

Roland Barthes's Visits to Greece

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If we are to believe the various testimonies, Barthes spent two periods of time in Greece, at two very different moments of his life.¹ In 1937, at the age of 21, he took part in the trip organised by the Sorbonne Ancient Theatre Group, of which he was a founding member.² This experience would be related in an account written in a highly literary style and published in 1944 in *Existences*, the student journal at the Saint-Hilaire-le-Touvet sanatorium where Barthes spent most of the War. The article, modestly entitled 'En Grèce' (and not simply 'La Grèce'), adopts a discontinuous form, listing, in no clearly discernible order, a series of brief developments with the following evocative titles: 'Islands', 'Athens', 'Museums, statues', 'Salamis', 'Acrocôlia', 'Aegina', 'Flowers', 'Mycenae, Argos, Tiryns', 'Santorini (a volcanic island)', 'Delos'.³

Some forty years later at the age of 63, between 7 and 18 June 1978 Barthes returned to the country, staying mainly in Athens. This second journey would not give rise to any publication, but written traces remain nevertheless. In the 'Grand fichier' (large filing system) kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris, about twenty cards correspond to the notes taken by Barthes regarding his meetings and discoveries in Greece.⁴ These *nota* are less extensive than the 1944 article; only half-composed, although still perfectly legible, together they constitute a fascinating document on the imaginary of Greece, the passage of time, and the creative process.⁵ A curious reader can glimpse the backstage of the literary work, the crucial moment when things become words under the gaze of a writer-traveller who lives, feels, and reflects on the relation between world and writing.

Place-names: The Place and the Name

There are three types of relationship between text and journey. Sometimes the text accompanies the journey (as in Barthes's notebooks and filing

cards), sometimes the text follows after the journey (as with *Empire of Signs*); and sometimes the text precedes the journey. This last type refers to the traveller's readings before leaving (guidebooks, literary works, written accounts), which provide a preliminary, bookish knowledge of the world, creating expectations and often surprises when we move from representation to reality. Accordingly, everyone has a knowledge of Greece even before going there. Since antiquity, all of Western culture has *written* Greece, whether this concerns its philosophers, the three tragedians, and the reading and rereading of these texts over the centuries, at school or elsewhere. Barthes himself, having read Racine or Chateaubriand, wrote his own Greece in his first text, 'En marge du Criton', and in the dissertation for his diploma of higher studies ('Évocations et incantations dans la tragédie grecque'), supervised by the great Hellenist Paul Mazon and defended at the Sorbonne in 1941.⁶ In 1937, then, Barthes was discovering a country that he already knew through literature and his study of Classics.

'En Grèce' therefore presents the contrast between what one expects and what one discovers, between the dreamed country and the real country that one visits on an organised trip. It is initially concerned with scale and proportion. From the first fragment, 'Islands', the visual impression is central:

My main recollection is that everything seemed very small: at Delos we thought we were approaching a rock near the island, but it was the island itself. Some of these islands are mere rocks.⁷

Barthes has the same experience at Mycenae, Argos, and Tyrinth: 'These are three heaps of rocks on a stony plain'; and the discovery of a big city such as Athens holds other surprises: 'In summer the streets are so hot, so dry, that they smell bad: sour milk, rotten meat'.⁸ His disappointment extends to the inhabitants of Aegina, who are far removed from the legends of its beautiful youths:

For days we have been looking for someone beautiful who reminds us of the splendour of the ancient Greeks; now they are quite the opposite of what they were; many are small, dark-skinned men with flattened features, gnarled skin, oily eyes, bad teeth.⁹

When travelling for a change of scenery, the comparison with France tends to diminish the country being discovered. Accordingly, the 'Acropolis museum is small, provincial [...], like entering a sculptor's studio in Montrouge or Fontenay'; but the comparison with the country of origin, which is strongly present in *Empire of Signs*, is not limited to a feeling (even an ironic one) of disappointment; it is sometimes neutral, for example comparing the clearly visible strategy of the battle of Salamis to the mud of Agincourt or the 'formless plain of Waterloo'; and the comparison is sometimes to the advantage of Greece, where 'the art of shaving gently comes naturally even to young boys, who do it better than in Paris'.¹⁰ Barthes sometimes outplays the simple alternative between reduction and emphasis, as on several occasions he uses a process by which he begins with a criticism before overturning the situation with a pleasant surprise. For example, although the beauty of the Greeks does not live up to expectations, the exceptions provide compensations that outweigh the general rule: 'the only handsome person we've seen was a sixteen-year-old shepherd; he had blond locks, blue eyes, a fine profile, and an overall air of elegance'.¹¹ Similarly on Salamis, although the small, humble boat resembles the ferry between Dinar and Saint-Malo, its arrival provides a little piece of theatre:

[O]n arriving, we were able to have a coffee under the canvas; it leaves in the tiny cup a thick, strongly flavoured sludge that feels like grit between your teeth, and which you wash away with a large glass of chilled water, so that this fault becomes a pleasure.¹²

Beyond what might seem like a simple game involving the expectations created by reading, and the good and bad surprises that follow them, the young Barthes also offers a real reflection on Greece, or rather on the imaginary of Greece that exists in contemporary France. His own position is clear: Western culture considers Atticism as the ideal of ancient culture, at the risk of reducing the wealth of its heritage and sanitising its materiality. To begin with, Barthes restores the historicity of Greece, insisting both on the diversity of its components and their evolution over time. This is true for its nature as well as its culture. While admiring the rare flowers found in an arid landscape, the young traveller rejects the idea of an eternal Greece, fixed in its customs and landscapes: 'Could it be that countries change their geography as well as their history?'.¹³ In 1978, Barthes's notes are once again very sensitive to 'ethno-sociographic levels', the palimpsest of a country torn between East and West, between the

Byzantine world and the Turkish presence. It is therefore a matter of replacing a harmonious classicism with the reality of a composite and violent world ('the land is so violent') – whether this concerns landscapes baked by the sun, the great tragedies, or the 'acrocòlia', the offal in butchers' shops which provokes hesitation or disgust.¹⁴

In contrast to the ethereal universe constructed by the academic imaginary, Barthes seeks adventure in a world where anything can happen:

The vault of the sky, the wave that gently washes on this land where we are finally treading in places that we had previously believed to be purely ethereal, the scent of exoticism that emanates from a summer night full of music and faces, all of this inspires and makes up the setting of an adventure.¹⁵

The comparison between the white marble statue presented by history and the entirely coloured original version becomes an example of the opposition between an archaic Greece and an imaginary that can be adapted to anything:

Now all that survives is the highly distinguished; Greece has managed to produce ruins that are even more beautiful than its masterpieces; or at least ruins of universal appeal, which have impressed everyone (except Saint Paul), and are just as capable of adorning a Renaissance château, eighteenth-century gardens, or a play by Giraudoux; but sometimes one would like to see them escape from the style for which they are so vaunted, and rediscover a more unplanned character, more in keeping with the wonderful disorder of the world and with the passion of their time.¹⁶

In the 1944 article, just as in his dissertation, and most likely under the influence of Paul Mazon, Barthes made a contribution to overturning the sanitised version of the 'Greek miracle'.

A Mediterranean Hedonism

For the traveller seeking adventure, Greece provides an echo of all the cultures that border the Mediterranean. By resituating the country in an Orient that oscillates between imaginary and reality, Barthes places all the

countries that he has visited in dialogue with each other. In 1937 he had not visited either the Maghreb or the Mashriq (his stay in Egypt came later, in 1949); but by the time of his trip to Greece in 1978 he had established regular relations with Morocco and Tunisia. Having become tired of the events of 1968, he accepted a post at the University of Rabat in 1969 for a year, returning later to the country frequently as a tourist. From November 1977 to June 1978 he made three visits to Morocco and one to Tunisia, on the invitation of his old friend Philippe Rebeyrol, staying in the magnificent residence of the French Ambassador at La Marsa. The 'Grand fichier' contains notes from these different trips: a group of about twenty filing cards relate to Barthes's stay in Rabat and Mahioula. These notes address very varied subjects, recalling the writing project undertaken in 'Incidents', which is composed of snapshots of small events of everyday life and varied encounters, particular ones of a sexual nature.¹⁷

In 1937, as if by intuition, Barthes was already describing a geographical and cultural universe unified by numerous correspondences: 'The hairdresser, the shoe-polisher, and the bath attendant are three recurring figures of the Mediterranean countries'.¹⁸ This Mediterranean, more or less imagined, is characterised by a scholarly combination of hedonism and melancholy. Barthes's Mediterranean, a place of sun, light, happiness, and rebirth, follows in the footsteps of André Gide (*The Fruits of the Earth, The Immoralist, If it Die...*), and similarly relates the moral and sexual emancipation of a young man, from a Protestant background, eager to experience all the adventure that is offered by this crossroads between the West and the Orient. There is also an influence from Camus, which therefore introduces Algeria into the web of correspondences. The description of Delos in the 1944 text fully justifies this association:

This orderly succession of light and more solid horizons symbolises, for me, the marriage of earth and water, which is nowhere more sumptuous than here; the island is the centre of a solar conflagration; the sun insists, it thickens the blood; it enters through the eyes, the ears, it is heard, it is an oppressive silence; then it is diluted, lightened, drawn up; it attaches to each wave a sword of flames.¹⁹

In the same issue of *Existences* (and this is no coincidence), Barthes published a 'Réflexion sur le style de *L'Étranger*', having read this novel when it was first published, and strongly admired it.²⁰ The dialogue between the two authors and between the two articles (on Greece and Camus respectively) is striking: the presence of the word 'noce' ('marriage')

recalls the book in which Camus celebrates the happiness of Tipaza; the happy meeting of earth and water (not to mention the sky) corresponds to the harmony of the Camusian landscape, which draws these worlds together without entirely combining them; as for the 'sword of flames', this recalls the metaphors at the end of the murder scene on the beach under a blazing sun.²¹

Barthes is very aware of the tradition that he is joining, and he makes his personal mark on it by combining the hedonism of travel with the most ordinary, even anodyne elements of everyday life. As we have seen, the taste of coffee, the beauty of flowers, the consistency of coffee residue between the teeth, all give rise to brief notations, far from the great lyricism of Camus or of Gide's *Fruits of the Earth*.²² In both the 1944 article and the 1978 notes, Barthes extols the virtues of a light drunkenness (recalling the 'sobria ebrietas' of *A Lover's Discourse*), which allows the subject a degree of detachment from the world, without losing self-control and contact with reality.²³ When he mentions, in two notes written in Morocco, the pleasant intoxication produced by the wine of Boulaouane ('Vinum laetificat', he adds by way of commentary), does Barthes remember the custom that he described in 1944 in the fragment 'Acrocôlia'? The Greeks tend to dilute their wine with water:

This is the sign of an ingenious soberness, which is maintained not by virtue but to make it easier to achieve the release of intoxication, pleasures, passions. An intoxication obtained with only a little wine is of very different nature to an overwhelming intoxication; getting drunk on limited means was an art form that led to states of an exquisite singularity, almost divine; the Orientals – in all respects so similar to the Greeks – practised the same asceticism; there are poems on the subject by a Persian poet.²⁴

These seemingly innocuous notations are revealing of Barthes's predilection for a consciousness that remains lucid even when the mind sets adrift, his distrust for drugs that affect one's judgement, and even his preference for phantasy over dreaming.

The presence of young men establishes another great difference with the author of *Noëces* and even with Gidian desire, which is more ironic or mediated. The 1944 text is very allusive, even if it is not difficult (at least in retrospect) to read between the lines. The description of statues ('the statues in their current state are like angels of pleasure, whose nakedness has a Jansenist quality'), the appearance of the handsome

shepherd who resembles photographs by Wilhelm von Gloeden ('he had blond locks, blue eyes, a fine profile, and an overall air of elegance'), the use of male names, all create a carefully controlled eroticism.²⁵ Writing in 1978 on note cards for his own use, Barthes is more direct, even crude, when describing the sexual beauty of the statues. But in both texts, at both moments in time, we find the same dialectic between words and body, the same dialogue between culture and adventure. Thus, in 1944, the appearance of the sixteen-year-old shepherd leads to the following comment: 'it was Charmides, Lysis, Clinias, or Antolycos'.²⁶ Thus, in 1978, Barthes delighted in Greek first names, which he provides in their French translation: Diamant, Esprit, Toussaint, Liberté, Paris, Adoni ... And again in 1978, an encounter with someone with the first name Lefteris stirs up in Barthes a literary imaginary – archaeo-Hellenic, Platonic – and he stresses both its familiarity and its exoticism. Evidently, the Mediterranean, a space that is both geographical and cultural, never allows a separation of the reader who travels and the traveller who has read.

Two cards in Barthes's filing system from 1978 seem to occupy a singular place in this universe that is heavily marked by homosexuality. Upon entering two churches by chance, Barthes comes across orthodox ceremonies for a marriage, then a baptism, which excite a strong emotion in him. How should we interpret this positive reaction prompted by sacraments that clearly relate exclusively to heterosexuality and the family (in 1978 same-sex marriage, *in vitro* fertilisation, and surrogacy were all a long way off)?²⁷ Should we see a form of nostalgia, a barely concealed fascination with conjugality and filiation? Such an interpretation, although possible, does not seem very convincing. We should first note that, in both cases, Barthes's judgement shows no leniency. The young newly-weds (a couple conforming to the style of the sentimental magazine *Nous deux*) and the characters involved in the baptism are striking in their ugliness and triviality. As for the religious or sacred dimension to the Greek ceremonies, Barthes excludes them completely and even makes this very exclusion into the central interest of the spectacle. Indeed, what matters to him is a reflection on the structure and the ritual. The emotion arises from a double awareness. First, an awareness that sociability, of whatever sort, protects the subject from loneliness and abandonment.²⁸ Second, the code or the rule creates a genuine moment of rest, as long as the ritual is 'pure', free from all aspirations to transcendence, be it religious or philosophical.²⁹ This marriage and baptism without faith, without conjugality, make an impression on Barthes by the rigour of a ritual that has no purpose other than itself, which simply plays out gestures that are predictable, but

without interiority, emotivity, or compunction.³⁰ Rather than troubling the solitude of a gay man suffering from a lack of sociability (it is still possible to join a community of one's own choosing) or posterity (the desire for filiation is not a universal law, and creation often takes the place of procreation), these ceremonies show the extent to which, for Barthes, the rule should not be conflated with abuse, and ritual is 'necessary' even if the institution practising it is 'detestable'.³¹

Nonetheless, whereas the article of 1944 clearly testifies to the pleasure of adventure, the two cards in Barthes's filing system from 1978 reveal a discomfort that undermines hedonism with a sort of 'melancholy' (Barthes uses the vernacular term 'cafard'). The context of crisis seems to give meaning to these travels, which are conceived as a means of escape and a change of scenery. In 1937 Europe was embroiled in the political turmoil that would lead to the Second World War. The young Barthes was well aware of the political dangers and, with a few school friends, he formed the DRAF (Défense Républicaine Anti-Fasciste) in 1934. When he wrote 'En Grèce' he was in the midst of the War and suffering from illness, and it therefore restored a happy memory in these unhappy times. The article of 1944 bears no trace of these unhappy times, except by contrast, as it constitutes a small island of happiness on the magic mountain. In 1978 and 1979, the atmosphere had darkened once again: the arrogance of 1968, the loss of his mother, the uncertainty besetting his project of writing a novel, all created an atmosphere of melancholy, which he attempted to dispel by seeking out the sun and the young men of the Mediterranean. Whereas, in 1937, Barthes contrasted an imaginary of Greece with the real spectacle of the country, the notes of 1978 contain many ambivalent comments, torn between the listing of little corners of paradise and the unease provoked by the surrounding ugliness. Neither Greece nor Morocco is capable of reversing the current, of offering, like Japan, a literary utopia as a defence against the disappointments of the Western world.

As in 'Incidents', the filing cards of 1978 are full of contrasting notations, the beautiful neighbour and the ugly neighbour, the happy encounter and the ubiquity of irritating characters. Sitting at his desk, Barthes divides the landscape into two parts, one idyllic, almost heavenly, the other marked by the ruins of a wasteland; the same opposition occurs in restaurant toilets that are strikingly dilapidated and dirty, but whose window opens onto a dreamlike setting. As he noted on a filing card of 1978, Barthes considered for a moment the possibility of retiring to Mahioula, as he found it so beautiful and peaceful. But this project came

to an end barely a moment after it had been formulated. It would have required him to feel that he was not only passing through, that he really belonged there, that he could be sure to feel at home. But the traveller, in Greece or elsewhere, is never at home: he always ends up returning to Paris.

From the World to Writing

All that remained, then, was literature. In the last year of his life, Barthes started work on the novel that had long been a subject of phantasy. Would he have completed this project? We will never know: a traffic accident and a nosocomial disease indefinitely forestalled any answer to this question. In any case, the filing system shows clearly that Barthes worked to the very end on a renewal of his writing, remaining undecided between a history of literature ('Our Literature') or a more explicitly novelistic form (*Vita Nova*).³² He was in Morocco when the 'Vita Nova' conversion of 15 April 1978 occurred and which is mentioned in the plans for *Vita Nova*: Barthes suddenly resolves to devote his life to literary creation.

This attitude, which is exemplified in the filing cards of 1978, is hardly new. The first trip to Greece, in 1944, should already be read both as a finished work and as a testing ground for a young man exploring the wealth of literary style. It is fascinating to read this article in its historical context, to identify the forms of elegant expression that are peculiar to an era and a certain education; it is also unsettling to view it in light of the work to come and to discover that certain stylistic traits, certain poetic choices would become recurrent. To start with, the taste for rare words, which verge on preciosity. The 'elegance' ('*vénusté*', a word derived from the goddess Venus) of the shepherd, the 'oppressive' silence at Delos ('*térébrant*', literally 'boring in', like an insect), the 'seductive' colour of the statues ('*alliciante*', from the Latin '*allicio*', meaning 'I attract'), all testify to a concern for writing which we might find a little naive.³³ Even if Barthes would soon relinquish his use of these rare terms, we should recall that he used the term '*vénusté*' throughout his life (for example, in relation to Zambinella in *S/Z*), and that the same appetite for writing inspired the choice or creation of many terms such as '*studium*', '*punctum*', '*obvie*' [obvious], and '*obtus*' [obtuse]. When we read the phrase 'round blocks of columns express their whiteness in the sun', we might well be amused by the slightly facile juxtaposition of a familiar expression ('round blocks of columns') with such a highfalutin formulation ('express their whiteness');

but we should also remember Barthes's taste for the term 'express' ('exprimer'), which relates less to mimesis or enunciation than it does to the action of forcing the juice out of fruit.³⁴ In 1944, as in the decades that followed, this verb indicates both a concern for a certain preciousness in writing and the will to describe the world in its materiality, to establish, by slightly personifying the lemon or the column, a sort of disillusioned complicity between man and world, between a hedonist spectator and the sensuality of things, perhaps recalling the 'tender indifference of the world' of which Meursault becomes aware at the end of *L'Étranger*. The same commentary applies to the 'roasted traveller' who enjoys the coolness of museums.³⁵ The unexpected use of the adjective 'roasted' ('torréfié', the term used for roasted coffee beans) is an implicit reference to Mediterranean coffee, associating once again man with nature, the subject with its environment, in conformity with the phenomenology of sensitivity that runs throughout Barthes's work, from the thematic criticism of *Michelet* up to *Camera Lucida*.

Beyond the choice of words, the 1944 article manifests Barthes's concern for their arrangement, his search for the right formula and the right turn of phrase. Having reread all his books in order to write *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, Barthes boasts, in the 'Green File', that he has never written a sentence without a verb.³⁶ This broad claim is untrue, as the beginning of the fragment 'Aegina' clearly shows: 'A wood of very short pines. Gentle climb to the temple, in the pure, damp air of dawn, the rising sun shining on the white ruins of Aphala; we see the bright coast of Attica'.³⁷ But in spite of its excessive generalisation, this value judgment bears witness to the importance of syntax in all Barthes's works. As an accomplished pupil of the French school system (where they teach the model 'subject-verb-complement!'), and influenced by Saussurian linguistics, Barthes 'idolises' the sentence.³⁸ In this respect he is working in the tradition of Flaubert, who wished to give each phrase the degree of self-evidence and necessity that only poetry possessed. How and why should we compose a sentence? For a series of writers, including Barthes, the whole problem of creation is contained in this question.

The answer involves the examination of models from Rhetoric and prosody. The abundance of binary or ternary constructions in the 1944 article bears witness to this desire to create a sort of syntactic self-sufficiency that gives the reader the feeling that the sentence has reached a state of plenitude, without it being necessary to remove or add a single word. The model of the Alexandrine similarly haunts French prose, with the contradictory injunction to draw on its formal effects but without

writing blank verse. We might think of the famous opening of *Salammbô*: ‘C’était à Mégara, faubourg de Carthage, dans les jardins d’Hamilcar’ (‘It was at Megara, a suburb of Carthage, in the gardens of Hamilcar’). What is it that creates the force and magic of Flaubert’s *incipit*, which is so representative of this syntactical self-sufficiency that it is imagined to be the essence of literature? The initial impetus of the paragraph and the proliferation of historic and exotic names play a certain role (Flaubert is an Orientalist writer). But we would place a greater emphasis on the way the phrase approaches the Alexandrine in search of the right form, the right formula. In fact, the first fragment, with its six syllables, corresponds to a hemistich, which is perfectly accented on the sixth syllable. How, then, are we to continue if we are to avoid breaking the rule that separates prose from poetry? After the six syllables of a false hemistich, the second section (‘faubourg de Carthage’) contains five syllables, then the last (‘dans les jardins d’Hamilcar’) contains seven. In other words, having created an illusion of an Alexandrine, Flaubert continues the sentence by first undershooting the length of the hemistich then exceeding it, so that it is both phantasised and avoided.

The 1944 article, which is so clearly marked by a concern for artistic writing, also takes its rhythm from the favoured Alexandrine metre of French poetry. The opening of ‘Museums, statues’ plays in its own way with syllables and accents. Indeed, the first sentence, with its desire for formal perfection, contains twelve syllables, like an Alexandrine: ‘Les musées sont frais au voyageur torréfié’ (‘The museums are refreshing for the roasted traveller’).³⁹ But is it really an Alexandrine? We would be more accurate in calling it a dodecasyllabic sentence, as the accentuation is a long way from the canonical model which places the two main accents at the end of each of the two hemistich, that is, on every sixth syllable. It seems difficult to accentuate the ‘au’, with the result that the sentence feels like an unfinished metre, the ghost of an Alexandrine. In a very different way, this same ghost seems to haunt the first fragment, ‘Islands’:

Certaines de ces îles sont de simples rochers; d’autres
profilent des horizons brumeux dans des matins très clairs;
d’autres sont couvertes de bois de pins, d’autres enfin, sur
leur terre violente, exposent les grands ossements blancs des
villes évaporées. [Some of these islands are mere rocks; others
create foggy horizons on very clear mornings; others are
covered with pine woods; others, on their violent earth,
expose the great white bones of evaporated cities].⁴⁰

If we follow the course of the sentence with the Alexandrine in mind, we will hear a near perfect verse, as long as we do not pronounce the mute ‘e’ in ‘îles’ (‘Certaines de ces îles sont de simples rochers’). The next sentence seems to be free of versification (‘d’autres profilent des horizons brumeux dans des matins très clairs’); but we only need to distinguish the protasis from the apodosis, and isolate the two complements, one object and one complement of time (‘des horizons brumeux dans des matins très clairs’) to see a perfect Alexandrine appear. The same goes for the last part of the sentence, although it is decidedly prosaic (‘d’autres sont couvertes de bois de pins, d’autres enfin, sur leur terre violente, exposent les grands ossements blancs des villes évaporées’). Once again, we only need to isolate the object of the verb ‘exposer’ and elide the mute ‘e’ of ‘villes’ to hear the Alexandrine verse form that is the fetish of French poetry. The fragment ends with a theatrical formula that combines the effect of the falling cadence, the use of a picturesque metaphor, and the rhythm of a muted Alexandrine: ‘les grands ossements blancs des villes évaporées’.

There is now only one last exercise for us to consider, which, beyond the level of the sentence, concerns the composition of the text. In his 1972 article ‘Where to Begin?’, Barthes recommends beginning the analysis of a work by comparing the beginning and the end, the *incipit* and the *excipit*.⁴¹ If we apply this system to the 1944 article, it is clear that the first fragment strongly contrasts with the last. Indeed, everything begins with the evocation of the Greek islands, scattered in the Mediterranean: ‘In Greece, there are so many islands that one does not know if each one is the centre or the edge of an archipelago’.⁴² This flexible and unpredictable arrangement seems to anticipate a well-known passage from *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (‘The circle of fragments’) and even the ‘archipelagic thinking’ of Édouard Glissant, with which it would seem Barthes was not familiar.⁴³ The *incipit* of ‘En Grèce’ reads mostly as a metaphor of the text itself, which is presented as a series of autonomous fragments, unified by the sensibility of the writer-traveller. But we often forget to oppose the beginning to the end of the article, to confront this evocation of a decentred, horizontal, plural world with the long description of ‘Delos’ which, both literally and figuratively, completely changes the perspective:

Here I stand, almost at the top of Mount Cynthus, on the mosaic of a Roman villa; our gazes rise up, the island is enlarged; we see it becoming the centre of a group of Cyclades which seem to be joined to each other by stretches of blue: Naxos, Paros, Andros, Tinos. This orderly succession

of light and more solid horizons symbolises, for me, the marriage of earth and water, which is nowhere more sumptuous than here; the island is the centre of a solar conflagration; the sun insists, it thickens the blood; it enters through the eyes, the ears, it is heard, it is an oppressive silence; then it is diluted, lightened, drawn up; it attaches to each wave a sword of flame.⁴⁴

Could we not argue that this opposition, present since 1944, between the archipelago and the panorama, relates to two aspirations, both contradictory and complementary, that are found in all Barthes's work? On the one hand, the taste for fragments, for constructions free of rhetoric and narrative; on the other hand, an enduring passion for the view from above, which gives the spectator a feeling of euphoria, power (and sometimes discomfort). In its literal sense, this corresponds to the text on the Eiffel Tower.⁴⁵ In a figurative sense, the panorama corresponds to Michelet, who casts his eye across history to restore both its presence and its intelligibility; and, in a general sense, it corresponds to the attitude of the intellectual who detaches himself from the world and takes to the heights to express its meaning and mythologies. All Barthes's thought oscillates between participation and detachment, the view from above and immersion. And all his writing tries to articulate the discontinuous and the continuous, which are indispensable to the creation of a work that is coherent, free, and readable. Barthes's last two books admirably illustrate this dual aspiration, exemplified by the Greek islands, for architecture and ruins respectively: whereas *A Lover's Discourse* refuses to hierarchise its various figures, and favours an alphabetical order, *Camera Lucida* opts for a linear structure, which follows the various stages of a hermeneutic process.

This obsession with finding a balance between the continuous and the discontinuous also inspires the filing cards written in Greece and Morocco in 1978. Haunted by desire for the novel, Barthes turns once again to Proust, who makes his own life into the redesigned material of his literary work. But we need to make an important distinction from the author of *In Search of Lost Time*; whereas Proust (who inspires the search in *Camera Lucida*) preserves biographical chronology, a filing card written in Morocco proposes on the contrary to 'desyntagmatise' life, that is, to scatter throughout the work a series of biographemes, notations gathered here and there and freely redeployed.

The filing cards reveal another aspect of Barthesian creation: rather than a fine style, or the sentence's confrontation with poetry, or questions of composition, they put on display the moment when reality becomes

word. Between the initial *notula* and the rewritten *nota*, the filing cards bear witness to this difficult process of materialisation that allows each subject, each consciousness to take the first step towards transforming an individual experience into a text for other readers. It is a matter of finding the right form, that is, a sentence that gives the impression that there is nothing more to add; in this respect, the correct form is a matter of the traveller-writer reconciling mimesis and semiosis, the need to describe the sensation and to convey its intelligibility. In Morocco, as in Greece, Barthes was very attentive to the 'vénueté' of the young men that he met, and especially of their eyes. Barthes notes his attraction to the form of the pupils of a young Moroccan man who reminds him of a friend back in Paris. Some beautiful filing cards display the writer's struggle to express the beauty of a certain young Ahmed, trying to approach reality with an arrangement of adjectives and metaphors, seeking the right adjective that will convey the specificity of the spectacle that the traveller sees before him. The obsessive desire to describe Ahmed's eyes returns in a second filing card, without any greater success. A passage from *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* gives a clear idea of this creative effort:

I try, little by little, to *render* his voice. I make an adjectival approach: agile, fragile, youthful, somewhat broken? No, not quite; rather: *overcultivated*, having a faint British flavour.⁴⁶

Although the writer does not always succeed in expressing himself, does he not have several tricks up his sleeve? Ronsard, for example, as a note in *A Lover's Discourse* tells us, found a wonderful solution for expressing the sweetness of the beloved woman, by escaping from tautology with an excess of tautology: 'When I was caught up in the sweet beginning / Of a sweetness so deliciously sweet...'⁴⁷ Faced with Ahmed's eyes, the writer-traveller too finds a solution through a stroke of luck, which will allow him to say something about the singularity of the young man after all: 'I give up. One day, I'll think of the right adjective. Or he shall be: he whose eyes I cannot describe.'

Both Greece and Morocco are lands of 'adventure': the adventure of encounters, of life, of literature. In a way, beyond a description and reflection on the Mediterranean, Greece is conflated with all the places in the world that stimulate Barthes's writing, excite his pathos, and provoke emotions. When we focus on the creative process, on the desire to draw as close as possible to things and words, we struggle to define anything that

is specific to Greece or Morocco. When he travels or reads, Barthes gives only the illusion of forgetting himself; it is always him, always his subjectivity at the centre of all these operations. An initial impulse leads him to go out into the world, to wander the streets of Paris, answer different demands for writing, even to the point of working on authors that he does not like, such as Racine. A second impulse leads him to reduce the distance separating him from the spectacle and the object, and he slowly makes his own use of what he observes. Whether in Greece, Morocco, or Paris, Barthes seeks out the detail that pricks him, *punctum*-like, the reality that speaks to him, the beautiful face that attracts him, the suffering that elicits his compassion. In Greece and Morocco Barthes acts as a writer in pursuit of the same creative path, fully aware of the necessity both of constructing his *œuvre* and avoiding limiting himself to mere repetition. Does this mean that Greece and Morocco, and even Paris, are interchangeable? Are they merely the places in which he found himself, with the same gaze producing the same effect, whatever the spectacle might be?

The only answer is an ambiguous one. Barthes always travels with himself, here or elsewhere. But Greece offered him, despite everything, a form of singularity that corresponds to a form of plenitude, even paroxysm. In a way, because it is a land of high culture and, more than any other country, confronts the traveller with the power of imaginaries, and because it corresponds to a certain art of living prized by Barthes, Gide, or Camus (the ubiquity of sea and sun, the flavoursome simplicity of the food, the ease of new encounters), Greece (and Morocco to some extent) resembles Arcadia. But an Arcadia without naivety, which seduces without making one forget the presence of death and melancholy. In Greece and Morocco, Barthes found it more possible than anywhere else to satisfy the pleasures that corresponded to his tastes and culture. And more than anywhere else he was also aware of the vanity of worldly things. 'Et in Arcadia ego' is the phrase which appears on a famous painting by Poussin.⁴⁸ Does not the whole ambiguity of this sentence – 'I too have lived in Arcadia' or 'Even in Arcadia, I, death, exist' – symbolise the desire and illusion of earthly paradises?

Notes

¹ For details of Barthes's life, see the well-researched biography by Tiphaine Samoyault, *Roland Barthes: A Biography* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016); see in particular Chapters 5 ('His whole life behind him') and 18 ("Vita Nova").

² The year is often, mistakenly, given as 1938, and this error started with Barthes himself it would seem; see the convincing reasons for the correction in Maarten de Pourcq's contribution below.

³ All references to this text relate to the edition contained in the *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty, 5 vols (Paris: Seuil, 2002), vol. I, pp. 68-75.

⁴ Barthes maintained a filing system throughout his life; it was initially organised according to academic criteria, but in the 1970s the notes became more diaristic in form. The 'Grand fichier' corresponds to the last two years of Barthes's life. I would like to thank Michel Salzedo and Éric Marty for allowing me to consult this document. I was asked not to cite from it owing to the very intimate nature of certain files.

⁵ Barthes was always equipped with a notebook in which to record his reactions. Using these notebooks he would then write up more extensive files, passing from the *notula* (sometimes just a single word) to the *nota* (as long as a sentence); for more on this distinction, see Roland Barthes, *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France (1978-1979 and 1979-1980)*, ed. by Nathalie Léger, trans. by Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 90-93.

⁶ In 'En marge du *Criton*', written in 1933, Barthes satirically changes the end of Plato's dialogue: Socrates is persuaded to go on living by the sight of a plate of figs, and flees Athens with his disciples. It was published and discussed by Barthes in 1974 under the title 'Premier texte' in the journal *L'Arc*, in a special issue devoted to Barthes. The text is included in the *OC V*, pp. 497-501.

⁷ Barthes, 'En Grèce', p. 68.

⁸ Barthes, 'En Grèce', p. 72, p. 68.

⁹ Barthes, 'En Grèce', p. 71.

¹⁰ Barthes, 'En Grèce', p. 69, p. 70, p. 68.

¹¹ Barthes, 'En Grèce', p. 71.

¹² Barthes, 'En Grèce', p. 70.

¹³ Barthes, 'En Grèce', p. 72.

¹⁴ Barthes, 'En Grèce', p. 72.

¹⁵ Barthes, 'En Grèce', pp. 68-69.

¹⁶ Barthes, 'En Grèce', p. 69.

¹⁷ Barthes edited these notes but was reluctant to publish them. 'Incidents' was first published, posthumously, in the collection edited by François Wahl, *Incidents* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), and, in English translation as *Incidents*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 11-41.

¹⁸ Barthes, 'En Grèce', p. 68.

¹⁹ Barthes, 'En Grèce', p. 75.

²⁰ Roland Barthes, 'Réflexion sur le style de *l'Étranger*', in *OC I*, pp. 75-79.

²¹ In '*L'Étranger*, roman solaire', published in 1954, Barthes describes the novel in terms that strongly recall the passage of 'En Grèce' relating to Delos: 'On the beach there is another figure of the sun: here it does not make things liquid, but rather makes them harder, it transforms all matter into metal, makes the sea into a sword, sand becomes steel, a gesture becomes murder: the sun is a weapon, blade, triangle, mutilation, in opposition to the soft, mute flesh of man' (*OC I*, pp. 480-81).

²² When he is leaving La Marsa, Barthes is moved by the bouquet of flowers offered to him by the little gardener (note card from 1978).

²³ 'Sobria Ebrietas' is the heading for the final section of the book, on the 'will-to-possess'; Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 232.

²⁴ Barthes, 'En Grèce', p. 71.

²⁵ Barthes, 'En Grèce', p. 69, p. 71. See the text 'Wilhelm von Gloeden', written by Barthes in 1979 for the catalogue of the exhibition held in Spoleto in 1978. Baron von Gloeden posed the young peasants that he photographed in compositions evoking ancient art: 'he populates the Antiquity thus paraded (and by inference the pederasty postulated) with African bodies. Perhaps he is right, after all: didn't Delacroix report that the truth of classical drapery could be found only among the Arabs? Anyway, it is delectable, the contradiction between this whole literary apparatus of third-year Greek and the bodies of these young peasant gigolos (if any of these is still alive, may I be forgiven the expression, it is not an insult), with their heavy somber gaze and the blue-black glaze of sun-baked beetles'; Roland Barthes, 'Wilhelm von Gloeden', in *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 195-97.

²⁶ Barthes, 'En Grèce', p. 71.

²⁷ This religious and familial scene recalls the fragment entitled 'Exclusion' in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*: 'Walking through the Church of Saint-Sulpice and happening to witness the end of a wedding, he has a feeling of exclusion. Now, why this faltering, produced under the effect of the silliest of spectacles: ceremonial, religious, conjugal, and petit bourgeois (it was not a large wedding)? Chance had produced that rare moment in which the whole *symbolic* accumulates and forces the body to yield. He had received in a single gust all the divisions of which he is the object, as if, suddenly, it was the very *being* of exclusion with which he had been bludgeoned: dense and hard'; see Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 85-86.

²⁸ Cf. *A Lover's Discourse*, p. 47: '(Power of structures: perhaps that is what is desired in them.)'

²⁹ 'I go to the code as others go to mass, without believing in it' (note written in 1975, included in the 'Grand fichier').

³⁰ Some brief notes by Barthes allow a connection between Greece and Japan (that more distant Orient), the Orthodox baptism and Bunraku theatre, two forms of ritual which are fairly similar, despite all their differences. On the one hand, the gaze of the young priest does not accompany his voice, as Barthes notes on a filing card; on the other hand, the Japanese puppet theatre allows a distinction between ‘three sites of the spectacle: the puppet, the manipulator, the vociferant: the effected gesture, the effective gesture, and the vocal gesture’. Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), p. 49).

³¹ These are the terms used by Barthes on a filing card.

³² See Claude Coste, ‘From Fichier to *Œuvre*: Barthes and the “Our Literature” Project’, in *Interdisciplinary Barthes*, ed. by Diana Knight (forthcoming 2020).

³³ Barthes, ‘En Grèce’, p. 71, p. 73, p. 70.

³⁴ Barthes, ‘En Grèce’, p. 69.

³⁵ Barthes, ‘En Grèce’, p. 69.

³⁶ The ‘Green File’ is so called because of the colour of the box.

³⁷ Barthes, ‘En Grèce’, p. 71.

³⁸ Roland Barthes, ‘Deliberation’, in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 361.

³⁹ Barthes, ‘En Grèce’, p. 69.

⁴⁰ Barthes, ‘En Grèce’, p. 68.

⁴¹ ‘Where to Begin?’, first published in the first issue of *Poétique*, in 1971, and included in *New Critical Essays*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: California University Press, 1990), pp. 79-89, compares the beginning and end of Jules Verne’s novel *The Mysterious Island*, on which Barthes ran a course at the University of Rabat in 1970.

⁴² Barthes, ‘En Grèce’, p. 68.

⁴³ ‘To write by fragments: the fragments are then so many stones on the perimeter of a circle: I spread myself around: my whole little universe in crumbs; at the centre, what?’; Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, pp. 92-93.

⁴⁴ Barthes, ‘En Grèce’, p. 73.

⁴⁵ *La Tour Eiffel*, with text by Barthes and photographs by André Martin, was published in 1964 by Delpire Éditeur; it is published in English translation in the volume *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: California University Press, 1997), pp. 3-17. Barthes particularly describes the symbolic dialogue between the Eiffel Tower and Notre-Dame.

⁴⁶ Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, p. 67.

⁴⁷ Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, p. 197.

⁴⁸ The most famous version of the painting is kept at the Louvre in Paris: *The Arcadian Shepherds* or *Et in Arcadia Ego* (circa 1637-1639, oil on canvas, 85 x 121 cm).

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