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 20 (2002) 244-6.

As when a mortal stranger
engraves his name on your flanks,
and there, protected by time,
he achieves to grasp a modest immortality,
thus, if I write your bitter
fate on a fair page,
as if on the breast of a white drum,
may I live long.

Writing about the Parthenon, even a ruined Parthenon, is equivalent to engraving one's name on a marble column's drum, an act supposed to give immortality to the author. Byron is the famous example here, for he indeed carved his name on the temple of Poseidon at Sounion. "Like fragment hunting," Andrew Szegedy-Maszak reports, "graffiti writing was a frequent pastime of the foreign visitor." And many philhellenes, especially those who fought inside the Acropolis during the Greek War of Independence, carved their names for posterity on the columns of the Parthenon. One of Stillman's photographs actually focuses on these names. But for Stillman, just as for Vasileiadis, such an act of petty vandalism (as it would have been perceived by us today) is transformed. The Parthenon, Stillman suggests, "is not defaced but enlivened, perhaps even ennobled, by the signatures of men who came from abroad to help the Greeks regain their freedom."[28] And the association of Byron with the Greeks' struggle for freedom certainly sanctifies his own act. On the other hand, the idea of transcendence associated with the act of writing on stone has not passed unnoticed. At least two poems can be read as responses to this idea expressed here by Vasileiadis. Kleanthis Papazoglous, in a poem explicitly devoted to Vasileiadis, "Ανάμνησις του Παρθενώνος" (1872), expands on that very same idea of writing one's name on the Parthenon:

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[28] Szegedy-Maszak, "'Well-recorded worth': Photographs of the Parthenon", p. 351. As the author points out, "Stillman may have seen in the Philhellenes' resistance to the Ottomans a precursor to his own opposition to the Turks on Crete."

[...]
Μίαν ημέραν – ήμην παιδίον –
Έγραψα μέσω γραφών μυρίων
Το όνομά μου,
Κ' ευθύς ησθάνθην πυράν εντός μου,
Κ' έκτοτ'υπήρξαν ωραίου κόσμου
Οι λογισμοί μου, τα όνειρά μου.
[...]
Θα ίδουν τάχα τα όμματά μου
Εκεί ακόμη το όνομά μου
Κεχαραγμένον;
Αν ούτω, – χαίρε, φιλτάτη Μοίρα!
Το άσμα όπερ θα ψάλλ' η λύρα
Θα ζήση χρόνους ηγαπημένον...

This is associated here with the naiveté and happiness of youth that still sees the ideal in the world – and I suppose that the choice of the Parthenon must be connected to the fact that, in criticism, the monument was perceived to belong in such a world (encompassing youth, naivety, the ideal and the beautiful). The last stanza seems to hint that the preservation of the poet's name on the monument implies poetic achievement and fame. A rather bold satire comes from the Left of the interwar period. Asimakis Panselinos, in his poem "Ακρόπολη", is ruthless in his criticism of such mentalities:

Του απόλυτου του ωραίου είσαι κορόνα,
το μάρμαρό σου είν' άσπιλο σαν κρίνο...
(κάτι αν δεν πω για σένα, ώ Παρθενώνα,
σπουδαίος ποιητής πώς θες να γίνω;)

You are the crown of ideal beauty,
your marble, like a lily, is unblemished...
(if I say nothing about you, o Parthenon,
how can I ever become a great poet?)

* * *

Coming now to Keats's famous sonnet, I choose to present it here because, apart from its obvious relevance, it introduces a totally new aspect in poetry on the Parthenon: the issue of the Elgin Marbles. Only two other poems adopt this point of view, Hardy's "Christmas in the Elgin Room"[29] and Dimoula's "Βρετανικό Μουσείο".[30] In both these poems, though, there is a subtle though explicit allusion to the sculptures' violent uprooting from the Parthenon to Bloomsbury, which leaves out the political dimension of the problem. In Hardy, the most prominent conflict is between Christianity and paganism. Keats's response, on the other hand, is deeply personal, almost existential. It is not Lord Elgin's activities that preoccupy him, but their repercussions.

I mentioned earlier that non-Greek poets have a more relaxed attitude towards the Parthenon, but here is one that doesn't. In a way comparable to Greek poets, Keats is not inspired and elated at the sight of the Marbles, but becomes petrified as if he were looking at the terrible Medusa. Except that, whereas the Greeks were facing a devastated monument *in situ*, Keats observes the fragments that came from that monument in the British Museum, which finally purchased them in 1816, one year before the publication of the sonnet. And if the Greek poets' predicament is related to the burden of the past, Keats's own attitude towards the Marbles must be seen in the light of the cultural/aesthetic debate that went on in England from 1801 to 1816. Scott is right to point out that Keats's predicament is related to cultural imperialism and the discovery and possession of foreign heritage.[31] How can one write about art that has been removed from its original location? How can one understand and appropriate a tradition that is not one's own?

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[29] The poem is reproduced in *Dialogos* 3 (1996) 134-5.

[30] Kiki Dimoula, *Ποιήματα* (Athens: Ikaros 1999), pp. 36-7.

[31] See the detailed and engaging discussion in Grant F. Scott, *The sculpted word. Keats, ekphrasis, and the visual arts* (Hanover: University Press of New England 1994), pp. 45-67. The quoted sources of the following paragraph are taken from Scott's study.

ON SEEING THE ELGIN MARBLES (1817)

My spirit is too weak – mortality
    Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,
    And each imagined pinnacle and steep
Of godlike hardship tells me I must die
Like a sick eagle looking at the sky.
    Yet 'tis a gentle luxury to weep
    That I have not the cloudy winds to keep
Fresh for the opening of the morning's eye.
Such dim-conceived glories of the brain
    Bring round the heart an undescribable feud;
So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,
    That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude
Wasting of old Time, with a billowy main,
    A sun, a shadow of a magnitude.

When the Marbles arrived in England in 1801 they were greeted with indifference and were put in a storeroom. They were first exhibited privately in 1807 and again the reactions of the viewers were not what we would have expected by today's standards. Scott, who has researched extensively in archival and published material of that period reports that Joseph Farington, a painter, recorded in his diary, the reactions of colleagues and friends that went to that exhibition. Some "seemed to be disappointed", he notes; "the whole was a mass of ruins." Sir George Beaumont recommended that "the mutilated fragments brought from Athens by Lord Elgin should be restored as at present they excite rather disgust than pleasure in the minds of people in general, to see parts of limbs, & bodys, stumps of arms, etc.–". Most famously, Byron, in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809) called the Marbles "Phidian freaks,/ Misshappen monuments and maim'd antiques". When the long debate about their artistic value finally ended in 1816, the tide had changed. Although the negative references never disappeared, the dominant aesthetic discourse emphasized their perfection and truth to nature. Important painters and sculptors such as Benjamin West, Thomas Laurence, and John Flaxman agreed that the marbles

were the finest things of their kind ever discovered. Their acceptance marked a new era in British taste. As Haydon, a friend of Keats, said about them: "That combination of nature and idea which I had felt was so much wanting for in high art was here displayed to midday conviction. My heart beat!" Others described them as "matchless works", "exalted in sentiment", "specimens whose peculiar and transcendent quality consists in the total absence of all manner whatsoever", "peerless relics", and hope was expressed that "with a more constant examination of those divine models, a purity of taste and accuracy of judgment grows up in the mind of the student..." This last remark highlights another factor that might be echoed in the poem by Keats. The Marbles were purchased as national treasures in the hope that they would inspire British artists, particularly the young. As the closing statement of the Select Committee put it: "...they will imbibe the genuine spirit of ancient excellence and transfuse it into their own compositions. This and this only, is the true and genuine method of properly studying the Elgin Marbles."

Although the possibility of imbibing the Marbles' spirit is clearly questioned in it, the poem is admirable in becoming the stage on which the conflicting views of the experts and the humble reaction of a young poet meet. The Marbles are not mentioned at all throughout the poem, but we can feel their impact and their symbolic weight without a doubt. The weak spirit of a young artist hopes to be inspired and strengthened but what comes forward instead is an agonizing struggle against death. Keats's selection of vocabulary is not random: phrases like "weighs heavily", "pinnacle and steep", "godlike hardship", "glories of the brain" etc. emphasize the widely accepted grandeur of the sculptures on the one hand and their paralysing effect on the artist on the other. Instead of being uplifted, the poet is compared to a sick eagle for whom the sky is only a distant, unreachable goal. The lightness that major critics saw in the art of the Marbles and their ability to breathe life seem only to impose inertia and death. And the words of admiration often tinted with eroticism that were used to refer to ancient sculpture in general and to the Marbles in

particular become here an indescribable feud in the heart of the artist and "a most dizzy pain" that does not allow for enlightenment and the clarity of mind necessary for the appreciation of such masterpieces.

But if the sonnet asserts the poet's weakness and mortality it also questions that side of criticism that rejects the Marbles' fragmentariness by emphasizing their ideal character and perfection. They are indeed "dim-conceivèd glories of the brain" not only because the artist's imagination can hardly grasp their beauty and magnificence but also because they are the works of a foreign civilization that is lost in time. The marbles are here but come from far away, both chronologically and spatially, and therefore their context is hard to reconstruct: both their original, ancient Greek one, and the contemporary one, since the Marbles, extracted from the temple in which they belong, are exposed now out of context and "outside in", as William St Clair has pointed out.[32] Keats boldly acknowledges here, in spite of the dominant discourse, that Grecian grandeur cannot be disconnected from "the rude wasting of old Time". Those sunny peaks of ancient art are lost, both because of the cloudy setting of Bloomsbury and because they have lost their integrity: they are fallen masterpieces, shadows of what they used to be.

Not that this leaves the poet unaffected. The encounter of the artist with what used to be a work of art of incomparable greatness engenders thoughts about the nature and value of artistic creation. If those wonders, as he calls them, have perished, in spite of the hardness and durability of their material, what is the fate that awaits the young poet whose inspiration and medium seem to be much more perishable? The "undescribable feud" and "most dizzy pain" the poet confesses here are also the result of his realization that, unlike his ancient Greek counterpart, he cannot yet control the reins of his inspiration. The phrase "billowy main" makes this point vividly. Though it brings into the poem the image of a winter seascape with waves that have the power to sweep off

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[32] William St Clair, "Imperial appropriations", p. 82.

whatever is in their way, it also alludes phonetically to the horses depicted on the frieze of the Parthenon. Unlike those riders of the frieze who seemed to be in full control of their steeds, Keats seems unable to hold the reins of his own art. While still acknowledging the splendour of the Marbles, Keats emphasizes their fragmented condition which reflects his own state of mind. The Marbles are neither inspiring nor uplifting. On the contrary, they become the sad relics of a past glory, shattered fragments with which the stumbling poet can identify.

* * *

A long jump will take us now from the 19th to the 20th century, to Calas's 1933 poem "Ακρόπολη". This abrupt transition leaves out the voices of the Demoticists, with Palamas prominent among them.[33] The most important characteristic in their approach to the Parthenon is that they give great emphasis to the symbolic value the monument had acquired in the 19th century, and especially the notion that writing about the Parthenon and using *katharevousa* would restore the tradition the monument came to represent in the newly founded Greek state. The Demoticists link such ideas to their polemical discourse about the Modern Greek language. The Parthenon is associated with *katharevousa* and the dead elements of Greek tradition. That is why they are against the restoration of the Parthenon and their poetry on the Parthenon usually involves the juxtaposition of the ancient ruins with flowers or birds that, on a deeper level, symbolize the Modern Greek language and its power to enliven the relics of the past.

In any case, all the poems on the Parthenon up to this point choose to adopt either the traditional stance of unconditional admiration or a more original approach that usually challenges the idealizing attitudes in the perception of the Parthenon. Calas's poem, on the other hand, is unique in making such a variety of

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[33] For a detailed discussion of Palamas's perception of the Parthenon and the context of Demoticism, see Giannakopoulou, "Perceptions of the Parthenon", pp. 247-53.

perceptions of the Parthenon its own topic, stretching the iconoclastic tradition that – ironically – began with the Palamas, to its limits:

Στο πρώτο πλάνο
ο Παρθενός
ο δηλητηριασμένος με ψυχαρική μελάνη
ο ψεύτικος, ο νεκρός
ο σκοτωμένος με φακό σε πλούσιο χαρτί
από τον Μπουασονά
νεκροθάπτη της Ελλάδας –
για φόντο χέρια σταυρωμένα
μπλεγμένα
σε θέση προσευχής
εντατικής προσευχής
τα χέρια φλύαρα χοντρά
εξόχως χοντρά
στα δάχτυλα για δαχτυλίδια
σύρματα ηλεκτρικά
που τρεμοσβούν τη λέξη
Ρ ε ν ά ν
– ο επίσημος της Ακρόπολης
κανδηλανάφτης –

In the foreground
the Parthenós
polluted by Psycharian ink
fake, dead
killed by a lens on deluxe paper
by Boissonnas
Greece's gravedigger –
in the background folded hands
twisted
into a posture of prayer
hands garrulous fat
extraordinarily fat
for rings on the fingers
electricity cables
vibrant with the word
Renan

– the Acropolis's official
verger – [34]

"Ακρόπολη" presupposes the literary and ideological tradition of Demoticism and the sentimental cries of Renan and it castigates the contribution of photography, tourism and advertising in the transformation of the monument from a work of art into a national memorial. Strong and vivid images, with qualities that bring to mind features of the cinema, expose and debase the Parthenon, attacking face to face what Calas perceives as the very symbol of the bourgeois attitudes. The Parthenon epitomizes the values of the official state, and its acclaimed repose and detachment could be interpreted as an immovable and stagnant frame of mind indifferent to the real problems ravaging society. Nationalism and Greek fascism are not irrelevant either. It is well known that during the Metaxas dictatorship the Parthenon was used to legitimize authority and power in Makronisos, called by the authorities the "new Parthenon".[35] The symbol of democracy had ironically become a tool in the hands of fascism.

But why should professional photography be to blame? The works of the Swiss Fred Boissonnas and Nelly helped to publicise Greece abroad. Such publicity is criticized by Calas, for, as well as perpetuating misconceptions about Greek art and culture, it foreshadows the touristic development of the Parthenon and – according to Calas – its humiliation. The reference to Delilah as a dancer, for example, brings to mind Nelly, who in 1927 and 1929 photographed two dancers (Paiva and Nikolska) naked on the Parthenon "with the female body symmetrically placed against the classical purity of the Acropolis":

πάνου στα μάρμαρα
πόδια, κοιλιά, στήθια, χέρια
μαλλιά ξέπλεκα

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[34] The translation is by David Ricks.

[35] For a detailed discussion, see Yannis Hamilakis, "'The other Parthenon': Antiquity and national memory at Makronisos", *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 20 (2002) 307-38.

της Νταλιλάς
αλλά οι τρίχες κομμένες
είναι χορεύτρα που βαρέθηκε τα παρκέτα
και πηδά
σε παλιά μάρμαρα
προκλητικά
πηδά ανάμεσα σε κολόνες
τοποθετημένες φανταστικά
από ποιητή μεγαλόπνοο πολύ
τον Χερ Καρλ Μπέντεκερ –

on the marbles
feet, belly, breasts, hands
dishevelled hair
of a Delilah
but the locks shorn
she a dancer who has tired of the floor
and leaps
over old marbles
provocatively
leaps among columns
fantastically positioned
by that poet of veritable inspiration
Herr Karl Baedeker –

Such attitudes are interpreted by Calas as yet another step towards the debasement of the ancient temple. The attempt to associate the naked body of the dancer with the aesthetics of the classical nude fails, because they are both torn out of their original (historical) setting and the set of values which supported them. I think that the piling up of the dancer's limbs proves this point. The body has lost the vertical stature of a classical statue and has become a heap of severed members. Such a deconstruction of the ideal is bitterly underlined by the scene of prostitution in the lines quoted below. Calas is here subverting the very name Παρθενών with its connotations of virginity and purity. The erotic element associated with the Parthenon in previous poems is challenged through this imagery and is taken to its extremes, bringing certain ideas of Melville's poem into a modern and very radical context:

ενώ σε νύχτες πανσελήνου
ο φορατζής εισπράττει τα φιλιά
που κρύβει ψεύτικης καρυάτιδας η φούστα
κι αφήνει σ' αυτές
χοντρές κοιλιές
σ' αυτούς σωληνάρια εξακόσια εξ

while on moonlit nights
the tax collector transacts the kisses
hidden under a fake caryatid's skirt
and leaves the women
with fat bellies
and the men with tubes of six-o-six

"Ακρόπολη" is an ecphrastic poem which does not restore the ancient temple, but, following Marinetti's urges, blows apart the icon formed by the bourgeois perceptions linked with it.[36] Ultimately the Parthenon is put by the poet to the service of his own understanding of art: it becomes itself the powder-keg that explodes all the conventional perceptions woven around it. Calas's avant-garde view of art as destroying every link with tradition finds here a successful expression. If Delilah has ironically survived Samson, the poet's art inherits the power of Morosini's cannons which are turned against the inauthentic icon. Even better, his cylindrical pen will act as a new Samson who will demolish the temple together with all those infidels who disgrace it. From that point of view the word ακρόπολες (l. 58) is of some significance. By debasing the word in a demoticist way, the poet, does not only mock the movement, but shows through the use of the plural that the acropolises are just faked icons created by various manipulations, ideological or others.[37]

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[36] For Marinetti, see D. Philippides, "The Parthenon as appreciated by Greek society", in: Tournikiotis (ed.), *The Parthenon and its impact*, p. 285.

[37] For a detailed discussion of the poem, see Giannakopoulou, "Perceptions of the Parthenon", pp. 258-66.

Calas's polemical and deconstructive poem does not, however, mark the end of poetry on the Parthenon. It is true that the number of poems devoted to the Parthenon in Greece since the 1930s is small when compared to the poetic production of the period 1860-1933. In fact, I have found only five: Engonopoulos's "Τραμ και Ακρόπολις" (1938), Angelos Karousos's "Προσευχή στην Ακρόπολη" (1958), Katerina Angelaki-Rooke's "Ακρόπολη-Κεραμεικός" (1963–77), Kiki Dimoula's "Βρετανικό Μουσείο" (1999), and last, but not least, Kostas Montis's aphorisms from *Στιγμές*, published in 1978 but probably written in the 1950s. And with the exception of two, they all keep a low-key, whispering tone that sees the past as an important constituent of the present (Engonopoulos), or contrast its aloofness and acclaimed repose to the internal, usually frustrated, realm of the individual (Angelaki-Rooke), or again, as we have seen in the context of Keats's sonnet, reflect on the fate of the Parthenon Marbles in the British Museum (Dimoula). But only Karousos and Montis bring back Calas's polemical spirit and his daring encounter with the ideological clusters crystallized around the Parthenon. In Karousos's poem the allusion to Renan and his "extempore" prayer is unmistakeable in the title, but the poet provocatively leaves the ancient relics in their "wakeless slumber". His prayer is for the new, modern city that emerges against the old.

ΠΡΟΣΕΥΧΗ ΣΤΗΝ ΑΚΡΟΠΟΛΗ

Ένας ήλιος είχε δύσει –
τα καινούργια ψηλά χτίρια
νέα εφάνταζαν στα βάθη·
οι μεγάλοι θεοί, πεθαμένοι για πάντα,
μαζί με ιστορίες και μύθους,
τον αξύπνητο είχαν πάρει.
Κι' εκεί μόνος, με φαντάσματα,
αφουγκράζοντας κάτι:
Μεγάλοι ναοί δεν υπάρχουνε.
Μια ολόδροση Αθήνα
στην παλιάν είχε φέξει.

Προσευχή με χαμόγελο
στη ζωή, χωρίς λέξη.[38]

PRAYER ON THE ACROPOLIS

A sun had set –
the modern tall buildings
in the background appeared strikingly young;
the great gods, dead forever,
along with stories and myths,
had fallen into a wakeless slumber.
And there, alone, with ghosts,
listening to something:
There are no great temples.
A fresh Athens
had dawned over the old one.
A smiling prayer
to life, without a word.

And Montis takes the ultimate step of rejecting the Acropolis altogether, both as a relic of the past and as an ideological symbol:

Ό,τι και να 'ν' η Ακρόπολη,
να το ξέρει πως στη πλάτη μας ακουμπά.

Μ' όλο το δέοντα σεβασμό
έχουμε σοβαρότερα θέματα απ' την Ακρόπολη.

Λοιπόν, πολύ κάθησε απάνω απ' τα κεφάλια μας η Ακρόπολη!

Αν εξαρτιόταν από εμένα
θ' απαγόρευα, σας λέω, τις ανασκαφές.

Δε μπορείς να γεννιέσαι με την Ακρόπολη απάνω απ' το κεφάλι σου,
δεν μπορείς να 'χεις ισοβίως την Ακρόπολη απάνω απ' το κεφάλι σου.

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[38] In *Νέα Εστία* 64 (1958).

Whatever it is, the Acropolis
ought to know that what it rests on is our backs.

With all due respect
we have more important things to think about than the
Acropolis.

Well then, the Acropolis has been sitting there on our heads
quite long enough!

If it were up to me,
I tell you, I'd ban excavations.

You just can't be born with the Acropolis over your head,
you just can't have the Acropolis over your head for life.

* * *

The English or American poets who write about the Parthenon during or after the Second World War are not altogether dismissive in the way of Montis or Karousos. They, at least, have preserved what has always been characteristic of foreign visitors to Greece: the eyes and attitudes of a tourist. Nevertheless, they are no longer the tourists who cannot see beyond the idealized perceptions of Winckelmann, Murray, Beadecker and other famous travel guides. Although such visitors know the tradition behind the monuments of the Acropolis, they know, in other words, what they are expected to feel when encountering such works of art, the revelation of "beauty" and "grandeur" as expressed in the poems of the 19th and early 20th centuries is no longer automatic and spontaneous. The post war poets who come from England or America (Durrell, John Heath-Stubbs, Josephine Jacobsen) experience a modern, vibrant Athens which is compared and contrasted to the classical city, but the ancient heritage, diluted in "every second-rate 'classical' building – / Church or museum –" and vandalized now, appears almost as an after-thought, or as a sudden revelation or again as a desperate cry, as in "The Parthenon" (1965), by John Heath-Stubbs:

[...]
A dash in a reckless and exorbitant taxi
Will get you there; then climb
Above the esurient, lively, and stuffy city
Feet slipping on loose stones.

Suddenly it stands there; like a familiar quotation
From dusty oleographs, the model
Of every second-rate "classical" building –
Church or museum –
[...]
Long since; the centaurs and heroes
Shanghaied to Bloomsbury.
It seems very small:
And she has departed.

So that's all. There is nothing to do
But stand and gape like any other
Romantic tourist; and then go.

But turn your back, and stumble
Down the steep track – then suddenly
The mathematical candour,
Neither over- nor under-statement,

Owl-clawed, hooks to the heart.

Furthermore, poems such as Durrell's "Acropolis" (1966) and Josephine Jacobsen's "An absence of slaves" (1965-70) are daring in alluding in a rather bold and provocative manner to the political situation in Greece in the late 1960s. In the case of Durrell's poem, for example, although the colonels' dictatorship is still a year away, the mention of the "socratic prison" in line 3, the bleak atmosphere of the cemetery (line 7) and the word "carnage" in line 17 put the glorious and radiant monuments of antiquity into a rather foreboding scenery. The grim association of the Parthenon (a monument to democracy) with totalitarian regimes, already effected in Makronisos, is here clear and unambiguous:

ACROPOLIS

the soft *quem quam* will be Scops the Owl
conjugation of nouns, a line of enquiry,
powdery stubble of the socratic prison
laurels crack like parchments in the wind.
who walks here in the violet dust at night
by the tower of the winds and water-clocks?
tapers smoke upon open coffins
surely the shattered pitchers must one day
revive in the gush of marble breathing up?
call again softly, and again.
the fresh spring empties like a vein
no children spit on their reflected faces
but from the blazing *souk* below the passive smells
bread urine cooking printing-ink
will tell you what the sullen races think
and among the tombs gnawing of mandolines
confounding sleep with carnage where
strangers still arrive like sleepy gods
dismount at nightfall at desolate inns.[39]

Last but not least, Jacobsen's poem is another blow to the tradition of idealism and may also have been written with the Greek Junta in mind. The rejection of the widely accepted idea that the Parthenon was the creation of a democratic society that enjoyed freedom is darkened by her daring reference to slavery in the Cavafian title of her poem and in her reference to the Pyramids. Indeed, since Winckelmann's *History of Ancient Art*, the importance of ancient Greek values such as freedom and democracy was constantly compared and contrasted with Egyptian society, and the art of each country reflected the values of their systems:

[39] In Lawrence Durrell, *Collected poems 1931-1974*, ed. J. A. Brigham (London: Faber 1980), p. 281.

AN ABSENCE OF SLAVES

The Greek guide
said:
"I want you to remember one thing."
With her deep voice and curly
hair
and small shocked shoes, she said,
"This is our pride:

this was free
labor:
free men built this Par-
thenon. Athenians
left fold and press and field
and harbor:
gave no slavery."

The sun broke
on glorious stone, ripped from the dark
quarry; she said: "The city
sent a slave
to each man's yoke,
oil press and furrow,
to free for toil the free Greek:

the free raised these!" she cried
to the blue sky and honey-
veined columns. "This is
no pyramid." And I saw
the loins and wrists
and bones and tendons of those disprized
who in absence reared the great frieze.

What is unique here compared to all the other poems on the Parthenon is the introduction of the voice of the Greek guide. So far, the experience of the Parthenon was personal, individual, only mediated by a travel guide or by the classical knowledge of the visitor. Here, on the other hand, the voice of the guide acts as a mediator between the relics of the past and the tourists – again,

unlike previous poems we probably have a whole group following the Greek guide. On a first level of course this reflects the reality of the times. In the 1960s tourism was certainly an organized business in Greece. But on a deeper level this is not without consequences. Having a Greek promoting the Greek values, especially in the late sixties, becòmes dangerously propagandistic – the guide sounds a bit too eager to convince us about the values of freedom and democracy. Such subtle subversion is not unique, of course. In Durrell's poem, quoted above, the reference to the "soft *quem quam*" and the "conjugation of nouns" makes the experience of the classics a mechanical endeavour subject to teaching and, possibly, to the ideological orientations of the official state. And the appropriation of the ancient heritage for propaganda by the official state and its educational system has already been criticized by Seferis in his poem "The last day", where he introduces a voice speaking in *katharevousa*: "της εν Σαλαμίνι ναυμαχίας", and of course by Ritsos in many of his later poems of the 50s and 60s.[40]

To conclude, the poems devoted to the Parthenon span from the early 19th century to the late 20th century, and the majority were published between 1850 and 1940. Overall, irrespective of whether they were written by Greek or foreign poets, they display similar attitudes towards the monument, attitudes that involve admiration, awe, respect and deep emotional responses of the Renan type. Nevertheless, a small number among them went beyond the tradition of Idealism. Melville used the new art of photography to frame his poem and give us different points of view – physical, but also, much more indirectly, ideological. Keats challenged, in a way that reminds us of Greek poets such as

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[40] For Seferis, see D. N. Maronitis, "Αντιστάσεις και συγκρότηση του ποιητικού λόγου", in *Η ποίηση του Γιώργου Σεφέρη* (Athens: Ermis 1984), pp. 108-29 (p. 124). For Maronitis the use of *katharevousa* reflects "τη ρητορική προσφορά του ανθρώπου στην ιστορία" and is characterized as a "ψευδοηρωική [...] παγίδα [που] χρησιμοποιεί συνήθως αρχαία σύμβολα και σύνεργα ηρωολογίας". For Ritsos, see again Maronitis, "Η τιμή του χρυσού και η τιμή της πέτρας", in *Πίσω μπρος* (Athens: Stigmi 1986), pp. 153-62 and David Ricks, "Ρίτσος-Όμηρος: ένας ποιητικός διάλογος", *Δωδώνη* 22 (1993) 49-65.

Vasileiadis, the burden of a foreign tradition that is experienced out of its local/geographical and historical contexts. The demoticist reaction to the ideological exploitation of the Parthenon was taken to its extremes in the poem of Nicolas Calas, who, in the manner of Marinetti, proposes the complete destruction of the Parthenon and all the ideological clusters attached to it for the sake of a new poetry. Finally, the poets that come after the Second World War all find a more or less direct way to continue the deconstructive tradition of Calas. Whether we have the sharp and unambiguous rejections of Karousos and Montis, or the more subtle but strongly undermining reactions of Durrell and Jacobsen, the modern poets cannot fail to see how an ancient monument that has been in the process of being restored and purified for the last one hundred and eighty years, keeps collapsing under the ideological and historical circumstances that frame it.