

Martin Heidegger, *Sojourns: The Journey to Greece*. Trans. by John Panteleimon Manoussakis. Foreword by John Sallis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005) 70 pages. \$14.95

Heidegger as Tourist

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Imagine for a moment yourself in a place rich in the monuments of an ancient past. It is difficult to conceive what one might find more annoying, hordes of scurrying tourists or the occasional scholar with pretensions of expertise. But insofar as the living present obstacles to *knowing* the dead, the latter might be more grievous. For which archaeologist has not wished to sweep away modern habitations in order to reveal the lost treasures of the earth below?

In *Sojourns: The Journey to Greece*, penned in 1962, on the occasion of Heidegger's *very first* visit to Greece, one finds the dilemmas of tourism and scholarship particularly heightened. As one might expect, confronted with the toxic sludge that slows the flow of once sacred streams, Heidegger finds that tourism is a form of technology: "with the unthoughtful onslaught of tourism an alien power enforces its own commands and regulations" (55). Interestingly, this judgment does not imply that Heidegger appears an unfriendly visitor of the scholarly variety. Reporting his luxury cruise through the islands, he recounts "the friendly crew on the ship;" "the personnel in the dining room were equally courteous and caring" (7). He finds warm words for the peasant women on a tiny island near Delos, "they had spread out colorful textiles and embroideries for sale—a joyful spectacle, witness to a poor but assiduous life" (30). Heidegger does not even begrudge his fellow tourists on the ship who dutifully make a "sincere effort to educate

themselves reading informative guidebooks.” He does not doubt that such efforts are “pleasant” and “useful” for individuals (9). No, for Heidegger the dilemmas of tourism and scholarship are heightened because the stakes of a visit to “Greece” are so high.

For Heidegger a trip to “Greece” has nothing to do with the edifying experiences of the individual—be it the dutifully lounging tourist or the ever hungry Hegelian *Geist* (the historical consumer *par excellence*). The possibility of “returning to Greece” rather, for Heidegger, involves the *confrontation* of the future with the past, the “enigmatic relation” between the fateful “flight of the gods of Greece” and the present power of technology (3). It bespeaks of the fate of humanity and of existence itself: “the historical future...will be decided by whether its relationship to the beginning will remain in oblivion or will become a recollective thinking. The journey to Greece must contain the course of such a reflection” (38). Clearly this is a tall order for a scholarly tourist. With such earnest ambitions—nothing less than his life’s work and the fate of existence—Heidegger accordingly reports how he long hesitated to make the trip, “for fear of disappointment: the Greece of today could prevent the Greece of antiquity, and what was proper to it, from coming to light”(4).

Skepticism—the virtue of the Cartesian individual—is not the philosophical approach most closely connected to Heidegger, to say the least. But fascinatingly, the poetic philosopher of worldly disclosure and mystical revelation proves himself to have plenty of personal *doubts*. Indeed “doubt” is one of the primary literary devices through which Heidegger narrates his journey from island to island, temple to monument. His hesitation, he acknowledges at the outset of *Sojourns*, indicates a “doubt” concerning his entire philosophical project, as if “the thought dedicated to the land of the flown gods was

nothing but a mere invention and thus the way of thinking (*Denkweg*) might be proved to be an errant way (*Irrweg*)”(4-5). “Doubts” plague the *Schwartzwalder* when he spies Corfu: “Maybe the notions that I brought with me were exaggerated and misleading. Everything looked more like an Italian landscape” (8). He finds “doubts” too in Ithaca; and these “doubts remained whether we would ever be granted the experience of what is originally [*anfaenglisch*] Greek...doubts about whether such effort to return to the origin [*Anfang*] would not remain vain and ineffective” (8-9). Olympia (particularly the Temple of Zeus) is somewhat more promising, but the landscape of “the charming valley of Alpheus” does not find explicable connection “with the agonistic severity and articulation of the Greek essence.” Heidegger again is overcome: “Doubts arose again whether this essence, long-cherished and often thought through, was a creature of fancy without any connection with what actually had been” (13).

As is most fitting for Heidegger, *poetry* saves the sage from the abyss of doubt and skepticism. In *Sojourns* two moderns—indeed two Germans each having made their own journeys searching for “the Greek essence”—are guides to “the appropriate way of seeking” (14). Goethe has a moment here, interestingly, for Heidegger primarily as a thinker of restraint. It is most significant for him that Goethe, such a prolific poet, wisely never finished his tragedy *Nausicaa*, as it likely was burdened by a “Roman-Italian-Greece viewed through the light of modern humanism...the time of the machines” (8). Hölderlin, on the other hand, whose words appear from the beginning and throughout *Sojourns*, is a positive inspiration as *he dared to be really romantic*. Heidegger insists that Hölderlin is a better guide to the congress between the future and past because he dared, “to turn his gaze toward the Greece that has already been.” He speculates that this

bold appropriation of the past was rooted in a surplus of future vision, “because his gaze was reaching farther, toward the arrival of the coming god” (1).

Among the Greek poets Heidegger recalls Homer, Aeschylus and quite a lot of Pindar (who was perhaps slighted in his work on the pre-Socratics). At the beginning of his journey, approaching Ithaca, one of the first islands visited, he fancies himself something of an Odysseus returning home. And although he reports that there was much that “would not fit in with the picture that I had from the days of my first reading of Homer in the Gymnasium in Constance” (10), reference to the greatest of all Greek love stories, is a fitting flourish for his wife Elfriede, “the mother,” who encouraged his trip and to whom he dedicates the text (vi). A mention in passing of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, which he recited on the boat, immediately reveals his opinion regarding the primacy of speech, although he acknowledges that an important votive relief on display at the National Museum at Athens (which he declined to visit), “could have been for us an immediately expressive, and thus fulfilling” confirmation of “poetic language” (46).

The most dramatic indication of poetry’s saving power comes in the narrations of Heidegger’s visits to the Parthenon at Athens and the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. Heidegger valiantly attempts to recount his experience of Parthenon: “the stonework of the temple lost its materiality. The fragmented disappeared. The spatial distances... condensed... Through an inconceivable shine the entire building began to float...it assumed a firmly defined presence...this presence was fulfilled by the abandonment of the holy. In this abandonment the absence of the flown goddess draws invisibly near.” Such a spectral event, Heidegger assures us, cannot be matched by “archaeological description” or mere “historical clarification;” only “the poetic language of Aeschylus’

Eumenides,” he recounts, “offered us some help towards a distantly fitting sojourn” (40-41).

Heidegger explains his expectation of the trip to Delphi, “the crowning visit of the entire journey,” would exceed all others; it would “surpass all knowledge and imagination carried with me and would speak with its own language” (50). He was not disappointed. From the beginning of the long ascent from the foot of Mt. Parnassus to the entrance of the sacred space where the “navel of the earth is protected” poetry was with him. At first Hölderlin *Greece* helped reveal the sanctity of this holiest of birth places, but then, approaching “the Doric temple of Apollo,” the words of the Pythia from the *Eumenides* come to his tongue, and later, climbing “higher and higher,” “the *Pythian Odes* of Pindar began, through a vague recollection, to speak” (53).

Philosophy appears in *Sojourns* as well, although, as hinted above, only subordinate to poetry. One particularly interesting philosophical theme featured is that of “the call,” for with this motif Heidegger draws a link between the heroic posture of “the call of conscience” of *Being and Time* and his later post-*Kehre* work. Moreover, in *Sojourns* his account of “the call” provides him with a second literary device to narrate his journey from island to island, temple to monument. With great confidence the sage of the *Schwartzwald* reports the “events” of his own “hearing” and “not-hearing,” endowing “the essence of Greece” itself with an agency that determines the course of his experiences (and that of the text). Humorously, it is not that he was at times lazy, or simply too old to visit every island, for “Greece” did not speak to him at every port. He reports that “neither of the smaller islands (Kos and Patmos)... succeeded in convincing us to disembark” (28). Likewise, from the comfort of the deck gazing at the Corfu harbor

(perhaps the land of the Phaeacians), he finds “missing was the presence of that Greek element” (11).

Recounting so confidently when and where “the Greek element” spoke to him, Heidegger offers something that appears—a half century later—as a confession regarding his own subjective contribution in matters of “proper hearkening.” Hopefully, after a wealth of twentieth-century scholarship regarding the place of Greece in Near Eastern culture, the revelations of Heidegger’s prejudices gives us food for thought. Heidegger recounts “a day of painful conflict” before the visit to Mycenea. Blissfully unaware, it seems, of the decipherment of Linear B already more than a decade previous to his writing, he reports feeling “a resistance against the pre-Hellenic world,” although he recognizes that “it was the critical exchange with it that first helped the Greeks to grasp their proper element” (19). Likewise as the boat turns to Asia Minor, he reflects on the fact that “the confrontation [*Auseinandersetzung*] with the Asiatic element was for the Greek *Dasein* a fruitful necessity” (25). And yet pondering this is what prevented him, he explains, from disembarking on the island of Rhodes, a lovely island he is sure, “educating and entertaining,” but apparently too far from the “essence” (26). Perhaps most disappointing and simultaneously most intriguing is Heidegger’s report of “the strange pre-Greek world” of Crete. He dutifully reports on his visit to Knossos at Herakleion, “the labyrinthal palace bears witness to non-warrior, rural and commercial *Dasein* dedicated to the joys of life, although highly stylized and refined. A feminine divinity is supposed to have been the center of all the worship” (23). Heidegger reveals that he is very impressed by “impressive glimmer and the luxurious shine.” He wonders at the Minoan luxury and is sure that we have not “the bleakness of the superficial, the

emptiness of the frivolous.” And yet he does not hear the call of “the Greece essence,” which “loves to hide.” “Could it be that what shines in the shine is only the shine itself and therefore neither can conceal nor hide anything?” (23-4) For Heidegger the shining Cretan palace is not the preeminent example of the disclosive power of art in harmony with its world and nature (as readers of *The Origin of the Work of Art* might expect); we have here not “Greece,” but something of an “Egyptian-oriental essence” (23).

But the reader wonders if Heidegger’s inability to connect the more ancient past of Crete to “the Greek essence,” his failure to see any real similarity between the shining goddess of the Minoans and the mysterious goddess *Aletheia*, does not bespeak a tragic flaw in his quest. The Minoan snake goddess, we know, was a goddess of oracular power, as the oracle at Delphi was originally an oracle of the Earth. Likewise the Minoan bee goddesses can be understood in lineage with the honey sweet Muses. These goddesses have many names, but at root it is Nature who is speaking in the bees, the snakes and the Muses. In this respect it is lovely to read in *Sojourns* that Heidegger perceives the “butterflies...playing” as “a dim sign of Pan’s hour” (16). It is charming that he hears the dolphins escorting the boat at the end of the trip as “Greece’s last greeting” (57). But surely this affirmation of “Nature” should extend to a wider cultural perspective, to a reconsideration of allegedly merely Eastern and Asian influences. Perhaps “Greece” is speaking in that which seems “Egyptian” and “Byzantine.” Perhaps “Greece” greets Heidegger in Ithaca, when, as he reports, the “women in their gardens and children in the streets welcomed us with flowers” (11).