Where do the Marbles belong?

As the first of a projected series of debates on controversial topics, the editors invited members of Dialogos' *International Advisory Board to give their views on the question posed above and the issues it raises. Below we set out the responses of George Steiner, Erika Simon and G.M. Sifakis. We give the final word to Thomas Hardy and the last of his poems to be published in his lifetime.*

GEORGE STEINER

The museums of the world are largely stocked with plunder. Military and political conquest have always brought home objects looted from the vanquished. Forced purchase, acquisition under terms which, in retrospect, can seem crassly exploitative, account for other treasures. Any attempt at systematic restitution would produce not only chaos but ferocious disputes over original provenance and ownership.

Conditions of pollution around the Parthenon are such that no one, so far as I am aware, argues for some kind of (more or less artificial) 're-insertion' of the Elgin Marbles into what remains of the original structure. The possibility is that of their exhibition in the museum of classical art in Athens. Whether they would be better conserved or more accessible there than in London seems to me a technical question on the one hand, and a political guess on the other (what Greek régimes lie ahead, what eventual turbulence?). Art of this magnitude does, in a sense, belong to an entire Western culture. It is always on loan from history. Modern means of communication and reproduction may make its actual physical location less important than it was in the past. On (intuitive) balance, the case for restitution does not seem to me imperative. The entombment, in air-conditioned transatlantic university archives, of as yet unstudied and unpublished literary, philosophic, political documents vital to the study of English literature, thought and history, presents a more drastic dilemma. As does the utterly scandalous disappearance into private, closed collections and bank-vaults – be they in Japan, Saudi Arabia, Venezuela or Switzerland – of some of the world's greatest paintings and sculptures.

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ERIKA SIMON

I think the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum should not be moved to Greece. Their *Wirkungsgeschichte* is bound up with the British Museum. We should not try to change the history of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from which the Elgin Marbles are inseparable. Since that time the Marbles have had an impact on Europe which they would never have had if they had stayed on the Acropolis. In Ernst Grumach, *Goethe und die Antike II* (1949) 494-511, one can see an important part of that impact. I need only quote the verses:

Homer ist lange mit Ehren genannt,
Jetzt ward euch Phidias bekannt;
Nun hält nichts gegen beide Stich,
Darob ereifre niemand sich.

Homer was always special, then
You got Phidias, since when
Nothing can hold a candle to this pair.
Fair's fair.*

'Phidias' means the Elgin Marbles, which were drawn by many artists from the originals or plaster casts and sent everywhere. I think the British Museum should prepare durable casts of the Marbles for Greece, like the casts which were made from the Nereid Monument and sent to Lycia.

G. M. SIFAKIS

If there is a group of works of art that cannot be said to 'belong to' anyone, it is the group of sculptures from the Acropolis of Athens which are housed in the British Museum. Because of their artistic importance and unique position in the history of European civilization, they are literally priceless, unmarketable, and hence 'un-ownable' – in the sense, at least, that (say) a group of works by Renaissance or Impressionist artists can be auctioned, acquired, and then displayed, or stored out of sight, in a museum or private collection. This is another reason why they should not be called 'The Elgin Marbles', as this description

* Translation by the editors.

points to the time when they were indeed auctioned and carries a debasing connotation; they should properly be referred to as 'The Acropolis Sculptures' (to include the single Caryatid, the frieze blocks of the temple of Athena Nike, and other pieces in the same group).

Undoubtedly, the Sculptures 'belong to the world', or at any rate to all those peoples, nationals, or individuals, who refer their cultural ancestry to ancient Greece. Therefore, neither can the British claim legal ownership of the Sculptures (because no number of Turkish firmans could justify Elgin's outrage in tearing the sculptures off the Parthenon and other temples – *The Curse of Minerva* will never cease to haunt his memory), nor can the modern Greeks lay claim to them on the basis that they are part of their national heritage (because they are certainly much more than that: an integral part of the cultural heritage of Europe as a whole). No matter, then, what 'legal' arguments can be advanced by either side, they are beside the point.

The real question is, not who should own the Sculptures, but who should have the privilege of maintaining and safeguarding them, and making them available for everybody to see and study to the best advantage. In this respect, the British Museum seems eminently qualified and has proven its proficiency as guardian of the great treasure (no matter how it found its way there). On the other hand, the Acropolis Museum in Athens is crammed and quite incapable of holding the Sculptures. But should things stay the same for ever?

To the question '*Where* do the Sculptures belong?' there can be only one answer: in good time, to the place of their origin. They are architectural sculptures, but as they cannot, for various reasons, be put back on the buildings they were taken from, they should be installed in a safe place as near as possible to, and in visual contact with, the monuments to which they once belonged – that is, in the future Acropolis Museum, when it comes into being and proves every bit as adequate as the British Museum to hold them. My reason for suggesting this has nothing to do with national claims and related thinking. But placing the Sculptures in the historical and material context of their origin will greatly illuminate their significance, enhance their impact on viewers, and thus increase their influence on contemporary aesthetic and cultural orientations. It will also demonstrate the unity of Europe as a cultural whole and show respect to its ideals of humanism (including the redressing of wrongs done), at a time when Western culture is under constant pressures from many directions, and needs, perhaps more than ever, to reassert its traditional moral and cultural values.

Christmas in the Elgin Room

British Museum: Early Last Century

THOMAS HARDY

'What is the noise that shakes the night,
And seems to soar to the Pole-star height?'
– 'Christmas bells,
The watchman tells
Who walks this hall that blears us captives with its blight.'

'And what, then, mean such clangs, so clear?'
– ''Tis said to have been a day of cheer,
And source of grace
To the human race
Long ere their woven sails winged us to exile here.

'We are those whom Christmas overthrew
Some centuries after Pheidias knew
How to shape us
And bedrape us
And to set us in Athena's temple for men's view.

'O it is sad now we are sold –
We gods! for Borean people's gold,
And brought to the gloom
Of this gaunt room
Which sunlight shuns, and sweet Aurore but enters cold.

'For all these bells, would I were still
Radiant as on Athenai's Hill.'
– 'And I, and I!'
The others sigh,
'Before this Christ was known, and we had men's good will.'

Thereat old Helios could but nod,
Throbbed, too, the Ilissus River-god,
And the torsos there
Of deities fair,
Whose limbs were shards beneath some Acropolitan clod:

Demeter too, Poseidon hoar,
Persephone, and many more
Of Zeus' high breed –
All loth to heed
What the bells sang that night which shook them to the core.

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