

The Bliss of Life

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I

Rome (when you do not know it) has a stifling, saddening effect upon you during the first few days: through the inanimate and dismal museum feeling which it exhales, through the multiplicity of its pasts, . . . through the unspeakable over-estimation of all these defaced and dilapidated things . . . which are yet fundamentally no more than fortuitous remains of another time and a life that is not ours and should not be ours.

Finally . . . you find your bearings again . . . and you reflect: no there is not more beauty here than elsewhere, and all these objects . . . continuously admired for generations . . . signify nothing, are nothing and have no heart and no worth;—but there is much beauty here, because there is much beauty everywhere.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

On a brilliant January day I stood with a friend leaning on a railing overlooking the ocean at the Getty Villa in Malibu. Above us vines draped over the retaining walls on the hillside; behind us iris and rosemary hedges outlined the courtyards. It was an ordinary Wednesday in winter. Ordinary California, I thought, having just left winter on the tarmac 3,000 miles to the east. The air smelled of the narcissus in bloom beside the long rectangle of the reflecting pool. The hidden sweetness of the air, the careful exactitude of the proportions—it all seemed to offer intimacy with something very special, something lost but almost within reach. *You could think you were in Italy or Greece*, said my friend.

Inside the Villa, wall signs urge visitors to experience an imaginary ancient Rome, but this public re-creation of a vanished private villa is actually California and the ancient world at once. The cultural synthesis seems deeply American. Modern Greeks and Romans can claim relationship with a

brilliant history simply by virtue of their lives in the landscape where it took place, among its ruined monuments and the letters of its alphabet. Americans must travel for connection to that past—in literature, in drama and philosophy, in airplanes and rental cars. Here, however, we inhabit on home ground Herculaneum—lost city of leisure and luxury; here we inherit its paintings and mosaics, its statuary and its gardens, its conviviality and self-assurance. Here the display of Roman pleasures refracts the past to satisfy a modern and democratic desire for that unknown, intact former world. Reserve your ticket, park your car, follow the path, and you are part of it.

“The difference between being a barbarian and a full-fledged member of a cultivated society is in the individual’s attitude toward fine art,” J. Paul Getty announces in his autobiography. “If he or she has a love of art, then he or she is not a barbarian. It’s that simple, in my opinion.” Simply enough, Getty chose to improve the American cultural atmosphere by replicating in this California canyon the elegance of a lost age: a Roman villa modeled on the Villa dei Papiri at ancient Herculaneum, the seaside residence of L. Calpurnius Piso, Julius Caesar’s father-in-law. Two decades after Getty’s death the trustees of the resulting white elephant undertook to transform it into something that does have heart and worth for us. They undertook a renovation intended to account at once for its living perch by the western ocean and its hopeful participation in the long legacy of the vanished past.

Now I was standing with my friend in the outcome of that Escher-like play with loss and rediscovery. Like the image of the two hands drawing each other, past and present seemed to create each other’s outline, allowing a Roman villa on the California coast to make sense. Today the Villa is itself presented as an excavation from the past, with Modernist retaining walls against the canyon sides standing for the lava walls that surround the actual site of the ancient seaside town. I thought the redrawn architectural conversation definitely kept the Villa from being saddening or stifling, inanimate or dismal, in Rilke’s terms. On that January day the historical display of the Villa and its contents, bracketed in time present

by its walls and trees and gardens, seemed to illustrate how many-layered are the world and time. But was that simply my American habit of synthesis: a continuing barbarian struggle to make classical past and modern present mutually contingent?

The Villa's expensive enchantment is an ongoing excavation of a tantalizing past: visitors must find their bearings in a mingling of imperial opportunism and delight, mimicry and authenticity, mortality and imagination. You could think you were in Italy or Greece . . . but you are not. What self-imagination, then, is true among these fortuitous remains? What happiness is mine in them?

J. Paul Getty was of course not the first wealthy American who wished to hitch up with the lost beauty of the past. Long before the Getty Villa's sunlit cheerfulness came sepia images of Pompeii's streets by the vanished light of the nineteenth century, or a party of once intrepid travelers scattered insignificantly beside the Pyramids. Our post-Civil War Gilded Age coincided with both early archaeology and advances in photography; drawn to the scenes of antiquity, long-ago leisured travelers can be seen in salt- or silver-print images that offer their own reckonings with beauty and loss. My forebears finding their bearings.

Or perhaps not: perhaps indeed entangling themselves uneasily with works done in the name of a god, with beauty, barbarism, or loss. In 1870, the American photographer William James Stillman published an album of twenty-five meticulously composed prints showing the Athenian Acropolis. A technical and an artistic achievement then, today it offers additionally the Acropolis in Stillman's own time in Athens.

Greek architecture, said his friend and mentor the great Victorian critic John Ruskin, "rose unerringly bright, clearly defined, and self-contained" from its creators' resolute search for "bright, serene, resistless wisdom" and the desire to do things "ever more rightly and strongly." In Stillman's Acropolis photographs are the ruin and loss of a nineteenth-century present—the ruins of the glorious past in an uncertain present. As the Villa showed me the lost luxury of Roman summertime, Stillman is bringing me into this broken space of wisdom, strength, and desire. He has me looking at the way the sun falls between the columns, lighting the scarred stone and showing the stacked drums of their construction, with bits of open sky through the lintels overhead. His photographed Acropolis emerges from a long history of

artistic contemplation. The images come to me like excavated artifacts, multiply resonant. At once stern and beautiful, they are documents of the historical claims still made on this place, and the conflicting meanings it still may have for those whose short lives touch nevertheless its long significance.

Was this, too, an Escher-like play with past and present? The crumbled glory of Stillman's Parthenon certainly invites me to entangle myself with its beauty. Surely here I am in no danger of falling for unspeakable over-estimation. Stillman's artistic hands, though, include in their drawing of past and present something more than beauty and dilapidation. In a few of his images of this broken space of Periclean power there is another vanished present. One shows a figure, almost unseen in a line of stacked marble, sitting with his head and upper body turned to the distant line of the horizon, the line traced from Hymettus to Lycabettus. Dressed in a white pleated foustanella skirt, the national dress taken up forty years earlier by Greek freedom fighters, this man silently links the ancient past to a still struggling present. Even while the power of his camera is given to the Parthenon's ruined majesty, the claim of the young modern Greek nation on the temple's remains is quietly registered by the philhellenic photographer.

Like those travelers at the Pyramids, the figure has become a transient historical accident. Half hidden in the light on the ruins, it traces a distant battle for liberty. Time has folded the present over the struggling past, indifferent to Stillman or Rilke, to Getty, to Italy or Greece, to me caught now looking for its patterns. Beauty cannot drive out loss, nor disempower sadness. It probably doesn't even rescue us from being barbarians. But it still can help us find our bearings. It can take us far from home. Aliveness to its presence holds transience at bay.

The intricate floor of the circular temple displaying the Lansdowne Herakles at the Getty Villa is composed of twenty-two concentric circles, four thousand triangular pieces of black or yellow marble, with a touch of rosso antico and green porphyry at the center. A marvel of illusionistic paving, it was copied stone by stone from the floor in the belvedere of the original villa, discovered a hundred feet underground in the course of Karl Weber's excavations at Herculaneum in 1750.

Weber's workers were slaves, convicts in chains, according to the *Guide to the Getty Villa*, which adds parenthetically that he'd asked for their chains to be removed so they wouldn't damage the ancient mosaic floors. This

eighteenth-century cruelty allowed the belvedere floor to be lifted out piece by piece and reassembled in the museum at Portici, near Naples; two centuries later, it was recreated piece by piece in Malibu.

Equally ravishing is the renovated Getty Villa's triclinium (which would have been the dining room). Decorated in marbles from Egypt, Tunisia, Sparta, and Turkey, it incorporates design elements from three different villas at Herculaneum. Resting on a bench there I am surrounded by an almost sickening display of gorgeous luxury. It simultaneously evokes the past and denies the actual experience of visiting what's left of that vanished world, with its flaking columns and unlit frescoes. Here in the imagined loveliness of Piso's time, how distant I am from the delicacies Piso served there as the long first-century afternoons drifted into evening: flamingo tongues, ibex, and even field mice (fattened in little cages).

Nowhere here is the uneasy gravity of Stillman's photographs. This past is a foreign country of buried splendor, slave labor, virtuoso architecture, field mouse stew. Into its dark cave shine the headlamps of the present, reassembling my understanding of who I am, drawing me into perplexities about beauty and history, democracy and art.

I'd been thinking that art's true delight is to offer a way of being in the sun-filled now—briefly unannexed to the wealthy, barbaric, or liberty-loving dead, even while reaching across time for Herculaneum, or Rilke's Rome, or Stillman's Acropolis. But the actual Acropolis was still there, right here in my own brand new century! I am neither wealthy nor particularly intrepid, but I thought my American eyes might see something unexpected if I took them to see the bashed up remains of the works done in Athena's name. Perhaps a more shadowed delight. And even if my vision fell short of Stillman's resistless sympathy, the landscape of the past would move me in a different way from the landscaped loveliness at the Getty Villa.

II

Heroic myth separates this world of remote antiquity from that of history, sometimes only as a thin veil, sometimes as a solid dense curtain; from beyond it we may see a faint gleam or hear the clash of arms and the stamping of horses, distant cries and the rhythmic stroke

of oars; the sounds, the gleam of past happenings that can no longer penetrate to us as actual historical facts.

Jacob Burckhardt,
The Greeks and Greek Civilization

Flying east is more disorienting than flying west. The generous dividend of time is raked back, with interest. My days in Athens began slowly, at the National Archaeological Museum. In one gallery I lingered with remains from the east pediment of the Temple of Aesclepius at Epidaurus: the Sack of Troy, body parts floating under the track lighting. A head (possibly King Priam's), a torso, an arm, a bit of a kneeling figure, drapery. A Trojan woman floats like a swimmer above the Achaean she is supposedly clashing with. From behind the curtain comes the clash of arms, but these fragments from the important battle between the Greeks and the warrior women are silent. Who indeed can mend these figures or patch together the tale of how they got there, or make this heritage whole?

In another gallery the head of a youth is almost worn down to the marble, really just a delicate nose and the holes where the ears had been, the triangular shape of the hair not yet gone all the way back to stone. Anonymous portrait by an anonymous creator, it's a vision of the quiet struggle between time and art, which art has not yet lost. Across the room is another young Parian figure, so carefully made: the little fold over the navel, the beautiful butt with its smooth indentations on the side, the little ridges of the rib cage, the strength of the back above the waist. Broken nose, almond eyes, small smiling mouth. Where the object is broken at the chest the glittering white of the original marble contrasts with the reddish-brown patina, the creature coming forward to me from the stone and from the past: defaced, dilapidated, beautiful. Waiting there to be seen, testifying to an ideal possibility, slowly eroding in the dusty afternoon light of the future, the past and its bright, serene, resistless wisdom are hidden in plain sight.

Less quiet proved to be the remains of a temple to Poseidon at Cape Sounion, a day trip out of Athens by land along the coast to the tip of the Attic peninsula. On a crag sixty-five meters above the Aegean, it's the spot from which King Aegeus, mistakenly believing his son Theseus had been killed on Crete by the Minotaur, threw himself into the sea. *Place me on Sunium's marbled steep*, sang Byron, ready to die for the cause of Greek freedom from Ottoman slavery.

Architectural historian Vincent Scully imagines the temple as a double boundary: against the sea and sky, and then against the land. To approach it was to be gradually confronted by a dramatic view just at the moment of arrival, he says, with the land to the east *falling like a petrified wave* someplace beneath—the earth giving a last great thrust there at the edge of the sea. Scully’s responses to the ancient temples are equally dramatic, but I had to say the effects he describes endure.

Poseidon, says Scully, was not only the particular god of sailors and the sea, but also of horsemen and horsemanship. Feared as the embodiment of nature’s violence, he also embodied *the godlike sense of movement and command* felt by horseman and tillerman—the feel of rolling earth and sea, the consent of nature to human command. Poseidon was a god of major challenge to courage, especially the courage to move about the earth. The remains of the architectural monument that honored him make this place more than a site of spectacular natural beauty. Yes, the land itself is a force; but here, as on the Acropolis, was asserted once again human willingness to entangle with anything.

Sitting beside the temple with the October sun hot on my arms and hard on the heavy blocks that formed the lintels above me, I thought the power the gods represent still offers a challenge exhilarating to tangle with. In my attentiveness to this architectural assertion from the past, I was still reaching for the place of that challenge in my own time. I was not thinking of the Getty Villa, though, or Stillman’s mythic particularity. I was thinking of a decommissioned army base in the also hot and dramatic landscape of west Texas. I was thinking of the earth and sky of my vast and varied America, and of the Modernist artist Donald Judd.

Judd’s claims for the art of his time were Periclean; the confined interior spaces of museum galleries, with their regularly shifting displays, he found unworthy of that matchless art. *Somewhere*, he said, *a portion of contemporary art has to exist as an example of what the art and its context were meant to be.* To that end he transformed two former artillery sheds on the old military base: now floor-to-ceiling glass siding opens the space to display a hundred milled aluminum boxes, an intoxicating deployment of geometry, perspective, and the use of desert light. Human skill there too embodies a willingness to entangle oneself with anything, and the consent of nature to human will.

We’re still at it, engaging the hard-wrought facts of nature so as to entangle the present in a myth-infused heroism.

The American structures at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, claim a place on earth for the record of intentions and beliefs in one time. They synthesize nothing. Here, now, they say, time can be held and dismissed; here no less than at Sounion. This fragmented Attic temple by the sea is also an unmovable example of the art of one time.

As the afternoon wore on and the shadows began to lengthen, a busload of French tourists arrived, exclaiming about the site and trying to make sense of the temple. One of them had a guidebook that explained who Poseidon was: *le dieu de la mer*, she read to her companions.

“*Je voulais savoir . . .*” grumbled a big-bellied man in a brand new baseball cap printed with the word GREECE. He’d like to know what he’s doing here in the warm October afternoon beside this pile of broken rock. Democratic barbarism, I thought (not entirely without satisfaction), is not limited to Americans.

The later Greek world of the Hellenistic age, says historian Jacob Burckhardt, lost the great vista of earth and temple, that promise of love between mortals and immortals. In the wake of the Peloponnesian wars came some of the darker aspects of democracy predicted by Plato, including an addiction to chatter and a citizenry living for the desire of the moment. *The democratic state, in its thirst for liberty, wanders into disreputable bars and gets drunk on too much undiluted wine*, as Burckhardt presents Plato’s point.

In a situation like this, the ancient philosopher noted, rulers and parents lose their authority, old men try to make the young laugh, the very animals go about freely, and people become extremely irritable, resentful, disconnected, and all too likely to top their ignorance with ridiculous caps. The god of the sea, *le dieu de la mer*, of storms and wild manes, of triremes and stamping hooves, can hardly be imagined.

Below us on the Sounion headland *la mer* itself stretched green and blue and full of light; a few fallen column drums lay on the beach. When the sun slipped behind the western clouds their rims and edges were suddenly backlit and as the air cooled, a thousand seagulls swept from the undercliff into the sky, wheeling above water, rocks, temple, and tourists. We are here, *Monsieur*, for the ravishing Attic coastline, for its marble memory of the ancient world, this broken temple like a dream half remembered, the distant cries and rhythmic stroke of oars. The connection between myth and history is asserted here by this boundary between sea and sky. We come to be with the uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts that are the

legacy of the past. We come to be with past time in its own place. Here is where we meet antiquity on its own ground, but without the crumbled and commanding beauty of the temple would history even matter? The continuing mythic and polytheistic reality of this past is still asserted by its art.

The colossal statue of a faintly smiling youth found with the temple at Sounion is now at the archeological museum in Athens, a monumental carving, with monumental knees stepping forward into my time now. This kouros once stood facing the great stepped land formations visible from that headland, *like the first man to take a first step toward the sea*, says Scully, *with the sea shapes coiling and dusking in his hair, and the sea sounds reverberating in the chambers of his ears*. The figure's ears in fact are also coiled, almost like a sliced nautilus shell, open and responsive to Poseidon's element. The sign on the wall says he represented eternal beauty, youth; the power, hope, and bliss of life. I spelled out the Greek words: *ti xara tis zois*. The pleasure, the happiness, the bliss of life. To be young in ancient Greece was to be full of physical and moral promise, to have within you the present and the future, to be wealthy in time. As indeed this figure, at least—still with us 2600 years on—seems to be.

This Greek museum is no rich re-imagining of vanished pleasures; its high-ceilinged dilapidation is disappointing. One room offers cases filled with mysterious objects called “frying pan vessels” that nobody has been able to figure out, accompanied by the faint sound of a young guard's personal music system. In belatedness and curiosity is my connection to antiquity, my pleasure in (and my claim to) its diverse beauties. In the café in the museum's forecourt I sipped a hybrid drink called Nescafé frappé and listened to a lively conversation between the waitress and a party of Mexican tourists about the terminology in their respective languages for bathroom fittings. In Athens I longed for Athens.

The Acropolis, then. Like the figures on the Parthenon frieze you can still walk through the space of the Athenian agora up the Panathenaean Way. In the afternoon light the distant temples on the old rock are silhouettes against the sky. When I got there, though, it seemed this too was a museum of the past, fenced and gated and requiring an entrance fee. The gods are not there anymore, nor is Stillman's freedom fighter, nor Stillman himself with his brilliant, brooding camera. And yet . . . and yet the landscape still sweeps from Hymettus to Lycabettus, from the sea to the mountains. From high on the old citadel, modern city

and ageless sky spread out below and above; even threaded through with construction materials, as they are now, the temples invoke heroic memory.

The monuments on the Acropolis have been under painstaking restoration for decades; its landscape is a construction site with cranes and scaffolding folding themselves over and around the pillars of the Parthenon. The modern Greek state with its short history reaches into its idealized distant past for its noblest identity, into the mythical womb of its soil. Long before Greek art and thought made its way to Rome, to London and New York and Malibu, an unerring brilliance flourished just here. When the ancient cedar interior pins that still held the stacked column drums together were removed as part of the current restoration, so as to be replaced by modern titanium ones, they were discovered to be intact. So perfectly measured and fitted had been the drums to each other that the pins were protected from environmental degradation for two and a half millennia. In their dismantlement the gleam of past happenings shoots into the present, a ray from behind the curtain. Yes, just here: *the art and its context*.

A conversation with godlike powers underlies the Parthenon's enduring authority, the balance of darkness and light. It inspires the current reparations in progress on the citadel; it reaches across time zones to the lost pleasures of Herculaneum, the multiplicity of Rome, the marble mosaics of Malibu. It reaches to the west Texas plateau. The built spaces here are full of landscape and movement. Wind and light play across the city below in a visual narrative in which nothing is ever lost precisely because it's always changing, always in transition. In the distance the democratic jumble of the modern city continues to climb the old hills. High on the architrave of the Parthenon's eastern end a few green plants spill over the stone. Surely this is what it means to be wealthy in time: to be entirely about the uncontentious present, about being here now, not about a lost civilization or reconstructed story. *Ti xara tis zois*, the bliss of life.

In a field visible from the east windows of Judd's artillery sheds can be seen what look like the remains of an old construction project. In fact they are great concrete boxes arranged in a series of different configurations. You can walk into their strictly measured enormity—some have one end open, like a cave, others two ends open to frame the landscape. The shifting movement of the sun on their sides can make the heavy blocks appear uncannily light, give

them an impossible transparency; it's a dynamic between eye and mass as lively as the one created by the subtle differences in the dimensions of the Parthenon's components. In a high wind off the surrounding desert, being among them is like being on a ship, the sea sounds reverberating in your ears, wild elements under the command of orderly construction. The command is not that of horseman or tillerman, yet here, too, the conversation between mortality and imagination. Here, now, American self-imagination free in time, reaching to fix its landscapes ever more rightly and strongly, until it too is past.