

Athens, Hill of the Muses; Evening

Martin Robertson

The quarried rock drops to the slums,
like looking from a train into backyards
of English slums, but worse (and better,
as sun-scorched poverty is better
than rain-logged poverty). The sun burns
on the quarry-face. The other way,
above this bare hill and a pine-green hill,
from the Acropolis, the Parthenon
burns back stilly at the setting sun.

Crossing the thistle-bristling rock
one stumbles in the square-cut marks of man
having flatness enough for a small dwelling,
hundreds of small dwellings.

Here, they say,
the poor of Attica, herded in
between the long walls, learnt to live in slums,
and watched the Spartan soldiers burn their fields,
and learnt to steal. Here the plague
struck them, thousands; struck through the city,
struck Pericles, whose statesmanship
had brought them there, had raised the Parthenon.
(Pheidias, his arbiter of art
escaped the plague. He was not of the slums,
but stole, perhaps, and died, they say in gaol.)
Their Parthenon endures; and thus shall, sad,
crowded cuttings in the rock endure;
where now, out of the slums, Athenian poor
climb, for love no doubt, demonstrably
for another purpose.

Marvellous marble hidden,
the slums hidden behind, down in their valley
one might be far—but for the ancient cuttings
(a road here rutted in the rock) and in them
the recent waste.

Climbing among pines
the Parthenon lifts again its lovely head
or rather (here is west) its lovely tail
(the greeks gave temples fronts and backs alike,
just as to statues generally gave faces
no more expressive than their lovely bottoms).

Now the sun goes down. Parthenon glows
above the shaded wall, and near at hand
glows the monument of Philopappos
(a Syrian princeling of the Roman age
honoured by rich Athenians of that age
with this rather pretentious monument
which time has tanned and broken to harmony).

The sky is green. Hymettus
miraculously blushes, soon
is grey again.