

Stories from Exile: Fragments from the Cultural Biography of the Parthenon  
(or 'Elgin') Marbles



Yannis Hamilakis

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# Stories from exile: fragments from the cultural biography of the Parthenon (or 'Elgin') marbles

Yannis Hamilakis

## Abstract

The group of artefacts known as Parthenon (or 'Elgin') Marbles has attracted enormous attention from scholars and the public, mainly because of its involvement in the politics of restitution of cultural heritage. The prime concern of this article is not the issue of restitution itself (although inevitably the issue is discussed to some extent), but the fascinating cultural life of this group of artefacts, from their initial production in the fifth century BC, to the present day. Not only are the Parthenon Marbles a significant landmark in the topographic project of the Hellenic national heterotopic dream, they also contribute to the discourse of the social and political reality of modern Greece and the reality (and often the hyperreality) of the global diasporic communities which participate in the Hellenic national project. The article illustrates with specific examples their deployment in the global cultural economy and the ambiguities and ironies surrounding these transactions. In addition to the conventional narrative, it employs alternative narrative forms such as poetry and partly autobiographical accounts.

## Keywords

Parthenon marbles; cultural biographies; nationalism; politics of the past; Greece.

*5 December 1997: cloudy, typically Welsh, early morning. One of two passengers in the only van-taxi around, rolling through the Welsh hills towards London. Why am I doing this? The pretext/excuse is that I am going to participate in the demonstration organized by societies of Greek students outside the British Museum, to demonstrate for the return of the Parthenon marbles to Greece. A bus-load of Greek students – some my own students – left the campus very early that morning to participate in the event. I am not among them, I am not going for the same reason, although I did sign (with some scepticism) the petition when a couple of students knocked on my office door a few days ago. I shall be the observer and they the ethnographic subjects. . . .*

*Arrive in central London, late for the beginning of the demonstration. Miss the start but manage to find them as they turn into Great Russell Street. One single black banner with*

white letters: 'Send them Back!' Several Greek national flags. Fewer demonstrators than I expected: no more than 300–400. [Months of campaigning – mainly through the internet – which was focused around this demonstration on the day which was nominated Parthenon Day, gave the impression of a much larger event with the active participation of the large number of the many thousands of Greek students who study in the UK.] The small crowd quite vocal with the main slogan 'Send the Marbles Back to Greece!' Substantial police forces surround the group. The traffic is blocked in the streets where the demonstrators are going to pass. I am carrying a large professional video cam-corder which I do not dare to use [why?]. Take a couple of shots with a conventional camera. Suddenly, a couple of my students recognize me. They call me and ask me to join them. I wave at them and stay on the pavement. Approach the Museum. By-passers, slightly surprised and confused. Workmen in the courtyard of the Museum, slighted amused: 'What do they want? - They've lost their marbles!' They stop in front of the main gate. A few journalists and fewer television crews, mainly from Greek channels. Some demonstrators pose in front of the banner with the museum facade as a background, while their friends take the picture. A small team approach the museum officials who have gathered inside the courtyard. The team politely delivers the petition, goes back to the main group of demonstrators and encourages them to shout the main slogans a few more times; then the demonstrators re-group into smaller groups and make their way towards the hotel nearby where a panel discussion is to be held. An ex-minister from Greece who has come specifically for the occasion is one of the speakers, along with some British journalists. I too make my way to the hotel but I never get inside; I collect some leaflets instead, and leave. . . .

The episode described above (Plate 1) refers to one of the most recent moments in the social biography of the group of artefacts known as Parthenon (or 'Elgin' marbles), aspects of which I discuss in this article. The recent circumstances surrounding this group of artefacts have attracted enormous publicity due to their entanglement in the politics of restitution of cultural property (e.g. Hitchens 1997; Smith 1916; St. Clair 1998; Vrettos 1997). Indeed, the case is one of the most often quoted and used in the textbooks and broader discussions of the issue (e.g. Greenfield 1996; Lowenthal 1998). My concern here is not with the issue of the politics of restitution itself (although inevitably the matter will be discussed) but with the unique social biography of this group of artefacts and the changes in their meaning in different social contexts. I will therefore attempt to trace some aspects of this complex biography and recover some fragments of their long and eventful life. Given the space limitations, I can afford only some glimpses of that life, especially the more recent and less discussed phases. I wish to show that a cultural biography approach may prove a more interesting and rewarding avenue for the discussion of issues of cultural politics such as the heritage restitution. A bottom-up perspective which elucidates the complex entanglements of archaeological production with the negotiations of social roles and identities may prove a more useful procedure than the legalistic treatments or the 'heritage management' frameworks.

By the term 'Elgin Marbles' (as the British Museum is obliged by statute to refer to this specific group of artefacts (Hitchens 1997: 17)) is denoted a group of sculptures depicting mainly mythological scenes from the fifth century BC Athenian temple of Parthenon, the most prominent architectural feature of the Acropolis. Almost half of the architectural

issue of  
entanglement

social biography

bottom-up  
perspective



Plate 1 From the student demonstration for the restitution of the Parthenon marbles (British Museum, 5 December 1997).

sculptures are in London and the other half in Athens, either on the monument itself or in the Acropolis Museum. More specifically, the British Museum holds half of the original frieze (c. 75m in length), fifteen metopes and seventeen pedimental fragments. In the original collection are also included a caryatid and a column from the Erechtheion. A small number of fragments from the Parthenon sculptures can also be found in a number of other museums such as the Louvre and museums in Denmark, Germany, Austria and Italy (Greenfield 1996), although there are no calls for their restitution.

The social biography of this group should inevitably start with their initial production in the context of fifth-century Athenian society. The sculptures were part of a large building and decorating project on the Athenian Acropolis initiated by Pericles, following the military victory against the invading Persians. Pericles used the financial resources from the tribute contributed by the Greek city-states, funds which were intended to secure Athenian military protection. The funds were transferred by Pericles from the pan-hellenic island-sanctuary of Delos to Athens in c. 454 BC (Spivey 1996: 136; cf. also Osborne 1998: 158, 174). The building programme on the Acropolis involved a large workforce, some of the best-known architects and sculptors of the time and an enormous amount of materials and resources, including vast quantities of gold. The project, therefore, was an exercise in conspicuous consumption, with clear political connotations and symbolism related to the Athenian political hegemony in the area, as well as the political status, reputation and desire for posterity of the main protagonists. Spivey has suggested (1996: 136–40, 1997: 237) that the political message was addressed to an audience far

start-initial  
production

beyond Athenian or pan-hellenic society: Athens might have been engaged in an act of competitive display of grandeur with the defeated enemies in the preceding wars, the Persians. They might have been trying to outbid the huge ceremonial centre built by Persian leaders at Persepolis, attempting thus to defeat Persians in the war of conspicuous architectural and artistic consumption as well. And yet that 'war' was disguised as such, since the iconographic programme makes no direct reference to Persians or to historical events such as the preceding Persian wars. But at least some of the chosen themes (such as the battles with Centaurs or with Amazons) might have made reference to the Athenian power and its fight against the 'other', an inferior entity be it a semi-human-semi-animal creature such as Centaurs or 'un-domesticated' female power such as the Amazons. These 'others' could be therefore taken to stand for the third common 'other', the 'barbarians', in this context the Persians (Spivey 1996: 150, 1997) (on the widely accepted interpretation of mythological representations in artistic expressions as Greek versus the 'other', see, among others, Francis and Vickers (1990: 21–42); Hall (1989)).<sup>1</sup>

The meaning of these sculptures was bound to change dramatically in the subsequent millennia, as their social life took many drastic turns (cf. several articles in Tournikiotis (1994) on the reception and role of the Parthenon from the post-classical to modern times). During the Roman period, the monument to which the sculptures were attached lost its original meaning but it continued to remain the focus of attention with the erection of honorary monuments and inscriptions for political leaders (Korres 1994: 139–40) in an attempt to use the cultural capital of classical antiquity for the legitimization of authority and the negotiation of political and social roles. After suffering natural disasters such as blazes, the monument was converted into an Orthodox church in the fifth century AD. At that time parts of the sculptures in the metopes were defaced (Korres 1994: 147), as their iconographic themes were seen as inappropriate to the new role and meaning of the monument. In the twelfth century AD, the sculptures coexisted with Christian wall paintings, part of the Orthodox iconographic tradition (Korres 1994: 148). In the next century, following the conquest of Greece by the armies of the fourth Crusade, the Parthenon became a catholic church and the cathedral of Athens. In the fifteen century, following the occupation of Athens by the Ottomans, the Parthenon became a mosque (with a minaret attached to it) and the Erechtheion (the temple with the caryatids) became a harem.

For the next two centuries, Greece was relatively isolated from the West but from the seventeenth century onwards, with the establishment of classicism as one of the main ideological forces among the Western aristocracy, the classical monuments of Greece became again the focus of attention, which led to, among other things, the mass proliferation of travel writings and memoirs (Simopoulos 1970–5: esp. v. 2–4; 1979–84; Tsigakou 1981), as well as the looting/'collecting' and removal of many pieces of antiquities (Simopoulos 1993). In 1687 during the Venetian–Ottoman war, the Parthenon and its sculptures suffered probably the most destructive blow in their history with the bombardment of the Acropolis and the explosion of the Parthenon which had been used by the Ottomans as a powder keg (Hadjiaslani 1987; Korres 1994). After the withdrawal of the Venetians, the Ottomans built a new, smaller mosque inside the Parthenon.

Judging from the evidence of folk tales, collected mainly by folklorists and travellers, the populations of the Greek peninsula at the time perceived classical antiquities as something belonging to the legendary sphere, to another time, 'the time of the Hellenes' which

War of  
conspicuous  
consumption to  
Persian

★ triumph over  
'the other'  
↓  
Barbarians  
↓  
Persians

rise  
in Classicism ★

was quite distinctive from their own time and ancestral lineage (Kakridis 1978). Antiquities were feared and respected, not because they were seen as part of the ancestral heritage (as later national narratives would have us believe – see, for example, Gennadios (1930); Kokkou (1977)), but because they were invested with supernatural properties. Fragments from monuments were re-used in the building of modern houses (they were mainly placed above the front doors (Gennadios 1930: 139)), not in order to rescue them (contra Kokkou 1977: 22), but as part of the cosmological belief in their apotropaic and protective properties. People were reacting angrily to the destruction of antiquities, not because of any sense of protection of heritage but because they feared that the destruction would upset the supernatural spirits dwelling in the monuments, which would bring diseases and other disasters to the population as punishment and retribution. Monuments and especially statues had acquired the identity of persons with human properties and emotional reactions (Gennadios 1930; Kakridis 1978; Kambouroglou 1893). Some tales describe the sculptures as human beings who were mutilated and petrified by magicians; the spirit inside them (often referred to as an Arabian) is frequently heard to mourn for their condition (tale recorded by the traveller Hobhouse; cited in Gennadios 1930: 57–8, note 57). The Parthenon sculptures therefore had acquired another new meaning or rather a range of new meanings: for Western travellers and aristocracy they represented the magnificent artistic achievements of the foundational era of European culture. For most of the local population (with the exception of the 'enlightened' local intelligentsia with Western commercial links and European education), they represented supernatural forces that should be treated with fear and respect and not be upset.

New  
meanings

Folk memory recorded the next crucial episode in the social biography of the sculptures: the violent removal of the large number of sculptures from the Acropolis by Thomas Bruce, Seventh Earl of Elgin (known as Lord Elgin), the then British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, in 1801. These tales recall the English lord who upset the spirits of the marbles; the tale referred to above (recorded by Hobhouse) narrates that the local people who were carrying from Athens to Piraeus a chest full of Parthenon sculptures removed by Lord Elgin's personnel, abandoned it half-way as they insisted that they heard the spirits of the marbles crying and protesting. Another tale recalls the mourning of the caryatids of Erechtheion (which are referred to as 'girls') for their abducted sister, the caryatid statue removed by Elgin's people (Douglas 1813: 85; cf. Kakridis 1978: 39), a tale which is still rehearsed today (e.g. Andronikos 1985).

The broader political circumstances surrounding Lord Elgin's removal of the sculptures are more or less known (see St. Clair 1998; Hitchens 1997 for more). He used his position of power as British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire and the favourable political climate during the Franco-Turkish war when Britain became an ally of the Ottoman Empire. Lord Elgin originally intended to request permission to draw and make casts of the Parthenon sculptures in order to decorate his mansion in Scotland, but he was eventually convinced (by his entourage and by the change in the balance of political power in the region) to request permission to 'excavate' and remove material from the monument. During this process, in addition to an ambiguous firman (permit), he employed bribery and threats to convince the local Ottoman authorities in Athens to turn a blind eye to his activities. The sculptures ended up in London's custom house in 1803, after a long and adventurous journey involving the sinking of the ship *Mentor* which carried one shipment

of sculptures (subsequently salvaged), near Cythera (cf. Miliarakis 1994[1888] on the circumstances surrounding the event). They stayed in Lord Elgin's possession until 1816 when they were sold to the British Museum (to repay part of Lord Elgin's huge debt) for £35,000 instead of the £73,600 asked by Lord Elgin (Hitchens 1997: 41). The decision was taken after a long and controversial public debate and an equally stormy session in the House of Commons.

The presence of the sculptures in London and the debate they aroused considerably influenced aesthetic taste and artistic perception in British society and beyond. They arrived at a time when classicism, still the dominant trend, was under severe attack by the advocates of romanticism. They therefore contributed to the reshaping of artistic taste since they represented a model quite different from abstract Roman art (still the artistic canon), being the prime examples of the new naturalist 'Grecian gusto'. They also helped to establish the idea of unrestored authenticity (after Canova's refusal to restore the Parthenon marbles) as the new artistic standard. Finally, they coincided with and influenced the 'Greek Revival', evident mainly in architecture (Rothenberg 1977; cf. Jenkins 1992: 24–6; the same study contains a historical account of the management of the collection by the British Museum up to 1939).

*London, Thursday 10 March 1994; afternoon; a group of around 100 Greek and Greek-Cypriot students make their way to the British Museum [a few days had passed since the death of Melina Merkouri, Hellenic Minister for Culture and passionate advocate and crusader of the restitution of the Parthenon marbles; her death caused a huge wave of public emotional reaction; the echoes of this reaction were clearly felt in Britain among the sizeable community of Greek students]; as they proceed towards the reception, it becomes clear that they carry flowers in their hands; they demand to be allowed to leave the flowers on the marbles, in memory of Melina Merkouri. The outright rejection of the museum personnel was followed by negotiations and finally they are allowed in; they are not allowed, however, to leave the flowers on the marbles. The congregation gathers around the remains of the Parthenon sculptures and someone reads a petition of the Society of Greek Students in London reaffirming their promise to continue Merkouri's crusade. Then they all sing the Greek National Anthem before the eyes of surprised guards and visitors. They manage to leave some flowers on the marbles despite the prohibition, and then they leave (story based on Metaxas 1994).*

Meanwhile, radical changes were taking place in Greece. The construction of classical antiquity as the cosmological cornerstone of Western European civilization had fundamental consequences in the region. The emerging new social class of European-educated merchants and shipowners with links with Western elites 'rediscovered' their ancestral heritage and engaged in the project of constructing the imagined community of the Hellenic Nation, a process which was seen as a process of national resurrection and regeneration (e.g. Hamilakis and Yalouri 1996; Herzfeld 1982, 1987; Kitromilides 1989; Morris 1994; Skopetea 1988). The foundation of the Hellenic state as a result of this process led to the systematic care, collection and study of antiquities, since they represented the visible material proof of the national continuity and they became deeply embedded in the newly constructed national memory. The poet George Seferis (Box 1) narrates this process from the point of view of the national narrative: the burden of the marbles is hurting but

BOX 1

Εύπνησα με το μαρμάρινο τούτο κεφάλι στα χέρια  
που μου εξαντλεί τους αγκώνες και δεν ξέρω που να  
τ' ακουμπήσω.

Έπεφτε στο όνειρο καθώς έβγαινα από το όνειρο  
έτσι ενώθηκε η ζωή μας και θα είναι πολύ δύσκολο να  
ξαναχωρίσει.

Κοιτάζω τα μάτια: μήτε ανοιχτά μήτε κλειστά  
μιλώ στο στόμα που όλο γυρεύει να μιλήσει  
κρατώ τα μάγουλα που ξεπέρασαν το δέρμα.  
Δεν έχω άλλη δύναμη:

τα χέρια μου χάνονται και με πλησιάζουν  
ακρωτηριασμένα.

Γιώργος Σεφέρης, *Μυθιστόρημα* (1967 [1935])

[I woke with this marble head in my hands;  
it exhausts my elbows and I don't know where to put it down.  
It was falling into the dream as I was coming out of the dream  
so our lives became one and it will be very difficult for it to separate again.

I look at the eyes: neither open nor closed  
I speak to the mouth which keeps trying to speak  
I hold the cheeks which have broken through the skin.  
I haven't got any more strength.

My hands disappear and come toward me  
mutilated.]

George Seferis, *Mythistorima* (1967 [1935])  
(Translated by E. Keeley and Ph. Sherrard)

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it is almost impossible to let it down. That burden, imposed upon the populations of Greece by the West is, according to the poet, a burden of national destiny, since people 'woke up' with the ancestral weight in their hands (cf. Dimiroulis 1997).

The frequent condemnation of Lord Elgin's activities in his own country by prominent personalities helped to raise the issue in the newly founded Hellenic state. The earlier folk tales referred to above were now re-shaped and re-told by folklorists in such a way as to fit in the national narrative: rather than being seen as evidence for 'superstition' (as foreign travellers saw them) or as testaments of a cosmological construction of 'otherness', they were presented as evidence for the living consciousness of the population as descendants of Ancient Greeks and as custodians of their ancestral heritage. The Parthenon sculptures acquired, therefore, another meaning: they became a significant part of the national heritage, artistic masterpieces which had been misappropriated by a foreign power.

While the issue was never forgotten, as it emerged regularly in the writings of national intellectuals and poets (e.g. Cavafy; cf. Kavafis 1988) but also British and other intellectuals (forcing the British government to consider their return to Greece more than once), it was not until recently that the restitution of the Parthenon marbles became a matter of official government policy. It was after the government change in 1981 when the new Culture Minister Melina Merkouri – who had first become aware of the issue when, in 1962 while playing 'Faidra' in a film, she met Ipollytos (Antony Perkins) by the sculptures in the British Museum (*Eleftherotypia* 19 December 1993) – made the restitution her personal crusade and official government policy (and since then her legacy has been intricately linked to the restitution; Plate 2) which resulted in the first official request to the British government in 1983, after a decision of the Greek Ministerial Council. Since then it has remained a central issue in the political discourse of Greece and it has almost become one of the so-called 'National Issues', along with the disputes over the Aegean and Cyprus. All political parties, from the ultra-nationalist to the Communist, participate in the national crusade for the restitution of the sculptures (Plate 3). Since the issue has become a 'National Issue' it has been sacralized and is beyond any serious criticism (despite some dissenting voices, e.g. Marinos 1984; Loverdos 1997); it overshadows many other issues of cultural policy, such as the severe problems of the State Archaeological Service and its museums. The crusade also confers authority on the Minister for Culture who is seen as advancing one of the most important national issues.

Along with official government activity, there have been several other expressions of public interest in the topic: from regular press coverage to party initiatives, to group reactions such as the student demonstrations described above, even personal statements of protest such as the refusal of a visitor to the archaeological sites of Phaistos and Gortyna in Crete to pay an entrance fee, as long as 'the marbles' are in London (*Eleftherotypia* 12 January 1993). In more recent years, a number of initiatives involved the co-ordination and collaboration of groups and individuals through the internet, which made the co-ordination of student societies across Britain much easier, prior to the demonstration in December 1997 (see also the web site: <http://rethymno.forthnet.gr/marbles/>). The recent change of government in Britain has led to a renewed interest, since there was an old promise from a previous Labour party leadership that, when Labour reassumed power, they would return the sculptures to Greece. The Hellenic government, despite the recent

Marbles



New meaning

Political use  
+ meaning



T. Blair

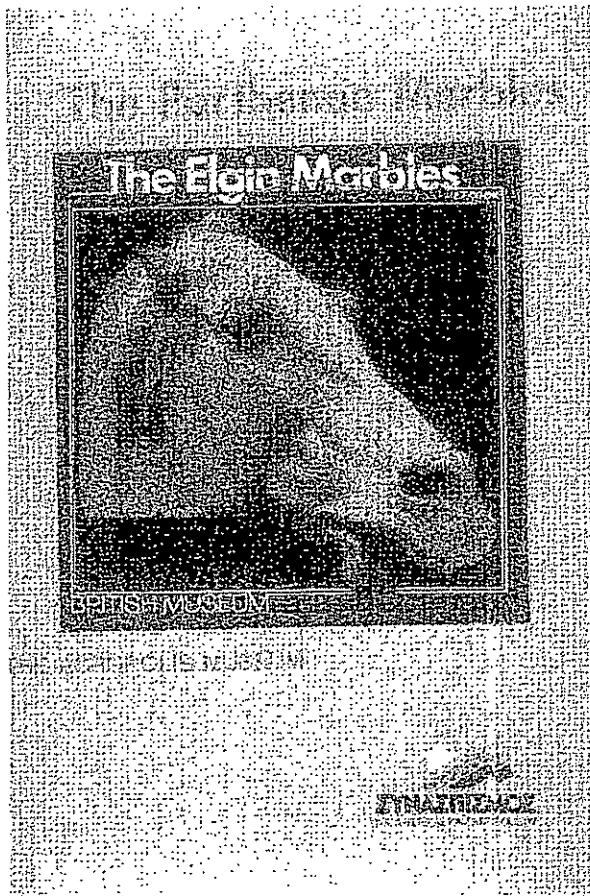


Plate 2 A pre-election leaflet by the party *Synaspismos tis Aristeras kai tis Proodou* ('Coalition of the Left and Progress') on the Parthenon marbles. It was used in the 1994 elections for the European Parliament.

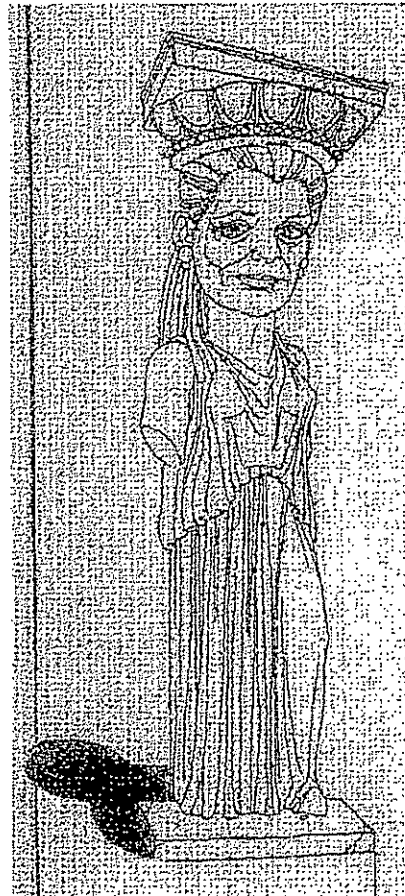


Plate 3 Melina Merkouri as caryatid in a drawing by the cartoonist Spyros Ornerakis, published in the Athens daily newspaper *Ta Nea* in 1994 shortly after her death.

unofficial refusal of the British State to enter into negotiations, has resumed the official request and has increased pressure, which includes wide publicity and intensification of the preparations for the new Acropolis Museum which is going to be built directly below the Acropolis. The Hellenic government hopes that the new state-of-the-art museum is the adequate response to the British argument that the sculptures cannot be properly exhibited in Greece, due to the lack of a proper museum, nor can they be re-united with the monument because of the notorious air pollution. The new museum will allow a direct visual link between the Parthenon and its sculptures inside it.

It is also worth noting that official Hellenic government discourse has recently changed, placing less emphasis on the argument of 'ownership' based on continuity and more on the argument of proper aesthetic appreciation of the entire monument, a monument which is seen as a major symbolic landmark of Western civilization (at the same time making clear that the request has nothing to do with the broader debates on restitution

and multiculturalism). In a leaflet produced by the Ministry for Culture and the 'Melina Mercouri Foundation' which has been distributed widely, we read in a letter by the, until very recently (February 1999), Minister for Culture, E. Venizelos (this text has been reproduced in the leaflet from the official letter-request submitted by the Minister for Culture to the British Arts Minister in 1997):

The request for the restitution of the Parthenon Marbles by the Hellenic Government is not submitted in the name of Hellenic Nation or the Hellenic History. It is submitted in the name of World Cultural Heritage and with the voice of the mutilated monument itself which demands the return of its Marbles.

(*Eleftherotypia* 6 July 1997)

The British Museum and the government still refuse to discuss the issue, and recent years have also seen some offensive neo-colonial responses in the British press (cf. Clogg 1994) and some 'orientalizing' (or 'Balkanizing'? cf. Todorova 1997) remarks in the House of Lords. Here is an example from an exchange on 19 May 1997:

Lord Wyatt of Weeford: My Lords, is the Minister aware that it would be dangerous to return the marbles to Athens because they were under attack by Turkish and Greek fire in the Parthenon when they were rescued and the volatile Greeks might easily start hurling bombs around again?

(cited in Hitchens 1997: vii–viii)

It seems, however, that large sections of the British public are convinced that the sculptures should be returned to Greece. In 1996 the issue featured in a Channel 4 programme where nearly 91,000 people responded to a telephone vote and, of these, 92 per cent were in favour of restitution.

*Athens, mid-September but still boiling hot; one of those official meetings in the Greek Ministry of Defence. In a country which spends the most substantial part of its state budget for military purposes, meetings like this have become routine; this time it is the turn of British officials (including the British Minister of Defence) to negotiate arms deals with Greek army officials; among the carefully worded diplomatic language a few complaints on the part of the British officials were laid on the table; the connotations soon became clear: 'you do not appear to be buying arms from Britain any more' or something to that effect; a few minutes later during a break, when the discussion was on unrelated topic, a passing comment: 'the marbles' they said may be returned to Greece in 2004 to coincide with the hosting of Olympic games by Athens. . . . (based on Anon. 1998).*

In his well-known article on the cultural biography of things, Kopytoff (1986) draws a distinction between the processes of commoditization and singularization. In his own words:

The counteractive to this potential or rush of commoditization is culture. In the sense that commoditization homogenises value, while the essence of culture is discrimination, excessive commoditization is anticultural. . . . Culture ensures that some things remain unambiguously singular, it resists the commoditization of others.

(Kopytoff 1986: 73)

'Everyone' is against commoditizing what has been publicly marked as singular and made sacred.

(Kopytoff 1986: 77)

The case of the Parthenon marbles demonstrates that this thesis is problematic. I would argue that, for the most part of their cultural life, the Parthenon marbles were at the same time singularized and commoditized: they were seen as unique and sacred (more on this below) but they were also exchanged as symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1990; Hamilakis and Yalouri 1996) in the transactions of cultural economy, although the transaction acquired different meanings in different contexts. During their original conception and creation it can be argued (despite the limited evidence) that they operated as commodities in the conspicuous consumption which accompanied the competition and power dynamics between Athens, other classical Greek city-states and the Persians. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries they were given away as part of the broader political transactions between the Ottoman Empire and the colonial powers such as Britain and France. During their British phase and with the additional value that they had acquired due to the change in aesthetic taste and the value of classical antiquity, they were used to repay Elgin's financial debt to the British government, operating at the same time as monuments of British colonialism and – indirectly – nationalism (cf. Kohl 1998: 227). Since the invention of the imagined community of the Hellenic Nation, the Parthenon marbles have become one of the most celebrated and valuable parts of the symbolic capital of antiquities. They are seen as unique, singular and sacred (as the result of the process of the sacralization of culture imposed by nationalism (Hamilakis and Yalouri forthcoming; Brow 1990)), but at the same time (and despite their disputed ownership status) are exchanged for other forms of capital (political, diplomatic) in negotiations both within Greece and in global political/economic/symbolic transactions. Their role as exchangeable symbolic capital, however, is disguised as such. As Bourdieu puts it (1998: 121), 'The economy of symbolic exchanges rests . . . on shared misrecognition' (cf. also Bourdieu 1990: 118; Hamilakis and Yalouri 1996: 119).

But these roles do not exhaust the meanings and agency of the sculptures. If the national project can be seen as a dreaming process (Gourgouris 1996) and as a topographic enterprise (Leontis 1995) which involves the construction of a heterotopic locus, then the Parthenon sculptures are one of the most significant landmarks in the imagined territory of Hellenism. Their value stems not only from their origin and association with the Parthenon with its enormous symbolic value, but also from their additional value as a disputed 'commodity', involving one of the political and economic superpowers. This dispute seems to go far beyond the specifics. It stands for the broader negotiations of the Hellenic Nation in the present-day world arena, it operates as a metaphor for its attempt to escape marginalization, to remind the West of its 'debt' to Hellenic heritage (cf. Hamilakis and Yalouri 1996: 119; Herzfeld 1982, 1987), to confront key players in the world using their own 'weapons': if the Parthenon is a key symbolic monument for the West as a whole (as dominant Western rhetoric has it), then it is surely more appropriate for such a significant monument to be appreciated and worshipped in its entirety.

We saw earlier that pre-nation state narratives and folk tales attribute animate

Singularized +  
commoditized

①

②

③

④

2 types of value

properties and human-like characteristics to the sculptures, partly due to the representational and iconographic themes which include many human figures. These rhetorical schemes have been deployed by the later national narratives and recast in the national discourse. Now, the national body includes the mutilated bodies of the sculptures: the national discourse cancels the distinction between human beings and artefacts (cf. Kopytoff 1986), and it transgresses the distance between past and present. Empathy is the main idiom in many writings and performative rituals surrounding the sculptures, which are seen as expressing the emotional reactions of human beings (see, for example, the poem by Dimoula in Box 2 and Andronikos 1985). Among these emotional reactions, the most common seem to be the nostalgia for the 'homeland', the pain and the agony of living in exile, their separation from their relatives (as in the case of caryatids who are seen as sisters, with one of them exiled in London), the trauma of imprisonment. The vocabulary used in the related discourses is revealing: exile, imprisonment, mutilation. It can be therefore suggested that the sculptures stand as a homology for Greeks in exile, for Ulysses, for the notion of 'nostos', the desire for the return to the homeland (Plate 4). With almost 5 million people who consider themselves Greeks living outside the borders of the Greek state, *nostos* has always been a recurrent theme in the national discourse.

Given the quantity of writings on the Parthenon marbles, it is in a sense surprising that relatively little of the complexity of the phenomenon has been exposed. This article has attempted to show some of the paradoxes, ambiguities and ironies surrounding the cultural life of this group of material culture: the realization that, despite their sacralization and singularization, the sculptures have been commoditized, exchanged and circulated as symbolic capital in the global cultural economy; the irony embodied in the fact that Elgin's removal of the sculptures may have deprived the Hellenic Nation of part of its invaluable national heritage but at the same time it has contributed to the increase of its value in the international cultural economy; and the even greater irony that, if the sculptures were to return to Greece, they may lose part of their value since they will have been removed from the international market of cultural economy, losing at the same time their ability to stand as metaphors for the negotiations of the Hellenic Nation and for the Greeks overseas; the ambiguity of the Hellenic national narrative which employs arguments based on objectified scientific discourses (e.g. on protection, proper aesthetic appreciation), and at the same time plays with the emotional and empathic discourse which anthropomorphizes the sculptures; the dilemma of the same national narrative which tries to come to terms with the idea that classical heritage has been constructed as both a national and global (read Western) resource (cf. Lowenthal 1988, 1998); and its attempt not to associate itself with the current debates on postcolonialism, multiculturalism, indigenous values on heritage and its restitution, knowing that such a thesis would undermine the value of the Hellenic Classical heritage as the cornerstone of the Western civilization.

Finally, this article has hopefully exposed some of the essentialism of most of the rhetoric around the issue, which seems to work within the same frame of ideological principles and meaning: a frame which is based on fixed static identities, on notions of continuities, on Greekness as something essentialist and static, on neocolonialist and orientalizing attitudes which see the people of Greece either as rightful owners of the classical heritage, being descendants of the ancient Greeks, or as volatile and irresponsible people who

**BOX 2**

Κική Διμουλά, "Βρετανικό Μουσείο (Ελγίνου Μάρμαρα)"

Στην ψυχρή του Μουσείου αίθουσα

την κλεμμένη ωραία κοιτώ

μοναχή Καρυάτιδα.

Το σκοτεινό γλυκύ της βλέμμα

επίμονα εστραμμένο έχει

στο σφριγηλό του Διονύσου σώμα

(σε στάση ηδυπαθείας σμιλευμένο)

που δυο βήματα μόνον απέχει.

Το βλέμμα το δικό του έχει πέσει

στην δυνατή της κόρης μέση.

Πολυετές ειδύλλιον υποπτεύομαι

τους δυο αυτούς να χέι ενώσει.

Κι έτσι, όταν το βράδυ η αίθουσα αδειάζει

απ' τους πολλούς, τους θορυβώδεις επισκέπτες,

τον Διόνυσο φαντάζομαι προσεκτικά από τη θέση του να εγείρεται

των διπλανών γλυπτών και αγαλμάτων την υποψία μην κινήσει,

κι όλος παλμό να σύρεται τη συστολή της Καρυάτιδας

με οίνον και με χάδια να λυγίσει.

Δεν αποκλείεται όμως έξω να χ'ω πέσει.

Μιαν άλλη σχέση ίσως να τους δένει

πιο δυνατή, πιο πονεμένη

Τις χειμωνιάτικες βραδυές

και τις εξαισίες του Αυγούστου νύχτες  
 τους βλέπω,  
 απ'τα ψηλά να κατεβαίνουν βάθρα τους,  
 της μέρας αποβάλλοντας το τυπικό τους ύφος,  
 με νοσταλγίας στεναγμούς και δάκρυα  
 τους Παρθενώνες και τα Ερεχθεία που στερήθηκαν  
 στην μνήμη τους με πάθος ν' ανεγείρουν.

Kiki Dimoulas 'British Museum (Elgin Marbles)'  
 (translated by Yannis Hamilakis)

Inside the cold Museum room  
 I stare at the beautiful solitary stolen  
 Caryatid.  
 Her dark sweet eyes  
 persistently fixed  
 on Dionysos' body  
 (poised in sculptured desire)  
 two steps away.  
 His own eyes fixed  
 on the maiden's strong waist  
 I suspect a long love affair here  
 which must have brought them together  
 So, when in the evening the room is emptied  
 of the many noisy visitors,  
 I imagine Dionysos leaving his seat  
 careful not to raise the suspicions of the others  
 and moving full of energy to overcome Caryatid's reservations  
 with wine and caresses.  
 It is possible, however, that I am mistaken.  
 There is perhaps another bond which unites them  
 more powerful, more painful:  
 In the winter evenings  
 and the beautiful August nights  
 I see them,  
 coming down from their high pedestals,  
 shedding their daily formal facade,  
 and with nostalgic sighs and tears  
 passionately resurrecting in their memory  
 the Parthenons and Erechtheions which they have lost.



Plate 4 The cover of the first issue of the student magazine *Nostos*, produced by the Hellenic Society of the University of Wales Lampeter. The explanatory note on the title reads: 'return to the homeland'.

cannot possibly be the proper custodians of what is seen as one of the most valuable pieces of global (Western) heritage.

The debate on the issue will undoubtedly continue and the cultural biography of the sculptures will enter into new phases. But, without understanding the contradictions, the ironies and the ambiguities of the phenomenon, we have very few chances of coming to terms with its complexity, and eventually undermining the essentialisms surrounding its treatment.

**Postscript**

I have been engaged with issues on the socio-politics of the past for a number of years and I always resisted the temptation to write on the Elgin marbles; and yet in private discussions and presentations, it was guaranteed that 'the marbles' would be the one topic which would crop up consistently. I was often asked directly 'So, what do you think about the Elgin Marbles, then?' My attempts to reply by insisting that there are may be other, more important aspects of the socio-politics of the past beyond restitution which I preferred to address, did not seem to satisfy my audience. I was aware of the implications and tacit assumptions of such discussions; of the often unexpressed accusation of Greek hysteria/obsession/paranoia on the topic. So why did I write this article? In the story narrated in the beginning, I said that I signed the petition for the restitution of Parthenon marbles with some scepticism. I have attempted in this article to convey some of that scepticism to the reader, having hopefully illuminated in the process some of the ambiguities and the complexities of the matter.

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*Department of Archaeology  
University of Wales Lampeter*

**Note**

- 1 It is worth noting that the interpretation of the Parthenon marbles and of the frieze in particular is one of the central and hotly debated issues among classicists. In some cases, the debates attract the attention of the international press, as happened with the recent study by Connelly (1996, where earlier debates are reviewed) which suggests a mythological interpretation involving human sacrifice. Moreover, the centrality of the sculptures in the Western imagination and culture has meant that certain interpretations (e.g. such as these emphasizing the heroic and the celebratory character of the artefacts) are favoured at the expense of others (cf. Connelly 1996: 55–6).

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