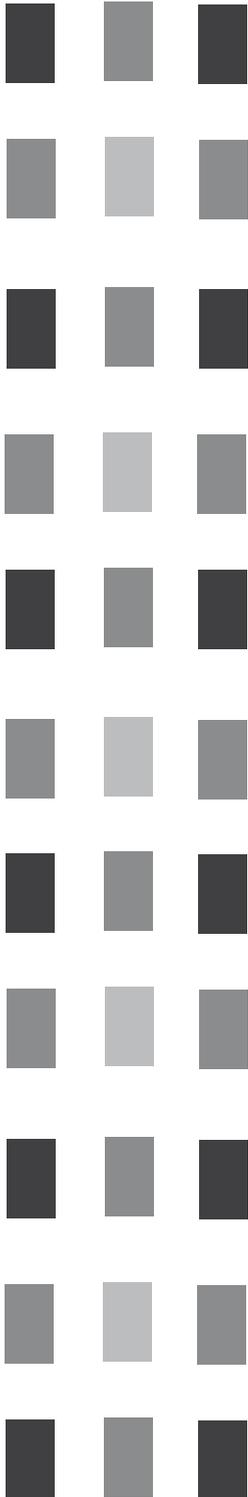


The Architectural Sign and the Architectural Gaze¹

Rupinder Singh



"No one sees the barn," he said finally. A long silence followed. "Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn." He fell silent once more. People with cameras left the elevated site, replaced at once by others. "We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura. Can you feel it, Jack? An accumulation of nameless energies" There was an extended silence ... "What was the barn like before it was photographed?" he said. "What did it look like, how was it different from other barns, how was it similar to other barns?" We can't answer these questions because we've read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can't get outside the aura. We're part of the aura. We're here, we're now. (Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, 1985)

Driving on the American highway the signs appear noiselessly on the car screen in *White Noise*, announcing, presaging, and framing the *Most Beautiful Barn in America*, and then they disappear. But at the barn, DeLillo discovers the observers' inability to have a direct experience of architecture: the aura interferes. But if such an aura could be circumvented, what would such a "direct access" to architecture be? Can this direct "seeing" be visually or linguistically recorded? Or would this experience be so radical, that it would refuse to be translated into any discursive sign? One type of observer who aspired to such a "direct seeing" as well as record it in a discursive mode was the 19th century European traveler to Greece. And this observer, and these travel records provide valuable insights into these questions.²

19th century travel narratives were a specific genre: I call them the "unfictionalized" Bildungsroman. The Bildungsroman aimed at an aesthetic education that would recover the original pre-discursive human wholeness; although they achieved such synthesis only fictionally. The claim of the travel narratives, however, was not set as fictional, but as authentic autobiographical experience.³ Travel narratives were the Bildungsroman of European culture with a degree of "real". A key operative term here was culture. Culture had two connotations: the cultivation of the inner human nature and culture as a folk spirit with a unique identity. Ancient Greece folk spirit – the second connotation of culture – was itself understood as a pre-reflexive wholeness, that is, the very universal human nature that the first notion of self-cultivation aimed at. The travelers then aimed at inner self-actualization by a direct contact with the climate and light of the classical land, the landscape and nature, and the monuments. Thus began a re-education of the eye. Climate was usually the first instructor, as the prodigious achievements of the Ancient Greek race were often attributed to it in the 19th century. J. P. Mahaffy, a noted classical

scholar records, "So we passed into the Ægean, the real thoroughfare of the Greeks Though the day was grey and cloudy, the atmosphere was perfectly clear, and allowed us to see these very distant Alps, on which the snow still laid in great fields."⁴ Had the day been bright and clear, Mahaffy's gaze may even have melted the snow on the Alps! Aside from the hyperbole, the poetic license here aims to establish the quality of light. This clean light was supposed to cleanse the eye. With a cleansed eye, even incidental and minor landscape elements were more meticulously recorded, but this cleansing went a level further. It penetrated the patina of history. This was important, as historical association was a key element of the recovery of pre-discursive wholeness. Homer was read in-situ, and the narratives are peppered with footnotes alluding to classical texts.⁵ This historical association was eventually one of bodily identification; the cleansing would only then be complete when one looked out into the Greek landscape with the same classical eyes that had first achieved the harmony of the pre-reflexive wholeness.

The Athenian Acropolis was the final objective of the trip; it was both an instructor and a test for the eye. Given this importance, one would expect detailed and individual eye accounts. And such records would indicate the nature of the direct gaze. Here an unexpected lacuna surfaces. On the Acropolis the rhetoric of immediate eye-description either disappears or the gaze is deflected to the landscape or the town below. Some authors do record how visitors often need time to acquire the taste to be instructed by the monuments, while others record apprehension at approaching the Acropolis. But most make such observations only to boast of the ease with which they themselves assimilated their aesthetic lesson. But no linguistic representation of the content of this lesson is given. The monuments are extolled, and there is an indication of self-affection. But in the continuum of the narrative a strange blindness envelops the recording of the sense-impressions on the Acropolis. If the travelers did penetrate the photographic aura, they were unable to bring it into language as anything other than this silence.

This silence is covered up in two ways—either by alluding to the classical past, or by cataloguing recent archaeological findings. And this rhetorical shift is marked by a "scholarly" and thereby a more "objective" third person tone. This can be sharply observed in Henry Baird's narrative: "One of the guards now opened a third gate, and passing through we found ourselves at the base of an acclivity, above which rose the Propylæa. A series of marble steps, some of which were discovered beneath the rubbish of a Turkish battery that formerly encumbered the spot, and others in their original places, have been partially restored under the

direction of the Archæological Society. The center is paved with large slabs of stone, and served in old times as a carriage-way. The pavement was grooved to give a foothold to the yoke of oxen that annually drew the car of Minerva up to the temple of the goddess ...⁶ The first line of the citation marks the end of the personal observation. The rest of the account disappears into a historical reverie.

Another case in point is William Mure, who after making the by now familiar shift from the first person to the third person on the Acropolis, tacitly acknowledges this shift, for he promises to provide his own description, "My own speculations will comprise little more than such remarks as naturally suggested themselves in the course of a ten days' survey of the actual site and remains of the city, with an eye, perhaps, rather to their picturesque than their archaeological features, and with incidental allusion to the effects ..."⁷ This promised picturesque⁸ description, however, never comes.

Here Mark Twain's *The Innocent Abroad*, a parody of such 19th century Travel narrative(s), is worth examining. For Twain's work too was a travel narrative. Exchanging a cleansed eye with an irreverent one, Twain covers neither to the "old traveler" or to the reputation of a monument. And yet he describes a scene or a monument with great acuity. This is what Twain has to report about St. Peters, "Of course we have been to the monster Church St. Peter, frequently. I knew its dimensions. I knew it was a prodigious structure Thus I had one gauge. I wished to come as near as forming a correct idea of how it was going to look, as possible; I had a curiosity to see how much I would err. I erred considerably. St. Peter's did not look nearly so large as the [Washington] capitol, and certainly not a twentieth part as beautiful, from the outside."⁹ Twain's gaze then exhibits the traits the traveler's gaze aspires to. This gaze, however, too falls into silence on the Acropolis. Twain narrates how, breaking the quarantine imposed on the Quaker City in Piræus, he and two other friends make their way to the Acropolis in a Huckleberry Finn manner. This whole trip is rendered with vivid eyewitness accounts. But on the Acropolis he provides only statistical details of the Parthenon, and then adds "I remember but little about the Parthenon, and I have put in one or two facts and figures for the use of other people with short memories. Got them from the guide-book."¹⁰ And yet it is clear that the Parthenon and the Acropolis had him enthralled for he expresses this emotion by aspiring for that too familiar communion with the past, "As we turned and moved again through the temple, I wished the illustrious men who had sat in it in the remote ages could visit it again and reveal themselves to our curious eyes-Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes, Socrates ..."¹¹

This general problem of observing the Acropolis is sometimes directly addressed. Paradoxical as it may seem to us, the advice is precisely to turn to the representations of the Acropolis. Here is Mahaffy's scholarly advice for viewing the Acropolis, this commentary is provided exactly at the point where his own description of the Acropolis should have been, "It is worth while to consult the professional architects, like Revett¹², who have examined these buildings with a critical eye ... [the old Athenians] for artistic, as well as for practical, purposes, deviated systematically from the accuracy of right lines and angles in order that the harmony of the building might profit by this imperceptible discord...the pillars which themselves swell slightly towards the middle are not set perpendicularly, but with a slight incline inwards (...)"¹³ The allusion to Nicholas Revett is a reference to Stuart and Revett's *Antiquities of Athens*. Even the note on optical illusion, is not verified by Mahaffy standing at some point on the site, but taken from Viollet-le-duc. But the thrust of the argument is clear: *to interact with the monuments one had to interact with the representational sign first.*

Here the architect's gaze must be brought in: the architect appears not so much as incapable of breaking the aura, as uninterested in doing so. He is rather more interested in inventing new representations for the monuments, that is of adding another layer to the aura. A case in point is Le Corbusier (fig. 1). His travel narrative, titled *Voyage d'Orient*¹⁴ was a pilgrimage of self-becoming, a Bildungsroman-narrative. Athens, the Acropolis



1 | Photograph of Le Corbusier on the Acropolis

and the Parthenon are the last destination of the voyage, its culmination. Just before reaching Athens, Corbusier records his excitement and impatience. But when Corbusier finally reaches Athens, trepidation and anxiety take over. He is unable to approach the Acropolis. Nevertheless, precisely at the point of recording this anxiety, Corbusier talks about it, as if he has already been there, "I really don't know why this hill harbors the essence of artistic thought I can appreciate the perfection of these temples and realize that nowhere else are they so extraordinary; and a long time ago I accepted the fact that this place should be like a repository of a sacred standard, the basis for all measurement in art."¹⁵ For Corbusier, in his own words, "to see the Acropolis is a dream one treasures without even dreaming to realize it."¹⁶ (fig. 2). And it is indeed as a collage of dream fragments that the Acropolis is described. For the descriptions appear at first to be direct eyewitness accounts. Then one realizes that what is portrayed as an unbroken single experience is a reverie of various trips on various days. Moreover, Corbusier speaks here not from a direct personal bodily experience,¹⁷ but from a creative one, seeking to represent these monuments in a way never done before. He notes, "Bewildered the active mind grasps and plunges into a past that should not be reconstructed. But it would also be beautiful if, outside reality – these temples, this sea, these mountains, all this stone and water – could become for one hour only the heroic vision of a creative mind."¹⁸ Corbusier's aim then, to re-emphasize, was not so much the direct interaction with these structures, as new representations. Corbusier ends this "dream" like recording with this confession, "Days and weeks passed in this dream and nightmare"¹⁹

Sigmund Freud provides a possible explanation for Corbusier-like anxiety as well as for the silence of the gaze.²⁰ The eighty-year old Freud wrote about his experience on the Acropolis, titled *A disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis*²¹, 32 years after having visited it. Freud's text is not another travel narrative. He readily acknowledges having had such an experience, and then sets out to dia-



2 | The very first sketch Le Corbusier drew of the Acropolis

gnose it. On reaching the Acropolis Freud's first impression, so he tells us, was of disbelief, "so all this really does exist, just as we learnt at school." This general feeling of unreality was such that Freud could not take the evidence of his senses to be real. Freud recalls that his first attempt to grasp this phenomenon²² was by transforming the past: "it must have been in childhood, when I first read about the Acropolis, that I never believed it." Ultimately for Freud the root cause of such a defense mechanism is his having crossed the forbidden boundary of succeeding well beyond his father. Freud's explanation could easily be employed to explain the general narrative silence.²³ Furthermore as repression, the lacuna would most clearly be felt in the linguistic register. But there are problems with such an interpretation. First none of the transformations in the travel narratives are personal, as Freud would require. They go back into the classical past and not personal pasts. Second, not everyone visiting the Acropolis was overcome by filial piety, as Freud was. So why is everyone overcome by this silence at the Acropolis? The silence of the gaze at the Acropolis then looms even larger.

It would be too simple to reject the travel narratives, to claim that the center of their "authentic and lived" Bildungsroman was just fictional. Surely it was that, and the traveler was unable to detach from the aura. But the silence here is intriguing.

Let us understand the constructed status of these icons. The aesthetic value of the Parthenon and the Acropolis was well established before any actual observation of the Parthenon.²⁴ Europeans began to visit the Acropolis in any reasonable number only in 19th century and the aesthetic fame of the Acropolis precedes that. However, this pre-established Aesthetic Ideal was not set as a visual image. Parthenon had no equivalent to Marilyn Monroe's snapshot, at least not for these visitors. The actual visit to the Parthenon always held surprises, as the discovery of color on its columns in the middle of 19th century did. So on the visual register, Parthenon did not yet have a fixed photographic aura, although during this period it would slowly acquire one. One argument here could be that precisely because Parthenon's aesthetic value was constructed before its image, these visitors fell into repressive silence in front of the symbolic father figure. But Mark Twain and Sigmund Freud were no respecters of such conventions, and yet both Mark Twain and Freud had a similar experience. Moreover, if the Acropolis was just a construction, an aesthetic convention, there seems no reason why it would not be translated into narrative, even if fictional. For, conventions facilitate discourse.

And so, away from the actual Acropolis commentaries and pictorial representation slowly be-

gan to profligate. For it is pictorial representations—first etchings and then photographs—that try to compensate the absence of eyewitness accounts in the narratives. The etchings offered "reconstructed" whole Acropolis, as if echoing the triumph of the recovered wholeness of human nature of the Bildungroman-travel narrative. The photographs which replaced these etchings were usually generic, devoid of any specificity of light, angle, time of the year, and worse of all, local people. The aim was to offer a universal unchanging image and not a single specific experience, colored with subjective details (fig. 3 a–4 b).

Thus towards the later part of the 19th century, what the narrative could not convey is purported to be conveyed by these illustrations. And employing these illustrations, a-posteriori textual explanations of how the Parthenon was, and should be viewed, multiplied. But can the reader experience from these illustrations or textual theories what the traveler could not bring into language? Or do these representations *not* stand-in for the object, re-present it, but rather construct another object. Here the 19th century European traveler to Greece stands then with Delilio's observers of the *Most Beautiful Barn in America*. But, does the photographic aura necessarily and always lead to silence, as

one may hastily assume Delilio to imply? No, for other photographed and represented monuments are annotated with eyewitness accounts in these travel narratives. I would argue that photographic aura formed from visual representations facilitates discourse, even if not "direct seeing:" but there is a caveat. Norman Bryson has argued, visual cultures invest authority in the visual sign and recognition becomes the central mode of interaction:²⁵ Here, however, the actual physical structures do not form these visual signs; rather, their "representations"—photographs, drawings—which formed this visual sign. And in the case of these other monuments, the physical structure was able to stand-in for these visual signs, that is, represent its own visual sign and thus facilitate interaction; and not the other way around, as we often think. This is precisely what did not happen at the Acropolis. The representation, the visual sign that stood for the Acropolis was inadequate. The actual Acropolis was not subsumed under it, it exceeded that it was called upon to represent: it exceeded its visual image. The specific challenge of viewing the Acropolis then was, even as a constructed convention, that it demanded not to be viewed as another building, or as a row of columns etc., but rather as architecture's datum, as its perfection;



3 a | Frontispiece in J. P. Mahaffy's "Rambles and Studies in Greece", 1900



4 a | Illustration in Mark Twain's "Innocents Abroad"



3 b | Photograph in Mabel Moore's "Days in Hellas", 1909



4 b | Photograph in Mabel Moore's "Days in Hellas", 1909

3 a, b | The same or similar generic images would be used by different travel narratives. This was one of the most common images and Corbusier's first sketch of the Acropolis is also from this very spot. It is possible that Corbusier was influenced by this generic image.

4 a, b | This was another very popular or generic view of the Acropolis. The Illustration in Mark Twain's "Innocents Abroad" is definitely from a photograph as in the one below.

but with the added qualification that the actual structures exceeded the visual images which they were called to represent. The silence in the narratives marks this act, it indicates that this viewing beyond the visual sign resists being translated into language. For, away from the Acropolis, it was its visual signs, its photographic aura, which had to be viewed as architecture. And that could be and was put into discourse.

The 19th century Acropolis is perhaps then a unique case where the convention and its sign come up against a limit in the visual representational system.²⁶ It allows us to argue that there may well be two modes of viewing architecture. One

that is rare, but is the direct, sensory, bodily mode. And this mode may not be discursive. And the second mode may be the presence of architecture only through the visual sign. Most buildings are approached through this second mode, and the actual physical structure fills in, it represents this sign. And history of architecture as a discourse is then perhaps only the history of the second mode; the first mode escapes it.

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Notes:

- 1 I am indebted to Andrew Szegedy-Maszak for instructions on 19th century Greek travel narratives and Christine Boyer for her critical guidance, comments and support. I am also indebted to a number of scholars at the Bauhaus Colloquium for their input, especially Adrian Forty, Anthony Vidler, and Joseph Rykwert. Unfortunately many of their suggestions could not be incorporated in the paper here.
- 2 This "direct seeing" must be distinguished from an earlier notion of appraising art and literature, one that following Hans Gadamer, can be called the "rhetorical tradition." This new tradition of "direct seeing," one that can also be employed to mark modernity, is based on a notion of aesthetics as an "expression of inner experience." This can also be called the new "psychological tradition."
- 3 A second reason to accent authenticity was to guard against forgeries. One of the earliest travel accounts, and extremely popular, was the 1744 three volume tome *The Travels of Charles Thompson Esq.* It went through five editions and managed to purloin from every known travel narrative. An excellent account of the forgeries and their circulation is provided by David Constantine in: *The question of authenticity in some early accounts of Greece*, in: Clarke, G. W. (ed.): *Rediscovering Hellenism, The Hellenic Inheritance and the English Imagination*, Cambridge, 1989, pp. 1–22; Also refer to Constantine's earlier book: *Early Greek Travellers and the Hellenic Ideal*, Cambridge, 1984.
- 4 J. P. Mahaffy: *Rambles and Studies in Greece*, seventh edition, New York, 1913, pp. 25; Among Mahaffy's other books are, *Social life in Greece*, *A History of Greek Literature*, *Greek Life and Thought from the Death of Alexander* and *What have the Greeks done for Modern Civilization*.
- 5 In contrast to the landscape, monuments and their associated historical aura, the native modern Greek were painted as picturesque, and sometimes, as with Virginia Wolff, downright obnoxiously.
- 6 Baird, Henry: *Modern Greece: A narrative of a Residence and Travels in that Country*, New York, 1856, pp. 32–33.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 The term picturesque here has two connotations. One is that of the picturesque landscape or elements, like the native people, of fleeting impressions. But the Acropolis was also considered picturesque as it lacked any essential symmetry.
- 9 Twain, Mark: *The Innocents Abroad, The Oxford Mark Twain*, Shelly Fisher Fishkin (ed.), 1869, 1996 pp. 271
- 10 Ibid., pp. 346 (my emphasis).
- 11 Ibid., pp. 348.
- 12 Mahaffy is referring to James Stuart and Nicholas Revett's *Antiquities of Athens*, (London 1762–1816) although he seems to have only consulted Penrose's *Principles of Athenian Architecture*. He wrongly cites Nicholas Revett as a professional architect.
- 13 Op. cit., note 4, pp. 88–89.
- 14 Translated as Le Corbusier, *Journey to the East*. ed. and tr. Ivan Zaknic, Cambridge 1987. On *Voyage d'Orient* also refer Giuliano Gresleri: *Le Corbusier, Viaggio in Oriente*, Fondation Le Corbusier, 1984.
- 15 Ibid., pp. 216.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 The Parthenon would play a major role in Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture* (Paris 1924), but even there the description is not of a direct experience, but stated as one from a third person voice. I am indebted to Stanislaus von Moos for confirming this point.

18 Ibid., pp. 223.

19 Ibid., pp. 230.

20 The silence of the gaze must be actually understood at three levels. First that at the level of the „first person experience.“ Second at the level of an ineluctable element in the work of art itself. This ineluctable element resists being translated from its specific position to that of an abstract or general one. Following Paul de Man we can tentatively name it „resistance to theory.“ The third is at the level of an aesthetic ideal. As Kant would argue in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft (Critique of the power of Judgment)*, Aesthetic ideal itself cannot be transfigured into language. This paper will, however, examine only the first level or layer of this silence.

21 Freud, Sigmund: *A disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis*, in: Strachey, James (tr. and ed.): *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XXII, London, 1964, pp. 239–248.

22 Before Freud's self analysis would enclose the phenomena within the domain of his theory, he asks a question that threatens to rupture some of the very fundamentals of psychoanalysis: why should the mind resist something that brings pleasure, resistance that manifests as incredulity at achieving one's most cherished thought? After all mind's defense mechanism should not work against its pleasure principle. I know of no study which has attempted to exploit such a rupture against Freud. Most readings follow him and associate this phenomenon either with the positive counterpart of déjà vu or the defense mechanism triggered by the crossing of filial limits. Refer for example: Sugarman, Susan: *Freud on the Acropolis, Reflections on a Paradoxical Response to the Real*, Colorado, 1998 which attempts to extrapolate a complete theory from this phenomena. On déjà vu etc. also refer Freud's comment in Chapter XII of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Standard Edition, Vol. 6 1901, 1960 and the essay *Fausse Reconnaissance in psycho-analytic treatment*, Standard Edition, Vol. 13 1914, 1955, pp. 201–207

23 Almost all travelers either shift from a first person account to a third person account, one which could possibly denote depersonalization; or revert to recalling the great intellectual fervor of the ancient times, a possible rendering of derealization.

24 David Watkin has attempted to answer the question as to how and why the Parthenon came to be seen as the most exalted exemplum of architecture. As the Parthenon is the most a-typical Greek Temple, this bestowing of the datum to it is all the more difficult to understand. Refer: Watkin, David: *Athenian Stuart, The Pioneer of the Greek Revival*, London, 1982, and *German Architecture and the Classical Idea*, Cambridge, 1987.

25 Bryson has made this argument in various guises. Refer for example his *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*, New Haven, 1986.

26 There is perhaps also a limitation of language, although of a very different nature. I say perhaps because this linguistic silence is itself a linguistic sign.