CHAPTER 1

The Instant of Their Debt
Derrida with Freud and Heidegger in Greece

Vassiliki Kolocotroni

Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida both speak of their trips to Greece as eagerly anticipated but delayed. Both admit to a reluctance to take the step; Heidegger records "a long hesitation due to the fear of disappointment":

> [T]he Greece of today could prevent the Greece of antiquity, and what was proper [*Eigenem*] to it, from coming to light. But also a hesitation that stems from the doubts that 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*].[1]

Derrida too reflects on a similar motif: "This was my third stay in Greece. Barely stays, regrettably, more like visits, multiple, fleeting, and all too late. Why so late? Why did I wait so long to go there, to give myself over to Greece? So late in life?"[2] This is of course partly a commonplace, quite literally a topos, a well-trodden rhetorical path in its own right, the traveler's signature nod to a weak sublime: one always arrives in Greece too late – witness Virginia Woolf's diary entry while there in 1906:

> Once again, the Ancient Greek had the best of it: we were very belated wayfarers: the shrines are fallen, & the oracles are dumb. You have the feeling very often in Greece, that the pageant has passed long ago, & you are come too late, & it matters very little what you think or feel. The modern Greece is so flimsy and fragile, that it goes to pieces when it is confronted with the roughest fragment of the old.[3]

Two years earlier, in 1904, Freud experienced a disturbing sense of incredulity (or "derealization," as he put it in his retrospective rendition

[1] Martin Heidegger, *Sojourns: The Journey to Greece*, trans. John Panteleimon Manoussakis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 4–5.
[2] Jacques Derrida, *Athens, Still Remains: The Photographs of Jean-François Bonhomme*, trans. Anne Brault and Michael Naas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 17.
[3] Virginia Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals 1897–1909*, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska (London: Hogarth Press, 1990), 324.

of the scene in 1936) at the fact that he, in middle age, actually found himself on the Acropolis, the originary site of the civilization he was busily analyzing at the time of that recollection. The shock was compounded by guilt, for this was a feat his petty bourgeois father, a self-educated merchant, could neither accomplish nor appreciate. The episode has been richly commented upon,[4] not least by Freud himself, who made of it an exemplary manifestation of what Derrida would later call "hauntology,"[5] the persistent presence of the past in the present, as well as a testament to the psychic work of the uncanny, turning the ambivalent feeling of dread toward the dead to "filial piety," thus temporarily laying to rest familiar phantoms.[6] As Freud put it: "The very theme of Athens and the Acropolis in itself contained evidence of the son's superiority. Our father had been in business, he had had no secondary education, and Athens could not have meant much to him. Thus what interfered with our enjoyment of the journey to Athens was a feeling of *filial piety*."[7] Freud had begun to explore that fraught relationship in *Totem and Taboo* (1913):

> Where in earlier times, satisfied hatred and pained affection fought each other, we now find that a kind of scar has been formed in the shape of piety, which declares "de mortuis nil nisi bonum." It is only neurotics whose mourning for the loss of those dear to them is still troubled by obsessive self-reproaches – the secret of which is revealed by psychoanalysis as the old emotional ambivalence.[8]

The connection with the uncanny was then made in the important 1919 work of that title:

> All supposedly educated people have ceased to believe officially that the dead can become visible as spirits, and have made any such appearances dependent on improbable and remote conditions; their emotional attitude towards their dead, moreover, once a highly ambiguous and ambivalent one, has been toned down in the higher strata of the mind into an unambiguous feeling of piety.[9]

[4] I list a few of these in Vassiliki Kolocotroni, "Still Life: Modernism's Turn to Greece," *Journal of Modern Literature* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2012): 1–24.
[5] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge Press, 1994), 18.
[6] Sigmund Freud, "A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, vol. 22 (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), 247–48.
[7] Ibid., 248.
[8] Sigmund Freud, *The Origins of Religion: Totem and Taboo, Moses and Monotheism and Other Works*, ed. Albert Dickson and trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), 122.
[9] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 149.

That uncanny ambivalence toward the past, the incomplete substitution of piety for dread, is conjured up by the visit to Greece. A "visit" can be both literal and metaphorical, or indeed if we are to read the literal into the metaphorical, literally transportative, and in the case of the two visits to Greece on which this chapter dwells, both senses are continually at play. Like Freud's earlier transcription of his moment of uncanny transport on the Acropolis, Heidegger's 1962 Greek "sojourn" and Derrida's "*demeure*/ residence" in Athens thirty-one years later record confrontations with familiar ghosts. That Greece is the common site of this confrontation is no accident, nor simply a stop in a modern-day philosophical Grand Tour; it is rather *the* destination of that errancy, error and wandering that both haunts and drives philosophy, at least in Heidegger's and Derrida's errant terms: "the craft of thinking, unswerving, yet erring," as Heidegger put it in 1950;[10] or as Derrida responded in 1964:

> That philosophy died yesterday, since Hegel or Marx, Nietzsche, or Heidegger – and philosophy should still wander toward the meaning of death – or that it has always lived knowing itself to be dying . . . all these are unanswerable questions . . . Nevertheless, these should be the only questions today capable of founding the community, within the world, of those who are still called philosophers; and called such in remembrance.[11]

To follow the trail of that *destinerrance*,[12] as Derrida would call it, requires the unpacking of a few *mot-valises* and the writing off of some considerable debts.

"*Nous nous devons à la mort*" – "we owe ourselves to death": the sentence provides the subtitle for Derrida's *Athens, Still Remains*, written in 1996 by way of a preface to a collection of photographs by Jean-François Bonhomme. Here, Derrida draws on memories of his brief stays in Greece, "so late in life," and reflects in an "*aphoristic* and *serial*" way on the photographs with which he traveled there.[13] The motif of death, treated

[10] Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 186.

[11] Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 79. There are echoes here (and throughout Derrida's thought) of Montaigne's reflections on philosophy's debt to death. See, for instance, chapter 20, book I of "To Philosophize Is to Learn How to Die," in *Complete Essays*, trans. and ed. M. A. Screech (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 89–108.

[12] See J. Hillis Miller, "Derrida's *Destinerrance*," *Modern Language Notes* 121 (2006): 893–910 and John Leavey, "Destinerrance: The Apotropocalyptics of Translation," in *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida*, ed. John Sallis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 33–43.

[13] Derrida, *Athens, Still Remains*, 1.

exhaustively (though inexhaustible) in his writing, makes an instant appearance:

> It was this past July 3, right around noon, close to Athens.
>
> It was then that this sentence took me by surprise, in the light – "we owe ourselves to death" – and the desire immediately overcame me to engrave it in stone, without delay: a snapshot [*un instantané*], I said to myself, without any further delay.[14]

Though unacknowledged, the provenance of the sentence may lie in a deep memory recalled "by surprise" from the personal archive of Derrida's encounters with Greek writing, as it features in a celebrated epigraph by Simonides, whose appearance in Plato's *Republic* and *Protagoras* as a poet-*bête noire* will have registered with Derrida, incidentally at the very least: "A certain Theodorus rejoices because I am dead. Another / shall rejoice at his death. We are all owed to death."[15] As Anne Carson has noted, "What Simonides contributed to our style of thinking and talking about death is a central shaping metaphor: the metaphor of exchange"; more specifically, "[t]he idea that human life is not a gift but a loan or a debt, which will have to be paid back, originated with Simonides."[16] The instancing of the phrase "in the light," however, points firmly toward the visual and conjures up an image of a Kerameikos column:

> [O]n the distended skin of an erection, just below the prepuce, a sort of phallic column bears an inscription that I had not yet deciphered, except for the proper name. Apollodorus. And what if it were *that* Apollodorus, the author of a history of the gods? I would have loved to sign these words; I would have loved to be the author of an epitaph for the author of a history of the gods.[17]

For Derrida, "the phallus or the colossus of Apollodorus immediately becomes the metonymic figure for the entire series of photographs collected in this book" and "each one of them remains in its turn what it becomes: a funerary inscription with a proper name"; as Derrida sees it, "never do any of these photographs fail to signify death."[18] This signification is clear enough in the series of images from Kerameikos, Athens's

[14] Ibid., 1.
[15] *Greek Anthology*, ed. and trans. W. R. Paton, vol. 4 (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1948), 56–57. Derrida may have been aware of the French rendition of the line in Ronsard's famous elegy *A Philippes des-Portes*: "Nous devons à la mort & nous & nos ouvrages." See Isidore Silver, *Ronsard and the Hellenic Renaissance in France*, vol. 2 (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1987), 380.
[16] Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost: Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 74, 80.
[17] Derrida, *Athens, Still Remains*, 1.
[18] Ibid., 2.

ancient cemetery, but Derrida reads a funereal inscription in images of a still living Athens, such as the flea market's cornucopia of discarded things, and the death-like slumber of a café denizen, as well as the street piano and bouzouki player, a silent soundtrack for this collection, which Derrida hears as "a dirge of mourning."[19]

For Michael Naas, this "sense of obsolescence [*l'affect de la disaffection*]" or "dysfunction function" as he puts it, conveys both disappearance and its premonition. I would "leav(e) behind only its archive,"[20] although, as Gerhard Richter points out in his introduction to *Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography*, for Derrida "[t]here can be no photograph that is not about mourning and about the simultaneous desire to guard against mourning."[21] The response to Bonhomme's stills of life among the remains, however, like the uncanny protuberance of Apollodorus's column, captures both the desire for inscription as petrified and thus perpetual attribution to the past, and its impossibility – Derrida's "I would have loved to . . . I would have loved to" countersign for eternity the memory of the man who recorded the passing of the gods, but with the added implication of belatedness. Not copying but tracing Apollodorus's inscription, what Derrida can sign instead is the sentence, *his* death sentence, *his* debt:

> We owe ourselves to death. I had in any case to pay my debt toward this sentence. No matter the cost. It had taken me, taken me by surprise (as if it had photographed me without my knowledge, unexpectedly, *exaiphnēs*); it had overtaken me, outstripped me, perhaps like death, a death that would have found me where I was still hiding; it had entrusted me with I don't know what for safekeeping, perhaps myself, and perhaps us; it had especially entrusted itself to me by making advances on me, by giving me an advance. It had granted me an advance . . . In the eyes of this advance, I was not only the debtor but I was *late*. Given notice [*mis en demeure*] to pay restitution. I couldn't lose any more time; my first obligation was to save the sentence as soon as possible, without any further delay.[22]

But why is this an "urgent sentence"?[23] How does it compel Derrida to save it? Derrida protests too much. Because by accepting, receiving this death sentence, "for safekeeping," as he says (perhaps for himself, perhaps for us),

[19] Ibid., 49.
[20] Michael Naas, "'Now Smile': Recent Developments in Jacques Derrida's Work on Photography," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 211.
[21] Derrida, *Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography*, ed. Gerhard Richter, trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), xxxii.
[22] Derrida, *Athens, Still Remains*, 7. [23] Ibid.

he inscribes a caption on every funerary image in this collection that forever defers death. To effect this delay, to make this debt unpayable, to declare it an "odious debt" (a topical term that one can't help thinking Derrida would have loved), Derrida calls as witnesses a French word, an untranslatable sentence and four familiar ghosts.

This French word is *demeure*, both a noun meaning "residence," "usual habitation" and a verb signifying "to stay" or "to remain" in the imperative.

> Everything having to do with debt and delay can thus already be found in the word *demeure*, as in the sentence "we owe ourselves to death," everything, eternally, having to do with obligation and time, everything and the rest – remains, destiny, deferral, delay (*demorari*: to remain, to stop, to take one's time or to delay – which strangely resembles *demori*: to die, to waste away).[24]

And there are more nuances: the phrase *à demeure* (permanently, abidingly); the injunction *demeure!* (stay!), resonant of the ancient epitaphic imperative, urging the passerby to linger at the site of memory; the *mise en demeure* (to be given notice); the *dernière demeure* (final resting place, containing an echo of "*qu'il meure*," or "that he die" in the subjunctive). *Demeure, Athènes*, of course, conveys all these connotations, as well as the literal declaration of Derrida's brief *demeure* (residence) in Athens that July. But there is a further resonance, not captured by the English translators, a memento of a previous encounter undeclared but still present: *Demeure, Athènes* shares a title with a near contemporaneous Derridean piece, "Demeure: Fiction et Témoignage" ("Demeure: Fiction and Testimony"), a commentary on a late *récit* by Maurice Blanchot, entitled *L'instant de ma mort* (*The Instant of My Death*).[25]

In that lapidary autobiographical fragment, which Derrida defines as "autothanatographical in truth,"[26] Blanchot recalls the instant of his near death in 1944, at the hands of the (anticommunist) Russian Liberation Army, operating under Nazi high command. Unspoken but implicit (and confirmed in Derrida's reading) is Blanchot's guilt at his escape, his unpaid debt to death, spared as he then resided in a castle, thus recognized by the

[24] Ibid., 9.
[25] Originally a conference presentation at the Catholic University of Louvain in 1995, it was published the following year in the collected proceedings as "Demeure: Fiction et témoignage," in *Passions de la littérature: Avec Jacques Derrida* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1996), and later in a stand-alone edition as *Demeure: Maurice Blanchot* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1998). The English edition includes Blanchot's piece: Maurice Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death*/Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).
[26] Derrida, *Demeure, Athènes*, 55.

soldiers as a member of the upper class. His survival made the witnessing of his own death an impossible testimony, his death a fiction, an escape from truth, compounded by the loss of a manuscript he carried with him at the time. Blanchot's final words trigger Derrida's deliberation on delayed testimony and "unexperienced experience"[27]:

> What does it matter. All that remains (*demeure*) is the feeling of lightness that is death itself or, to put it more precisely, the instant of my death henceforth always in abeyance.[28]
>
> *demorari, de* and *morari*, which signifies to *wait* and to *delay*. There is always the idea of a wait, a contretemps, a delay, or a reprieve in a *demeure* as there is in a narration. In great – French – literature, the *demeure* as the waiting or the appeal [*instance*] was made to rhyme with the word *meurt* . . . *Etre en demeure* is to be late, and *mettre en demeure*, in juridical language, is to summon someone to fulfill an obligation within an allotted time . . . There would be no end to the mortuary and moratory avenues of this vocabulary that we could visit.[29]

Thus Derrida revisits this vocabulary in Greece, evoking Blanchot's stay of execution. Such an ambivalent witnessing haunts *Athens, Still Remains* like a familiar ghost, adding by way of exemplarity to the "we" of Derrida's death sentence, "we owe ourselves to death," but also to its indefinite deferral, its abeyance.

Three more ghosts exemplify the workings of this delaying of the "right moment,"[30] literalized in Derrida's text by reference to the delay mechanism in every camera, the photographic shutter [*obturateur*]: first, Freud, whose "disturbance of memory on the Acropolis" is traced by Derrida as a visual echo in one of Bonhomme's photographs – the photographer on the Acropolis. For Derrida, this scene from the Athens archive, "the stratified ruin of all the Athenian memories," is one he "ha(s) never stopped thinking about, especially at the point where Freud meditates upon what he calls in French the "*non arrivé*."[31] The moment in Freud's text that Derrida captures appears by way of illustration of one of the ego's defense mechanisms (of those "pathological methods of behaviour," as Freud calls them, that lie "[b]etween repression and what may be termed the normal method of fending off what is distressing or unbearable"; Freud recalls the case of King Boabdil, the last Moorish king of Grenada at the end of the fifteenth century, who, hearing of the fall of his city of Alhama, "feels that this loss means the end of his rule. But he will not 'let it be true,' he

[27] Ibid., 67. [28] Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death*, 11. [29] Derrida, *Demeure, Athènes*, 78.
[30] Derrida, *Athens, Still Remains*, 3. [31] Ibid., 65.

determines to treat the news as '*non arrivé*.' . . . By burning the letters and having the messenger killed he was still trying to show his absolute power."[32]

Derrida has written copiously both about Freud's testimony of the ambivalent workings of reason and about the possibility a letter might never reach its destination, but in Athens, he seems particularly moved to conjure up the specter of Freud as a witness. This is partly to echo Freud's own confessed disavowal of and encounter with death expressed in the uncanny haunting by the memory of the father, but what Derrida homes in on is the brief instant in Freud's analysis that accounts for that ultimate refusal, *not* to receive the news of one's death, *not* to pay that debt. Again, one wonders, what would have Derrida made of the Greeks' refusal to receive the news of the imminent default of their (if it is their) debt, to treat the austerity memorandum as a *non arrivé*?

Which brings us neatly to the untranslatable sentence and the final ghosts, both philosophers, both witnesses to philosophy's living death, both guilty. Unlike modern-day Greeks, resistant and singularly unprepared to take the "medicine" prescribed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (in the memorable phrase of its ex-president Dominique Strauss-Kahn, now departed), Socrates is remembered by Derrida here as "knowingly awaiting a death that had been promised him."[33] He lingers on the death of Socrates as the eventful period of a long delay:

> between the speaking of the verdict and the taste of the *pharmakon* in his own mouth. He prepares himself for it and yet he speaks to his friends about preparing for death, about the exercise, care or practice of death [*epimeleia tou thanatou*], a discourse that still watches over us, a discourse of mourning and of the denial of mourning, all of philosophy.[34]

Derrida fantasizes on Cape Sounion that he would photograph Socrates awaiting death,[35] and later dreams of capturing him "as he speaks and claims to have foreseen the instant of his death"[36] – unrealized negatives that further underline the impossibility of full testimony. This is a cliché, Socrates being Athens's ghost-in-residence, patron saint of philosophers, whose absent presence would instantly trigger a whole spectrum of disturbances, from dread to filial piety. Derrida lingers on a particular detail from the story of Socrates's long wait for death, which suggests an association with his reading of Freud: "And yet – a story of the eye – Socrates claimed to know it; he claimed to know when the *theoria* (ie. Athens's

[32] Freud, "A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis," 246.
[33] Derrida, *Athens, Still Remains*, 29. [34] Ibid., 29, 31. [35] Ibid., 29. [36] Ibid., 33.

pledge to Apollo of a yearly pilgrimage/procession to Delos, during which the city must be pure and not conduct any public execution) would end thanks to a dream or, more precisely, by means of a knowledge (*savoir*) based on a *seeing* (*voir*), the seeing of a *vision* (*enupnion*) come to visit him in the middle of the night in the course of a dream . . . My own dream telesympathized with his."[37] However, Derrida comes to Athens neither to bury Socrates nor to praise him – aware of the unavoidable encounter, he declares his difference, his respectful distance from that emblematic, definitive scene of death and its afterlife, armed with his own recalcitrant, idiomatic sentence, an uncanny formulation of filial piety:

> An untranslatable sentence (and I was sure, from the very first instant, that the economy of this sentence belonged to my idiom alone, or rather, to the domesticity of my old love affair with this stranger whom I call my French language) . . . *nous nous devons à la mort* would remain forever untranslated, spelled out, photorthographed in an album of the French language.[38]

Ultimately, what the untranslatability resists, though also partly incorporates (in the true manner of Freudian mourning), is the sense "of the great post-Socratic and sacrificial tradition of being-for-death, this ethics of dedication or devotion."[39] There are echoes here of Derrida's reflection on the meaning of another "death sentence" in *The Gift of Death*: "[w]hat does *donner la mort* mean in French? How does one give *oneself* death [*se donner la mort*]?"[40] but the redoubling of the "*nous*" complicates the subject–object relationship, rendering the ownership of the debt problematic. The translators of *Athens, Still Remains* opt for an English formulation that evokes both a "reflexive" and "reciprocal relation."[41] David Wills in his review of the text sees the sentence as photographing the "passactive" relation of "originary mourning and indebtedness," as well as "philosophising itself, philosophy captured in the necessity or presented with the responsibility of having to think death."[42] Wills proposes "Photographer on the Acropolis" (fig. 9) as the "iconic photograph [that] photographs the sentence 'we owe ourselves to death' at the moment it comes to light."[43] The aporetic, uncanny doubling and troubling of the acceptance and refusal of death and the debt are realized in

[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid., 13, 59. "Photorthographed," of course, puns on "photograph," "graph" and "orthography."
[39] Ibid., 59.
[40] Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 10.
[41] Derrida, *Athens, Still Remains*, 73, note 1.
[42] David Wills's review in *Oxford Literary Review* 33, no. 2 (December 2011): 271. [43] Ibid., 270.

each still, as a "generalised punctum," as Wills puts it,[44] but also in formal terms. Formally, we see the repetition of the image of the Parthenon in the frame that freezes the "photographic waiting," or the doubling of the name on the sign on Persephone Street ("ΟΔΟΣ ΠΕΡΣΕΦΟΝΗΣ/ PERSEFONIS"). The picture-within-a-picture trope appears in the image of the Greek woman who contemplates a street painter's attempt at reconstructing a local scene; and finally, photographs directly redouble or mirror each other, as in the flea market seller whose pose echoes the figure of the Silenus on the frieze at the Theatre of Dionysus.

Above all, Derrida concludes, it is what the sentence does, "decontextualized as a photograph," aphoristic, oracular, an event that resists, that remains:

> It was thus impossible to decide, without any other context, as if its inscription were being read on a piece of funerary stone or on its photograph, whether it was a matter of an ethico-philosophical exhortation, with the performative potentiality that comes along with it, or a constative description, or even an indignant protestation that would raise the curtain on centuries of deception and obstinacy: So (you say that, it is believed that, they claim that) "we owe ourselves to death"! – well, no, we refuse this debt; not only do we not recognize it, but we refuse the authority of this anteriority, this a priori or this supposed originarity of obligation, of *Schuldigsein*, this religion of mourning, this culture of loss and of lack, and so on . . . Against this debt, this obligation, this culpability, and this fear of the dead, a "we" might, perhaps, protest . . . ; we might be able to protest innocently our innocence, one "we" protesting against the other. *Nous nous devons à la mort*, we owe ourselves to death, there is indeed a *nous*, the second one, who owes itself in this way, but we, in the first place, no, the first *we* who looks, observes, and photographs the other, and who speaks here, is an innocent living being who forever knows nothing of death: in this *we* we are infinite.[45]

And perhaps one can see that innocence in those photographs of everyday life, where death (inanimate beings/dead flesh) and life harmoniously, busily coexist, as in the fish market seller handling his produce; and more arrestingly, the two brothers at Athinas Market facing Bonhomme's camera directly.

For all his protestations, mantra-like invocations of ghosts and ruins-to-be, talk of death and debt, this spectator remains determined to capture in thought that instant of life that fends off the finite, that "inevitable moment – fatal like a click."[46] This may seem a mere signature move,

[44] Ibid. [45] Derrida, *Athens, Still Remains*, 63. [46] Ibid., 29.