



KYTHERA



Return to Cythera

And here, at last, we come to Greece



Maurice Chabas, *Le Retour à Cythère*, 1896

This oil on canvas, executed by the French painter Maurice Chabas about one hundred years after the creation of Pfaueninsel, represents a place that everybody knows, but that very few have visited: the Greek island of Cythera. What is surprising to me is not the somehow idealized and sentimental representation of the cult of Aphrodite, but the fact that it was created not long after the works of Gérard de Nerval and Charles Baudelaire, which demystified the Romantic image of the island.

It is true that the times were ripe for a different representation of Aphrodite's birthplace, and not necessarily for the best: here you have a linocut print by Louis Métivet, a well-

known illustrator and cover artist for the magazine *Le Rire*: this “Zurück von Kythera” was published in the German magazine *Moderne Kunst* around 1900.

The “girls from Cythera” are represented in an unflattering manner. It was the time of the “Suffragettes” movement for women’s rights, and this image is clearly directed against them. It is evident as well that Métivet goddess’s kingdom is not the same as the one depicted by the Symbolist Chabas: to express it bluntly, it is a brothel.

As you know, Cythera, considered to be Aphrodite’s homeland, was a mythical place, the subject of endless allegorical representations in literature and the arts. Born from the sea waves, and brought to the land, surfing a huge shell pushed by Zephyrus breath, Aphrodite was the worshipped goddess of lovers.

But what did Baudelaire and Nerval write about Cythera?

Baudelaire, in his poem “Voyage à Cythère”, published in 1855 in *Les fleurs du mal*:

Free as a bird and joyfully my heart Soared up among the rigging, in and out; Under a cloudless sky the ship rolled on Like an angel drunk with brilliant sun. “That dark, grim island there—which would that be?” “Cythera,” we’re told,



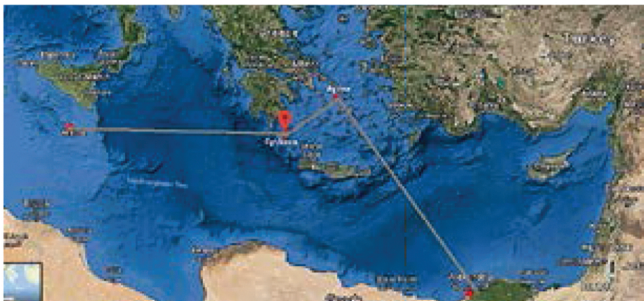
Louis Métivet, *Zurück von Kythera*

*“the legendary isle Old bachelors tell stories of and smile.
There’s really not much to it, you can see.” O place of many
a mystic sacrament! Archaic Aphrodite’s splendid shade
Lingers above your waters like a scent Infusing spirits with
an amorous mood. Worshipped from of old by every nation,
Myrtle-green isle, where each new bud discloses Sighs of
souls in loving adoration Breathing like incense from a
bank of roses Or like a dove roo-cooing endlessly... No;
Cythera was a poor infertile rock, A stony desert harrowed
by the shriek Of gulls. And yet there was something to see:
This was no temple deep in flowers and trees With a young
priestess moving to and fro, Her body heated by a secret glow,
Her robe half-opening to every breeze; But coasting nearer,
close enough to land To scatter flocks of birds as we passed
by, We saw a tall cypress-shaped thing at hand— A triple
gibbet black against the sky. Ferocious birds, each perched
on its own meal, (...)*

Baudelaire’s images and metaphors are directly inspired (as he recognizes) by Gérard de Nerval *Voyage en Orient*, a series of articles collected and published in 1851.

In 1843, Nerval travelled extensively to the Middle East, spending months in Egypt, Lebanon and Turkey. The account of his experiences is truly poetic; it is a mixture of things witnessed first-hand, dreamlike descriptions, and plagiarizing texts by other authors.

To reach Alexandria, he took a ship from the French port of Marseilles, but he claims to have sailed from Trieste on the



Adriatic Sea. Surely, he was in Malta and from there to the Greek island of Syros. He might have actually seen Cythera. He describes the spectacular sighting of the island at dawn: I have seen it that way, I have seen it: my day began like a Homeric verse! It really was the rosy-fingered dawn that opened the gates to the Orient for me. He confesses that he was searching for Watteau's shepherds and shepherdesses, their garland-adorned boats approaching flowered banks. But he appears to be deeply disappointed (or, rather, he feigns great disappointment):

Here is my dream... and here is my awakening! The sky and the sea are still present; every morning the Eastern sky and the Ionian Sea lovingly kiss; but the earth is dead, killed by the hands of humankind, and the gods have taken flight. (...)As we were sailing along the coast, before taking shelter at San Nicolò, I noticed a small monument, whose silhouette was barely perceptible from the blue sky... and from its perch atop a rock resembled a still-standing statue of some tutelary



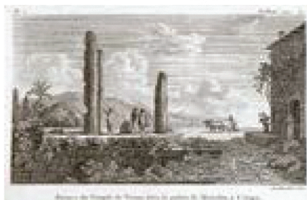
deity. But as we approached, we were able to discern very clearly this landmark. It was a gibbet, with three arms, only one of which was adorned. The first genuine gibbet that I had ever seen; it was on Cythera, a British protectorate, that I was able to spot it!

Gérald de Nerval never set foot on Cythera, or Cerigo, as it was known under Venetian rule. It is likely that he skirted the island in his French postal steamship on route from Malta to Alexandria via Syros. But he never landed on the island, nor searched the remains of the Aphrodite temple, nor visited a necropolis or a grotto by the sea.

Also the triple gibbet, that Nerval describes in order to stigmatize the British occupation of several Greek islands, is probably a literary invention. And his description of Cythera owes much to two travel guides: *Voyage en Grèce* by Dima and Nicolo Stephanopoli, published in London the year 1800; and Antoine-Laurent Castellan's *Lettres sur la Morée*, published in Paris in 1808⁷.



Engravings from *Voyage de Dima et Nicolo Stephanopoli en Grèce*, 1799



Engravings from *Lettres sur la Morée, l'Hellespont et Constantinople*, 1820

Nerval mentioned having seen, in a bucolic landscape near the Aplunori hill, a marble stele, which bore the words: “heart’s healing”. He was no doubt inspired by prints produced by Stephanopoli and Castellan⁸.

As he stated, Nerval had in mind two references, during his travels around the Mediterranean: a painting, Watteau’s *Pilgrimage to Cythera*, and a literary work, Francesco Colonna’s *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, better known in French as *Le songe de Poliphile* and first translated in English under the title *Poliphilo’s Strife of Love in a Dream*.



Antoine Watteau, *Le Pèlerinage à l'île de Cythère* (détail), 1717

Watteau's painting was presented at the French Academy of Arts in 1717, earning him, by royal appointment, the creation of a new section in the establishment, the genre "fête galante". Before him, the only category worthy of a prize was the genre known as "peinture d'histoire".

Nerval was an admirer of Watteau's depiction of fleeting beauty and pleasure. In the novel, *Sylvie*, published in 1853, he sets a party scene in a park, near the village of Ermenonville in the northern outskirts of Paris. It reminded him of Watteau's paintings depicting Cythera, and Jean Jacques Rousseau presence there (Rousseau's ashes remained for some years



The Temple of Philosophy in Ermenonville

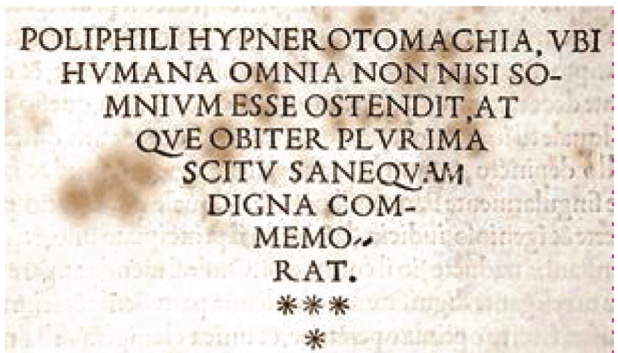
in a tomb designed by Hubert Robert, in a small island in the middle of the park). Nerval mentions also the Temple of Philosophy (which was unfinished, according to the wishes of its creator, the Marquis de Girardin). This is another example of 18th century “imitation ruins”, its model being the Temple of the Sybil in Tivoli. René Louis de Girardin, Rousseau’s close friend and sponsor, was the author of a remarkable treatise *De la composition des paysages*, (The composition of landscapes) published in 1777.

Now we come to the second work that served to guide the French poet in his travels to never-never land Cythera.

Le songe de Poliphile is an extremely learned and obscure compendium of the Renaissance view of antiquity. Between the 16th and 18th centuries, the work was rather influential, among poets, painters, architects and garden designers. The recent bestselling novel, *The Rule of Four* by Ian Caldwell and Dustin Thomason, as well as the installations of some contemporary artists (Nicolas Buffe, Sophie Dupont, Paolo Bottarelli), take inspiration from Colonna’s *Hypnerotomachia*.

Presumably completed in 1467 and published in Venice in December 1499 by the great printer Aldo Manuzio, it was written in an inventive language, consisting of spoken Italian mixed with Latin and Greek with Arabic and Hebrew inclusions. It is very likely that the Italian humanist Leon Battista Alberti assisted in its conception. Its complete title in English would read: *The Sleep-Love-Fight of Polifilo, in Which it is Shown that all Human Things are but a Dream, and Many Other Things Worthy of Knowledge and Memory.*

The love story between Poliphilo and Polia, conceived as a series of intertwined dreams, serves as a pretext (only one tenth of the book's 234 pages are devoted to this narrative plot) to a kind of encyclopaedia of the period's knowledge of antiquity as concerns rituals, costumes and accessories, as well as architecture, botany, gardening, landscape architecture.

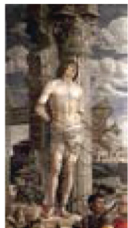


Incipit of *Poliphili Hypnerotomachia*

Much of the action described in the book takes place on the island of Cythera. It is there that the two protagonists celebrate their wedding, and Aphrodite appears to them. It is also on Cythera that magnificent and intricate gardens are described, along with ancient ruins and monuments and ceremonials.

The book is illustrated with 172 magnificent woodcuts by an unknown artist. But it is not known which Francesco Colonna is the author: the learned friar from Treviso, or the Lord of Palestrina? Some experts have even proposed that Colonna might be a pseudonym for Leon Battista Alberti himself⁹. Surely, the text cannot be read without the help of the images, and the images cannot be fully appreciated without understanding the text.

The subject of the archaeological, classical ruin is quite present in this book. It corresponds to a zeitgeist, particularly present in the Venice area, as Andrea Mantegna's activity bears witness to. Some experts credit this painter as the creator of *Poliphilo's* woodcuts. Here is a detail from his *Saint Sebastian*, painted around 1480.





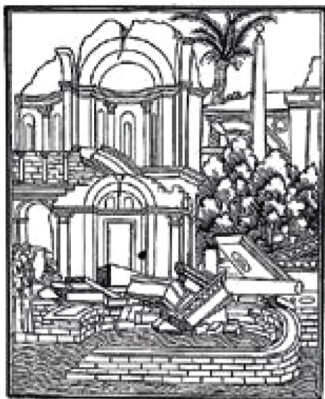
Come Polia et lui andorono allo littore aspectare Cupidine, ove era uno tempio destructo. Nel quale Polia suade a Poliphilo el vadi intro a mirare le cose antiche. Et quivi vide molti epitaphii, uno inferno depincto di musaico. Como per spavento de qui se partì et vene da Polia. Et quivi stanti vene Cupidine cum la navicula da sei Nymphe remigata. Nella quale ambo intrati, Amor fece vela cum le sue ale. Et quivi dagli Dii marini et Dee, et Nymphe et monstri li fu facto

honore a Cupidine, giunseron all'insula Cytherea, la quale Poliphilo distincto in boschetti, prati, horti, et fiumi, et fonti pienamente la describe, et li presenti fu fatti a Cupidine et lo accepto dalle Nymphe, et come sopra uno carro triumphante andorono ad uno mirando theatro tuto descripto. In mezo del'insula. Nel mezo dil quale è il fonte venereo di sete colonne pretiose, et tutto che ivi fu facto, et venendo Marte d'indi se partirono et andorono al fonte, ove era la sepultura di Adone.

I imagine that this work served as a leading example for all the “artificial ruins” up to the 20th century, with its notion of a fleeting past to be renewed, where decay is not regarded as a catastrophe, but as an appealing example of the impermanence of things. I believe that such re-enactments of Antiquity, like La Villa d’Este and Bomarzo, Frederick the Great’s Sanssouci, Pfaueninsel, Ermenonville and le Désert de Retz (to mention only a few renowned European gardens), and perhaps even Albert Speer’s concept of a “ruin value” derive directly from Poliphilo’s dream on Aphrodite’s island.

What I would like to say in conclusion is that the *künstliche Ruine* is always Romantic, but at the same time it bears witness to a progressive concept of History, which is typically “Enlightenment”. And the origin of this idea of the ruin as a constant renewal comes from the Renaissance period and, more specifically, from the Renaissance vision of the classical age.





Perhaps, you are waiting to see my own interpretation of the voyage to Cythera. Like all the artists and authors previously mentioned, I have never been to the island. If I were to create works devoted this theme, I would probably superimpose prints from *The Strife of Love in a Dream* on satellite images of this real island or, rather, to images of any archaeological site close to my house.

But why am I eventually interested in Cythera? Because it is a sort of paradigm of the gap between a real place and the images of it created and transmitted by past cultures. And this is a fertile gap.



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GEORGIA
GLORI DEI

GEORGIA
MATER AMORIS GEORGIA

DANGER

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