

## THOUGHTS OF AN ANTIPODEAN IN HELLAS

*To Marion Tapper, en philia*

### Part 1: an embarrassment of riches

Today's weary pilgrim can take shade for as long as s/he wishes on the leafy Stoa of Zeus Eleutherios at the North West corner of the sprawling ancient Agora (market place) at Athens. Its long-fallen columns were erected by the Athenians to celebrate the Greeks' unlikely victory over the Persian Empire in 480 BCE. Soon afterwards, they echoed with the talk of the philosopher Socrates and his students. Socrates is known to have frequented this place. It was at this very spot that the world's first free inquiry into the rational bases of moral and political life took place.

Today, in midsummer, all you will hear is the noise of the cicadas, thick as syrup, and the gentle rustling of the wind through the trees. At 7.45 in the evening, it is true, the sworn guardian will appear, whistle in hand, to move you gruffly on your way (most transactions in today's Greece are gruff — it is part of its charm).

But when this happens, you need only pass through the North gate of the agora. Then turn left and walk down the paved, café-lined street which runs parallel the agora's North side. About one hundred metres down the way, take a seat to your left, looking towards the Acropolis. For you will then be sitting (*je confess*) overlooking the foundations of the ancient Royal Stoa (Stoa Basileos) which once stood there. And although you wouldn't know it, it was on this very spot in 399 BCE that the same Socrates was brought to trial and condemned to death by the Athenians for pursuing his free inquiry into the bases of their ways of life.

You can take your time (and your dinner) as you take all this in, if you can. For this secular Golgotha is wholly free of pilgrims. The floods of tourists which daily choke the gates of the Acropolis will file past in dribs and drabs. But they will not stop. No one seems to know the place is here, or its significance — 'sit here, it's nice', I just heard an Australian voice say. The modern Athenians, having run an electronic train line over the Royal Stoa's Southern foundations in 1891, today do not even mark the site with a legible sign.

Today's Greece, you will see, is as full of wonders and surprises as its ancient forebear. If you had set out from the same Stoa of Zeus Eleutherios the other way (South), for instance, you pass first the remains of the Assembly (Bouleterion) where the Laws founding the world's first democracy were passed in 508 BCE. But you should not get too misty-eyed. For just next door, barely twenty strides closer to the hulking shadow of the Acropolis, the 'State Prison' or Demestherion of the fifth century BCE stands. In this building, little more than a hundred years after the Kleisthenic reforms of 508 BCE, the restored democracy asked its patron philosopher to kindly take the hemlock, and his free inquiries to Hades.

‘Eleutherios’ in ‘Zeus Eleutherios’ means ‘freedom’ or ‘liberty,’ as you will discover when you travel to Greece. For the country, still today, is as obsessed with this most enticing, and most contradictory of political words at the heart of our divided Western inheritance.

Every city or town you visit in Hellas will have its ‘Plaka Eleutherios’ (Freedom Place) and its Odos Eletheurios (Freedom Way), together with its ‘Odos Demokratia’. It goes without saying that the name of the national airport (Eleutherios Vassilidis) includes the word. Even the beautiful Orthodox Chapel you stumble upon when you inevitably get lost in the heart of Athens’ modern agoras North of Syntagma Square is called the ‘Agia Eleutherios’ — although what its theology could be I am not qualified to say.

So what is it, then, that the traveller can learn today from this land of self-proclaiming freedom, ancient and modern, whose classical wonders draw tourists from the four corners of the known world, now as in the days of the Caesars? And if what the old saw says is true — that the real benefit of travel is to return with fresh eyes home — what light can a time in Greece cast upon our own society ‘down under’, which likewise prides itself on its love of all things ‘free’?

Of course, each must speak for themselves, and from their own experiences. Everyone has their own reason to travel, even if it is only to say, as I heard an American tourist say after he had his snap taken at the top of Lykabetos hill: ‘now I can prove I was here.’ In his defence, Hadrian’s, Alexander’s and all the others’ monuments say little more than the same.

In a way, as Antipodeans, we are perfectly placed to appreciate what the two Greeces, ancient and modern, have to offer. From a place, as we are, nearly free of European history, we have an innocence about these things which the locals find difficult to understand.

‘You like Athens?’, our tourist guide queried us, amazed: ‘... really?’ Then, when there was a delay with a booking, thinking on her feet: ‘have you visited the Akropolis?’ (the thought had not crossed our minds!) ‘What should I do with my last day in Athens?’, I asked a Greek colleague more recently, as my stay drew towards its close. ‘Leave Athens’, was his wry response, and we both laughed.

The modern Greeks, if truth be told, seem somewhat at a loss concerning the truly incredible cultural heritage that has been bequeathed them. These ancient ruins dot their modern metropolises and countryside as incongruously as some proverbial neurotic’s symptoms, and — were it not for the tourist’s dollar — they would have as little to do with the life of the modern nation.

It is not that today’s Greeks, or their government, are exactly embarrassed about their extraordinary cultural inheritance. Far from it. The opening of the New Akropolis museum received a national telecast. This was then followed by a telecast of how other countries around the world had covered the event (one reminder of home).

Nor are the modern Greeks at an economic loss about their cultural riches. If they can’t always savour its cultural or aesthetic values, that is, they are acutely aware of the monetary price it fetches on the global tourism market. Nearly every street corner shop in Athens sells miniature busts of ancient greats at bargain prices (all made in Greece, note: it is the other guy who cheats), together with postcards and posters of the classical wonders. The traveller today can still meet all manner of Aristophanic scoundrels waiting to generously fleece them below the slopes of the Acropolis. Their friendship is as affecting and unconditional as

in Aristophanes' comic buffoons — just don't say, whatever you do: 'signomi, keimenon blepo — sorry, I'm only looking'. Strepsiades and Peithestratos just today speak fluent English and trade in busts, bookmarks, and painted pottery of Aristophanes, his contemporaries, and the Olympian pantheon.

Once you leave the flea markets and the Plaka, though, you can be surprised at how indifferent today's Greeks seem to the ancient wonders that gird their streets. And how, after all, could they not be? They commute, work, eat, drink, fight and love in their shadows every day, as non-plussed as the Sydney-sider about their Harbor Bridge or Opera House. Such things are to be seen, navigated, and not wondered at.

In Athens, you can park your car at the front of the Roman Agora any day of the week, astride the remains of the Emperor Hadrian's Library, or in the shadow of the Imperial Tower of the Winds. In the basking summer heat, the attendants of these and other sites sit down to their vigil with all the enthusiasm most Australians sit down to dinner with their extended families.

Many sites, like that of Socrates' failed defence the Stoa Basileos, are left to stand nearly as they will, unmarked.

Take, for instance, the site of the ancient Assembly on the Pnyx hill overlooking the Acropolis, scarcely five hundred strides away. This remarkable natural platform, due West of the Parthenon, played host to some of the most renowned figures in Western political history — Themistokles, Kimon, Perikles, Alkibiades, Kleon, Demosthenes. Today, it is frequented by Athenians taking their evening constitutionals, walking their dogs or jogging, and young couples quietly canoodling on the marble remains.

Just outside the city of Argos, which boasts that it is 'the oldest city in Greece', if you climb the hill towards the Frankish Fort there, you can stumble upon the remains of a Roman Sanctuary spanning several hundred metres of the slopes. Amidst the overgrown dry grass, you can trace out the seats and stage of a magnificent theatre looking down over the valley to the sea, a Temple and Stoa, a large (now-graffiti-covered) stair, and the bathhouse where Marc Antony bathed, still strewn with the decorative sea shells brought there by Romans two thousand years ago.

Or again, in Gortyn in Crete — if you persist despite the magnificently negligent sign-posting — you can find an even larger Roman complex, completely unattended. Gortyn was once one of the largest Roman centres in Greece. To this day, it houses the Gortyn Law code etched in stone, the oldest remaining in the Hellenic world. Today however, its magnificent Temple of Apollo, Praetorium, and Fountain complex presides in silent majesty over a captive audience of olive trees, amidst acres of red soil, strewn with broken stones. As you piece your way back towards modern civilization along the dirt path on the North side (the Aquaduct is your best guide), the only noises you will hear are the heavy bells of the local goat herds, and the whistles of their keepers. And you needn't worry if you tire — for it is best to see all this at dusk. Just sit astride one of the Roman columns (some fluted) or bases that litter the area, lying where they have fallen who knows how long ago.

If the modern Greeks savour their 'eleutherios', that is, the freedom they mean seems to have something to do with this magnificent complacency at the overabundant beauties of their country, cultural and natural. Freedom, some of our conservatives will counsel us, just means having no place else to go. 'Where

else would you want to go?', it is easy to imagine a Greek responding, with a patented shrug (see below): 'have you seen this place?'

It is certainly very easy for the Anglo-saxon traveller to feel their Protestant heritage in Greece, as you fumble around with your maps, Euros, guidebooks, and rationally pre-planned schedules<sup>1</sup>.

To put it mildly, modern Greece is a strikingly less regulated, less harried and less hurried society than our own (except when you get behind the wheel, on which more momentarily). Oddly, it almost seems a younger culture than ours today in very many ways.

It is for instance still legal to smoke cigarettes in designated public places in Greece, even in airports. Cigarette advertising also is much more prominent than it has been in Australia for over a decade. The long-forgotten Marlboro Man appears on billboards everywhere — from the prairies of middle America to the hearts and lungs of the modern Greeks, as you might say. You can buy cans of beer at any street side convenience store, and drink them as you walk. The locals' dress also is more casual, and more revealing. Good-hearted hounds luxuriate on the pavements, besides the very multi-lane thoroughfares of Athens. You can bring your best friends to the departure gates inside Eleutherios Airport without anyone blinking an eye.

Then there are the road rules, to turn a phrase. 'If you can drive in Athens, you can drive anywhere,' our agent advised us as we struck out from 'Cosmos', our friendly hire car providers. Suddenly philosophical, he then added: 'it is an experience.'

Part of this experience, we soon discovered, is that you can park pretty much anywhere in Greece, free of charge, including straddling street corners. The city councils have so far not awakened to this potential mine of public coin. If you can't see a place to stop your chariot, don't fret: the trick is to just pop on your hazards and do what you need to. People will beep and swear as they pass you by — you can learn some useful vocabulary. But pass you by they will, if there is even the narrowest of passages to be found. As for modern Greek road signs, three weeks is too little time for anyone to probe such higher mysteries. Be ready to take some false paths and do some hairy U-turns — and again, to learn some useful vocabulary from the passers-by.

As for the speed limit signs, they seem to have been placed at the roadsides by some god with a sense of humour (or perhaps they are another ancient relic?). If the sign says '80', anyway, this seems to mean your platform. You build from there. The rest is art or dare. Rest assured that no matter how fast you do venture, there will always be someone who is wanting to go faster. (Point of advice: just keep out of the left lanes.) Young Greeks can regularly be seen whirring by on motorcycles at 150 km/h or more, in jeans, cotton dresses, without helmets. You don't need to be Socrates to surmise why Greece's annual road toll each year is the highest in the EU.

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<sup>1</sup> —A short extract: an English couple at the Harbor at Chania in Crete, fighting at the next table on a perfect summer's afternoon. It turns out she has been behaving in a way he feels is not 'normal', and he has significant psychological authorities at his fingertips to prove the point. But you have to wonder what could exactly be 'normal', or why it would matter, when you are sitting in perfect sunshine astride a Venetian Harbour and Lighthouse that were a wonder of the Renaissance world, at a place where Nazi remnants supposedly held out until late 1945, so bitter was their hatred for the Cretan rebels. Again, it is very possible to feel very Protestant over here.)

Then there are the subtler differences about modern Greek culture and freedom which will strike you.

In Greece, for instance, everybody shrugs, like so many Al Pacinos, as they respond to you and to their fellows. The gesture is eloquent. It says something like this: 'I sense there might be some demand coming here. But relax, my friend. It is certainly not my concern.'

It is not that today's Greeks aren't as prone to argument as they are reputed to be. Raised voices in public are no problem over here. It is just that, well, if you disagree, what of that? Why take it personally? People move on. Besides, in summer at least, it is hot enough already here. Better not to get hot under the collar.

Doubtless our economists, who are wiser than we are, will say that what I am describing is less freedom, than 'Mediterranean inefficiency'. And there is truth in this. Greece has certainly held out much better than a place like Australia against the neoliberal marketization of nearly everything. In Crete, some of the mountains on the highway to Heraklion have at some recent time passed ownership over from Poseidon or Zeus to a new god, 'Vodafone', whose rites I do not know, but which we can assume come at competitive prices. But this remains an exception. The public landscape in Greece is generally freer from advertising than is ours back home. No ancient sites are yet sponsored by Coco-cola.

Modern Greece's GDP would presumably be higher if siestas weren't a prized national pass-time. Then there is the custom of taking dinner between 10 and midnight. However rational this is in a place as warm as Greece, it also cannot be good for productivity before about 11 o'clock in the mornings — especially when you consider that at 3 pm it is time again for a kip.

Of course, Greece's resistance of the globalising monoculture and economisation of all social life is not simply a matter of an inscrutable taste for freedom from any too pressing legal or economic compulsions. Especially when you leave Athens, you can see that the roots of this refusal lie in foundations set deep in Greece's traditional, communal way of life.

Family and Church remain much more robust here than they are in Australia. On a Wednesday morning, even in a tourist centre like Nafplion in June, you will be awakened by the Church bells at 7 am sharp. Between 7 and 9, if you care for a walk, you will see hosts of locals entering the many Chapels and Churches to pray, crossing themselves as they cross the thresholds to enter.

Sunday remains throughout Greece a Sabbath, another sure hit to Gross Domestic Product and sign of economic irrationality. On the Sabbath, the shopping malls and even the wide ornamental streets in the heart of Athens are nearly deserted.

Of course, the young here (I except the University district in Athens) are as in love with the flood of lower-priced, foreign brands, and glossy images the global market has brought here, as they are anywhere else. But the glamorous display this makes for certainly does not reflect a shaking up of the traditional, patriarchal relations between the sexes. Alongside the flood of Anglophone pop music, Greek radio stations play love ballads whose superb sentimentality bespeaks a culture a long way from the ubiquitous cynicism of the Anglophone culture industry. If the radio stations' airplay is to be believed, indeed, there are very many ardent lovers in Hellas today, who can only find meaning when they find their true loves.

Just being together with your family and friends is much more important in Greece — what philosophers call an ‘end in itself’ — than it is in today’s Australia. Nobody takes their meals, bieras or metrios in any rush over here. This is one way to spot the tourists.

In mid-afternoon, in towns all around the country, you will find pantheons of middle-aged men sitting idly alongside each other at the cafes and service stations on the main drag, enjoying the sun and the light. Often, no one seems to be saying anything much at all. At other times, there is some dispute: raised voices, vigorous shrugs, recriminations and gesticulating hands. When a young woman walks past, however, these aging, surly Zeuses break their vigil and turn poets and suitors. ‘Kala’s and other compliments fill the air, together with the most chivalrous invitations.

This much then on modern Greece as you will find it when you go there. But of course, it is not to see modern Greece or the Greeks that most travellers make their journeys. So, having fought our way free from the markets and bought our fill of trinkets, it is time to turn to the ancient things that make this country so unique.

## Part 2: of Freedoms, Ancient and Modern

I had not heard good things about Athens before going there. Athens was a big, dusty, crowded, modern city. This I had been told even by a lover of all things Greek and ancient. Having fairly recently travelled to Calcutta, I was ready for pretty much anything. But Athens is no Calcutta. In terms of pace, crowding, cleanliness, and surrounding natural beauty, Sydney is the closer parallel.

Perhaps my pleasant surprise at this is part of the reason why I so instantly fell in love with the city, and would recommend to anyone that they go there. But it is not the primary reason. It was the ancient Athens I had come across the seas to see.

And whatever the complacency of today's Greeks to their antiquities, the Athenians at least have done a generally terrific job of preserving the places where you will be interested in going — the agora, the acropolis, areopagus, keramaikos (ancient cemetery), Theatre of Dionysus, Pnyx hill (the ancient assembly) and the Sanctuary of Zeus of Olympus to the Acropolis' South. Nearly the entire area of the ancient walled city surrounding the Acropolis is cordoned off from any through-traffic. The Plaka and Monasteriki, the two suburbs at the Acropolis' North side, have kept their shuttered houses and paved medieval streets, not made with a view to the modern automobile. Then there is the fact that the Agora and Areopagus, the Keramaikos and Pnyx, together with the entire area surrounding the great Roman Temple of Zeus are all parklands, with ample trees and shade where you can take your relief from the pressing sun. Even if these were not sites of such historical interest, you could easily spend days wandering around here, without having to negotiate the busy modern roads and the Greek drivers. But for the distant sound of the traffic (at dusk on the Pnyx the chorus of horns below sounds like a herd of Neanderthal beasts), you can even forget as you idle around and wonder that you are in the centre of a major modern metropolis.

Perhaps the first thing which will strike you about the ancient Athens is its size. All of the ancient sites are concentrated, with the Acropolis at their geographical and symbolic heart. The ruins of the ancient walls that are still extant at the Keramaikos, Zeus Olympian, and near the parliament are nowhere much more than a modern kilometre from the Acropolis. Well might Pericles have said that Athens was an education to all Greece. In modern terms, it was not much bigger than one of our 'big 8' Universities. At 30000 male citizens, its population was also scarcely larger. Yet this remarkable place, scarcely more than 5 kilometres square, was by 450 BCE the centre of an international Empire. Furthermore, as we can hope will continue to be taught in schools and academies in future, it was also the birth place and cradle of the theatre, of history, of political democracy, and of philosophy.

Everywhere you go in this small space, if you look up, you will see one thing. The Acropolis and the Parthenon at old Athens' heart preside over the places below like a proverbial crown, or marble conscience. The Acropolis itself is a great thrust of rock, whose prow at either end seems to drive forward into the open spaces below like some noble ocean liner. It is obligatory, even if you have only one day, that you must ascend the steps on the West side to the Propylae,

the great gates of the complex, and pass through with your twelve Euros to see it all up close. On a midsummer's day, the heat and light on that platform of living marble are almost overwhelming. From the Acropolis' top, you can see perhaps 60 kilometres in all directions, save those wherein Attica's framing mountains block the view. Out past the port of the Pireaus, down the Saronic gulf, you can see the straits of Salamis sheathed in white haze, where the Attic fleet faced down and defeated the invading Persians in 480. The city below glows and reflects in white; the Attic countryside around it is a sea of dull ochre and dry red soil.

The Acropolis itself is largely today a work site, now as in the 440s when the Parthenon and smaller Erechthion on the North side were built, after the older Temples were raised by the Persians in 480 BCE. A worker there asked how old we were, and when we answered we were in our early thirties, he told us that, when we died, there would still be cranes here. The truth is, he explained, that the mathematics of the Parthenon in particular are so precise that to rebuild it even to the limited extent the Greek government hopes is even today no easy thing. Remarkably, there are no exact straight lines on the Parthenon. To beguile the viewer's eye, the 8 by 17 Doric columns each taper slightly, to a maximum girth at exactly 2.5<sup>ths</sup> of their height (a visual ruse called *entasis*). The lengths of metopes, triptychs, and steles above the columns also curve minutely, to take into account the angles below from which the Temple will be seen. There are certain angles upon the longer Western and Eastern sides where the lines of seventeen columns seem to merge dizzily into each other, creating that uncanny effect which modern philosophers call the mathematical sublime. This is worth seeing, against the background of the glittering white city, the olive Attic hills, and the blue of the sea.

But the aesthetic wonder of the Parthenon is only part of the story. This superb edifice remains today an immense embodiment in marble of classical Athens' civic pride and "confidence in freedom", despite the ravages of the centuries, the Christians, the British, and the Turks. On the pediments and in the metopes today, the odd piece of sculpture (here a rearing horse, there a processional figure) still peaks out, a reminder of the building's original devotional calling. Before it became a tourist trap, it is well to remember that the Parthenon was a grand Temple to the city's patron virgin goddess (this is what the name means). The democratic general Pericles had the Parthenon erected from the spoils of Athens' naval empire in the 440s BCE, in the interregnum before the Peloponnesian war, the plague, and her long defeat.

Even now, as the object of a million tourists' idle stares, Iktanos' masterpiece still speaks eloquently to the magnificent vision Thucydides records in Pericles' famous funeral speech in 430 BCE, to honour Athens' first dead in the war with Sparta:

"Our form of government ... does not copy our neighbours', but is an example to them. It is true that we are called a democracy, for the administration is in the hands of the many and not of the few. But while there exists equal justice to all and alike in their private disputes, the claim of excellence is also recognized; and when a citizen is in any way distinguished, he is preferred to the public service, not as a matter of privilege, but as the reward of merit ... There is no exclusiveness in our public life, and in our private business we are not suspicious of one another, nor angry with our neighbour if he does what he likes ... While we are thus unconstrained in our private business, a spirit of reverence pervades our

public acts; we are prevented from doing wrong by respect for the authorities and for the laws, having a particular regard to those laws which are ordained for the protection of the injured as well as those unwritten laws which bring upon the transgressor of them the reprobation of the general sentiment .../ To sum up: I say that Athens is the school of Hellas ... This is no passing and idle word, but truth and fact ... For we shall assuredly not be without witnesses; there are mighty monuments of our power which will make us the wonder of this and of succeeding ages; we shall not need the praises of Homer or of any other panegyrist whose poetry may please for the moment ... For we have compelled every land and every sea to open a path for our valour, and have everywhere planted eternal memorials of our friendship and of our enmity. Such is the city for whose sake these men nobly fought and died; they could not bear the thought that she might be taken from them; and every one of us who survive should gladly toil on her behalf.”

It is little wonder that such magnificent words and works, backed as they are by a concentrated century of cultural achievement probably unmatched in history since, have meant that the legacy of Athens — or even of ‘the Greeks’ — has remained a political prize many have wanted to claim ownership of.

In our own time, for instance, the father of the New Right, Friedrich von Hayek, has claimed to see in Athens’ ‘liberty’ and her rebellion against the tyrants of the sixth century BCE the forefathers of economic liberals’ vocal rebellion against the ‘big State’. Athens, a port city, was also a centre of trade, whose cultural dynamism was a sure reflection of its peoples’ wily economic enterprise. Public bureaucracy was after all considered in this first ‘market society’ beneath the dignity of free men, unlike in the age of our nanny state. The many public duties we regulate from Canberra where regulated in classical Athens by slaves.

But there is surely something silly in trying to espy in the ancient world an exact prescriptive model or apology for our liberal democracy today, or any other system of government. For one thing, for every virtue we should want to celebrate in Athens’ culture there are as many features of her life which we would hesitate about: the fact that to be a citizen you needed to be able to own and bear arms; the fact that the leisure for public participation of the citizens was based in the slavery of many others, and the indispensable economic role of migrants without access to the franchise; the complete political and cultural marginalisation of women, whose glory lay in their silence, as Pericles agreed with Homer, and Aristotle a century later.

Those who, with an eye to today’s debates, would see in Athens a vindication of their own one-dimensional vision that political autonomy is (grounded in) the economic liberty to buy and produce goods, though, need particularly beware. The great liberal thinkers whose ideas founded our modern market societies were more historically aware, and so more careful. Like the New Right today in action, they saw and feared in direct democracy a recipe for economic inefficiencies and the sure-fire recipe for the mob to trample upon the hard-won private liberty of the prosperous to peaceably enjoy the fruits of their economic gains and transactions. How indeed could we maximise our national wealth and economic freedom when the heads of each household were expected to spend nearly half of the day at the public assembly, with an eye to the ‘public good’ (a near oxymoron for the New Right today)? And how could we concentrate on private business and maximising returns when, on a rotating basis, each of us must spend a month as

the modern equivalent of a Senator, and one day as the ancient equivalent of the Prime Minister or Speaker of the House?

In the light of these demands, most of us would be more like the characters in Aristophanes who take every chance they get to complain about their public duties, and long for the good life in the good old days, when they didn't always have to go to the assemblies. In truth, and for what it is worth, we are much closer today to the Athens of the fourth century, a prosperous city of specialisation and declining public spirit, whose stages had been emptied of tragedies, and whose 'new comedies' are even the distant predecessors of today's 'romcoms'. The dour demagogue Demosthenes might even be the ancient John Howard, just with a real national enemy (Philip, then Alexander) to rouse his fellows against.

Of course, the greatness of fifth century Athens reflects the way ancient Greek culture was obsessed with competition, as our modern defenders of 'freedom' again rejoin. The great stadiums at Olympia and Delphi held around 30000 spectators. The Greeks competed in almost anything, from Homeric times to the days of Pericles: naked wrestling and chariotting, drinking bouts, or the composition and production of tragedies, comedies, and satyr plays. But it is the height of philistinism to say that this patented agonism was primarily rooted in free trade — every bit as ridiculous as to say that a people who would adjudge all things in terms of exchange value would ever produce buildings as beautiful as the Parthenon, the Erechthion, or the contemporary Temple to Poseidon over the waters of Cape Sounion.

To measure our distance from this place, and its sense of *eleutherios*, it is enough to compare Pericles' words concerning political freedom with the extraordinary poverty of the words of the recent leader of the free world, who when asked to define the freedom he sought to export militarily around the globe answered like a bashful schoolboy, reciting lines learnt by rote: 'if I have something to sell and you also have something, no one else should be allowed to interfere in our trading,' or words to that effect. But to cite the funeral oration again: 'we do not say that someone who keeps to himself minds his own business here. We say that he has no business here'.

So, despite the ideologues, it is not any political lesson that we can learn today from a visit to the homeland of political democracy, as we are drawn to "fix our eyes upon the greatness of Athens, until we become filled with the love of her and ... the spectacle of her glory." If anything, this place speaks against the hubris of our attempting any such thing. One day spent looking at the stately ruins of this place, and the extraordinary beauty of their surrounds, is enough to intimate powerfully to you the truth of what Albert Camus once said: that if modern anglo-European culture is the son of Greece, we are a renegade child.

But what do I mean? I will try to speak as clearly as I can.

The philosophies that today overwhelmingly govern our public life, despite the temporary rock of financial recession, are philosophies of limitlessness. The philosophy of free trade was conceived in the world of the seventeenth century, at the very time that Europe's discoveries in the new world opened up seemingly boundless fields for her expansion and exploitation. The possibility that is now emerging, that the limitless economic growth that has resulted is undermining the natural preconditions of our collective lives was then scarcely imaginable. Yet, whether it climate change, rising sea levels, peak oil or peak water — and

whether or not we like it — it is these unprecedented challenges that will surely define the next era of our collective history.

By contrast with these ideas, Greek thought from the start took its stand upon the notion of limit. In the pre-Socratic philosophers like Anaximander or Heraclitus, justice (*dikaisyne*) is for instance held to set her bounds on the natural world itself. Socrates, when asked to defend his life, would similarly only identify his highest wisdom with a proud acknowledgement of ignorance: not claiming to know what he did not or could not.

The idea then of tethering our cultures' ships to the idea of economies (and hence societies and populations) that would grow indefinitely, without any external limit in nature, would have been madness to the Greeks. They would have identified it in truth as a barbarian notion, akin most in their experience to the expansionary intentions of the Persians who they fought to the death at Thermopylae, Marathon, Salamis, and Plateia — and who incidentally bought the allegiance of many Greek cities with the promise of gold and unmatched economic plenty. Nothing in the *kosmos* can grow infinitely, they would have warned us. Their great tragedies are after all so many warnings against human beings abrogating to themselves the prerogatives of the gods.

Our Western culture is of course today not unaware of the transitional point that we are collectively approaching. We live in a period of widespread scepticism, and the absence of any wider, positive vision — some, more dramatic than this author, call this nihilism. This in any case is why we are presently so totally delivered over to philosophies which can conceive of no higher goals than “efficiency” or “growth” to orient our public life — in truth, the most callow and aimless of gods yet invented by human beings. ‘Efficiency for what?’, a classical Greek would ask us: ‘growth towards what?’

Even the postmodern relativism so lamented today by the political Right can only be understood as a shocked response to the excesses of a modern world, and the wider sense that the West has lost its direction. Yet postmodernism misdiagnoses the problem. It is not ‘Western rationality’ or ‘Western civilisation’ — very many-faceted things! — that are holus bolus to blame for the horrors of the world wars, the gulags, the camps, and now the increasing exhaustion of the earth. Nor will we find our salvation in the vaguaries of ‘difference’, ‘becoming’, ‘the Other’, ‘the infinite’, and so on held up by the postmodern prophets — all so many names for further freedom from all rational constraints, when what is needed is a new basis for these constraints.

But all this sounds terribly like edification. And edification is a million miles away from the dusty remains of the ancient Attic Agora, or the splendour of Sounion in the fierce sunlight of a mid-summer afternoon. My point is only that — you will see it when you go — all the mathematical perfection and technological virtuosity of the old Greeks' temples (and most of the great buildings on the tourist trail today are temples) are not there to set these edifices apart from or above the natural world. The Greeks' myths populated this world's mountains and groves with gods and daemons, and it is to honour these that their temples were first erected. It was the Christian world which first turned its back on this world. And the modern ambition to master and subdue nature — turning it into so many natural resources, which we are now exhausting — is much more Christian than it is classical, however proudly ‘secular’ we take our culture to be. The

culture that produced the sanctuaries at Delphi or Olympia knew nothing of any such need.

If there is indeed a fault with the Parthenon, it is that its very size bespeaks a sense of grandiosity which borders on becoming deeply un-Greek. Pericles' political opponents called him 'Olympian', and it was not a term of love. The nigh-Egyptian proportions of this monument scoffs at the Delphic wisdom of 'nothing too much,' every bit as much as Pericles' proud boasts that no poet could ever sing Athens' praises, so surpassing was her greatness.

And lest we forget, little more than a decade after the Funeral Oration, Pericles' own adoptive son Alkibiades was to lead the city on a pointless exercise in Imperialist excess: the Sicilian expedition. Her inevitable failure in Italy would ensure Athens' defeat by the Spartans, and in this way, that the city's so-celebrated golden age lasted little more than one hundred years. A century more, and the entire Greek peninsula has lost her autonomy under the heels of Philip and Alexander of Macedon, and Greek culture begun into its Hellenistic decline.

Perhaps in this story of overweening hybris, then, we can take something like a lesson today, if lesson is desired or needed. The Greeks never denied that mortals could, and would, press against and violate the limits of their condition, fondly imagining that their god-like powers proved them gods. They only insisted that, when we do this, that Nemesis — God of moderation, not of vengeance — will demand a price. Today, ironically, it is our scientists — those former paymasters of progress — who deliver us this message, prophesying changes in our biosphere whose political consequences can only be profoundly destructive. Whether we like it or not, our culture now needs to reconsider its relation to the natural world, and forego the ages-long conviction that somehow we are in, but not of, this biosphere. Courageous and wise political leadership will be needed, and continual struggle with those who will continue to profit from 'business as usual' and their vocal apologists. But we will also need to produce new ideas. And as we seek for these new ideas, and specifically a new conception of our limited, potentially so-destructive, place in the natural world, the recollection of the Greek world whose ruins we can still visit today — a culture which "carried nothing to extremes, neither religion nor reason, because it denied nothing, neither reason nor religion ... balancing light with shade" — speaks to us now with as much clarity and urgency as ever.