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The Parthenon in Poetry

Hellenic Centre, 5 June 2014

The Parthenon (1891)

Herman Melville

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 –
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 died down on all the seas;
 Hushed were the birds, and
swooned the glade;
 Ictinus sat; Aspasia said
'Hist! – Art's meridian, Pericles!'

Acropolis (1933)

Nicolaos Calas

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 –
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 –
and all of this
is boxed sadistically
into our ears
by the floodlight of some exhibition in the
Zappeion
advertising a certain French establishment
that reprobate is determined
to tune in with the moon
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

nothing but cylinders to be seen round
here
straight fallen columns
of marble or others
of roll-film, Agfa, Kodak
of coins – change
from negotiated dollars and sterling
cylindrical too these very words
fall juicily
words inspired
by the horror we feel
at Morosini's cannon-fire –
the cannons too cylindrical
each day razing the acropolises
restored by others in their negatives
the Kodaks' clicks cry out
words recited
to the rhythm of an Adler machine
by Madame Actress
she prostitutes our ears
with a weak larynx
sewer of her soul
spending itself at last
to applause
– black foam of a Venetian sea

(tr. D. Ricks)

An Absence of Slaves (1965-70)

Josephine Jacobsen

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.