

Souls That Travel: American Writers in Greece

But what are they looking for, our souls that travel . . . ?

--George Seferis

Some come to tour and end up staying on. Some come fresh out of writing programs to teach and travel awhile, then decide to extend their contract for a year, another, then indefinitely. Some come for a sabbatical or summer vacation and wind up spending a lifetime of sabbaticals and summers here. Others are here because they have Greek roots. One left the unemployment line in Portland, Oregon, another a prestigious position with the World Bank in New York City. Whatever circumstances bring them here, they all have this in common: They are Americans who live and write in Greece, the latest in a long tradition of travelers and expatriates. From Herman Melville to Don DeLillo, American writers have been lured away from their huge homeland with a relatively slight history by this tiny, rocky country and its vast history. What these poets, novelists, travel writers and translators find once they're here is a country more diverse and challenging than they expected and--for those who get to know its culture, landscape and people--an endlessly rich source of inspiration.

Over the years, two different visions of Greece have strongly influenced the way American writers approach this country: Greece as the embodiment of the classical

legacy, and Greece as Paradise. Each approach has opened up new vistas for those who've come, but each has also often worked to limit how much of Greece these writers have been able to take in.

For those writers in search of the Golden Age, the appeal of Greece is obvious. The Muses were born here, as was Western literature itself. Moreover in Greece the ancient world seems to live on. Visitors can see, even climb, Mount Olympus, home of Zeus. They can tour Sappho's Lesbos or Homer's Ithaca, or attend a tragedy by Aeschylus in the original Greek and in the same theater his contemporaries saw it in. Here, the ancient texts are no longer simply objects of study that comprise the basis of how the western world comprehends and expresses itself. The written word, along with all the history and myth behind it, seems to come alive in the intense eastern Mediterranean light of Hellas, as the ancients called Greece.

Herman Melville obviously thought so when he visited the island of Syros in the mid-nineteenth century and later wrote:

I saw it in its earlier day--

Primitive, such an isled resort

As hearthless Homer might have known

As did Mark Twain, who wrote about sneaking into the Acropolis at night in *Innocents Abroad* (1869): "The place seemed alive with ghosts. I half expected to see the

Athenian heroes of twenty centuries ago glide out of the shadows and steal into the old temple they knew so well and regarded with such boundless pride.”

The appeal of Hellas still draws writers to Greece. But Athens is no longer the city of Pericles. Though its citizens still spend drachmas and still are sometimes named Socrates, Antigone and other appellations from antiquity, Greece left the classical world behind centuries ago. Since the decline of Alexander the Great’s Empire several decades before Christ, Greece has been subjugated for centuries at a time, first by the Romans and later by the Ottoman Turks, and in between prospered as the heart and soul of the Byzantine Empire. Those 19th-century writers who came looking for Hellas usually failed to see these other layers of the Greek historical reality or their influences on the modern inhabitants. More often than not those who nurtured such images more often than not rejected the real Greece for the Hellas they had learned from books. As socially astute an observer as Mark Twain described the landscape of Attica as a “barren, desolate, unpoetical waste,” and the local residents as a “community of questionable characters, . . . confiscators and falsifiers of high repute.”

Those writers who didn’t reject what they found when they arrived in Greece struggled intensely to adjust their expectations. What Julia Ward Howe, author of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” (1862) and *From the Oak to the Olive* (1869), saw when she came to Nauplion in 1868 to help refugees from the Cretan Uprising resembled more

Dodge City than the first capital of the newly independent state of Greece. She was bringing relief supplies and money that she and her husband had raised as part of a larger movement in America and Europe to liberate from the Ottoman Empire all the lands identified with classical Greece. This is what she found on her arrival: “Crowd in the street. Bandit’s head just cut off and brought in. We go to the prefect’s house. . . . [H]e offers his roof--sends out for mattresses[,] . . . I mad with my mosquito bites. Mattresses on the floor. We women lie down four in a row, very thankfully”

So powerful was the appeal of the classical legacy that writers throughout the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries kept coming, known and unknown alike. Poet and classicist Trumbull Stickney (*Dramatic Verses*, 1902) came in the early 1900s; Hilda Doolittle (*Helen in Egypt*, 1961) in the 1920s. Diplomat and journalist George Horton (*Poems of Exile*, 1932) spent almost four decades in Greece in the early part of the twentieth century, composing poems after the classical tradition but also writing about village legends and contemporary political events, unlike his compatriots, virtually all of whom had eyes only for Hellas.

From the mid-twentieth century on, however, a different Greece began charming American writers: Greece as Paradise, a land of stunning physical beauty and simple, timeless ways. Henry Miller’s *Colossus of Maroussi* (1941), his account of his travels in Greece in 1939, became the “Bible” of a new generation of American writers in search

of an alternative to what Miller termed the “air-conditioned nightmare” of America. Traveling to Corfu, Crete and other islands, as well as to the Peloponnese and Athens, Miller was not interested in overlaying images of the Golden age onto what he encountered. Quite the opposite. Following the lead of 19th century English painter and author Edward Lear, Miller was attracted to rural island life, which they saw as simpler, more vital, more morally tolerant and less corrupted than life in the country each of them had left. For Miller, the lives of the people he met were not dominated by “machine-made luxuries and comforts,” but by the natural rhythms of the seasons and the numerous festive rituals associated with them. Even urban Greeks seemed more spontaneous and expressive than his “empty, restless and miserable” countrymen. And everywhere he went, the locals opened their doors to him.

Miller had his blind spots, however, sometimes romanticizing or ignoring the many difficulties that both rural and urban Greeks faced. In Crete he praised the rusticity of village houses with dirt floors, though no villager at the time would have said no to concrete. In Athens he observed that “the Greek knows how to live with his rags: they don’t utterly degrade and befoul him.” And even though he spent time in Athens and became good friends with poet-diplomat George Seferis, Miller completely ignored the political reality of a country about to be invaded by Hitler. Nevertheless his contribution was important. As Edmund Keeley, author of *Inventing Paradise* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), a chronicle of Lawrence Durrell’s and Miller’s relationship to Greece,

explains, “Miller came with the tremendous advantage of being uneducated--as Seferis noted--so had no prejudices about the classical tradition. He sees Indian tepees on the Argolid. And he didn’t go to the Acropolis until very late, if at all.” Though Miller, like those eager to find Hellas, projected his own fantasies onto the landscape of Greece, he at least took an interest in contemporary life, befriending village fisherman and urban intellectual alike.

In the decades after World War II, American writers began responding again to Greece’s allure. Many, unfortunately, perpetuated the blind spots of their predecessors. But gradually writers started expanding the range of their appreciation of Greece. Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, William Burroughs and other Beats came in the 1950s for extended stopovers, as did numerous others caught up in the counter culture movement of the 1960s and ‘70s, many with a copy of Miller’s *Colossus of Maroussi* or Nikos Kazantzakis’ *Zorba the Greek* in their backpacks. As John Zervos, director of the Athens Centre, a cultural institute which has hosted readings by Americans for several decades now, explains, Greece in the 1960s “became a magnet for people wanting to escape conventionality or to get away from whatever things they felt were holding them back mentally, intellectually or physically.”

Even those who didn’t completely identify with the Beat or hippie movements found Greece preferable to progress-oriented, morally-inhibited, Cold War-obsessed America.

Poet Alan Ansen (*The Table Talk of W. H. Auden*, Ontario Review Press, 1990) came in the late 1950s, and James Merrill (*Collected Poems*, Knopf, 2001) in the early 1960s, out of a love of the classical tradition, but even more so because here they were not persecuted for their homosexuality, as they had been in the U.S. Others who came for history began seeing more than the Golden Age. Kevin Andrews (*The Flight of Ikaros*, Houghton Mifflin, 1959), who arrived shortly after World War II on an archaeology scholarship, soon took up writing and traveled the mountains of Greece studying medieval Byzantine monasteries. Poet Robert Lax (*A Thing That Is*, Outlook Press, 1998) came to the island of Patmos in the early 1960s and spent the rest of his life there because of that island's New Testament connection (Patmos is where St. John wrote Revelations), and because of the ascetic life he could lead on the "Holy Island."

The wave of writers who came in the seventies and eighties seemed to make little distinction between Hellas and Paradise. Both time past and timelessness were important sources of inspiration. And Greece still offered a haven to those wanting to escape life in the U.S. Novelist Don DeLillo found Greece to be a welcome reprieve from the barrage of media and other distractions he had to endure back home. In the three years he spent here he became fascinated not only by the ancient ruins, but also by the modern language and the functioning of languages in general, an interest reflected in *The Names* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), a novel partly set in Greece.

The primitive corners on Cycladic islands such as Ios and Paros captivated poets Michael Waters (*Parthenopi*, BOA Editions, 2000), Linda Gregg (*Things and Flesh*, Graywolf, 1999) and Jack Gilbert (*The Great Fires*, Knopf, 1995), among others. As suggested by the title of Gregg's first book, *Too Bright To See* (Graywolf Press, 1981), many were mesmerized by the Greek light and all it shined on: whitewashed houses, stepped slopes of fruit trees, long empty beaches. These writers, many of whom lived in one-room houses, sometimes without water or electricity, believed that such Spartan conditions helped them realize "the value of life stripped of most distraction," as Waters put it. Here the writing life seemed as simple and natural as drawing water from a well or milking a goat--and every activity took on the aura of sacred ritual and meditation.

Also at the time several women writers, including Gregg and novelist Katie Estill (*Evening Would Find Me*, Ontario Review Press, 2000) found in Greece an abiding connection to the archetypal feminine divinities, and not only to Artemis, Aphrodite and other goddesses from classical mythology. For these writers, the landscape and all it contained were numinous with the presence of the Earth Mother, the Great Goddess of Minoan civilization, whose people, these writers often believed, had enjoyed thousands of years of prosperity and peace under a matriarchy devoted to the Great Mother. As Estill describes her experience, being exposed to the landscape and civilizations of Greece "presented to me for the first time in my life female divinity in concrete form."

Though they face difficulties just as their predecessors did, American writers who live in Greece today, especially those who have come in the last decade or so, seem intent on establishing a greater balance between past and present, and between timeless Greece and its modern quotidian. This change can be seen in such recent works by American writers associated with Greece as Tom LeClair's *Passing Off* (The Permanent Press, 1996), a novel that follows a year in the life of an American playing professional basketball in Greece, and Karen Van Dyck's *Kassandra and the Censors* (Cornell University Press, 1998), a critical work that examines the legacy of Greek women poets under the dictatorship from 1967 to 1974. For some writers living in Greece, this shift toward the modern is even stronger. Poet Christopher Bakken, whose collection *After Greece* (Truman State University Press) won the 2001 T. S. Eliot Prize in Poetry, rejects the easy turning to figures and themes from classical mythology. Instead he is strongly attracted to the landscape and to the close ties between family and friends among modern Greeks. And he is drawn even more to the possibilities that learning the modern language has opened up for him. Coming to Greece, he says, enabled him to immerse himself in a "new-ancient language . . . one still audibly and semantically in contact with its ancient roots." Learning modern Greek, which many writers and scholars in the past have dismissed out of hand as being inferior to the ancient Greek, has also been critical in the development of his poetry: "If poetry is an attempt to harness the essence of language, Greece points the way. Being at a loss for words

was endlessly helpful in my search for a more poetic timbre, a pared down one in English.”

For Adrienne Kalfopoulou (*Fig*, Sarasota Poetry Theatre Press, 2000), writing that focuses exclusively on the exotic dimension of Greece is often clichéd. More importantly, it overlooks the reality of modern Greece: “I’m not interested in decoration and talking about the Aegean as the bluest sea or . . . about how whitewashed the Cycladic islands are, trying to promote Greece as Spartan beauty. None of that interests me. In fact that upsets me.” Kalfopoulou prefers poetry that shows the rich complexities of everyday life. “It’s a Balkan reality [here], very messy, so my poetry becomes a translation of how there’s order in the chaos, and how things are so much more complicated than what they seem.”

Like LeClair, Bakken and Kalfopoulou, critic and translator Karen Van Dyck appreciates the modern reality, but for somewhat different reasons. In her view, people in the U.S. don’t adequately appreciate their language and literature, except in narrow academic and literary circles. But in Greece, people of all walks of life take pleasure in discussing both. “I love the fact that I can sit around at a table and talk about weird meanings of things and everybody gets into it as if it were as exciting as politics, and certainly [I like] the idea that poetry is important--it’s a relief to be around a culture that always feels that way.”

While these more recent expatriates aren't as likely to treat Greece as a blank screen onto which they can project fantasies of Paradise and the Golden Age, they still appreciate as much as their predecessors the laid-back lifestyle and focus on family and friends that remain essential features of daily life here. Most would readily agree with Alan Ansen, a resident of Athens for over 40 years, when he says that "people in this country take personal relationships more seriously." Nonetheless, culture shock is almost inevitable. According to Athens-based poet A. E. Stallings (*Archaic Smile*, University of Evansville Press, 1999), "You have to make a pretty big commitment to be living here People think that it's a sort of permanent vacation . . . [but] Athens is very urban and very chaotic. I actually like the chaos now to a certain extent, but when I arrived it was very difficult."

Like Stallings, most writers find ways to cope, usually by adjusting their own behavior and attitudes or by coming to understand and appreciate the Greek ways. When faced with the language barrier, for example, most writers (unlike most other Americans who come here) learn to speak at least some modern Greek, or they end up associating mainly with those nationals who know English--and many do. And though taken aback when they first hear a Greek railing against the U.S, which is often seen as trying to manipulate events in Greece and Europe for its own ends, most Americans soon learn not to take such tirades personally. Poet Charles O. Hartman (*The Long View*, Wesleyan,

1999) was living with his wife on the island of Aegina when the bombing of Kosovo took place, which the vast majority of Greeks--traditional allies of the Balkan Serbs--opposed: "We felt troubled, and we felt the trouble. [But] we never felt it directly--no one on the island seemed to hold the bombing against us personally."

Writers also have to adjust to the sociable nature of people here. Greeks love to go out with family and friends, and not just on weekends. Those Americans who prefer to write in the evening usually wind up changing their habits. Moreover, privacy is a concept few people here understand, especially since there's no word for it in the language. As Nick Papandreou (*Father Dancing*, Penguin, 1997) explains, "Society invades your space a lot more here. There's less time on your own. Something's wrong if you want to sit alone. When I really do my writing I do it in the daytime, because in the evening people will bother you to go out. They won't understand. They'll say, 'Oh, do it tomorrow.'"

As in most countries where the first language is not English, American expatriates often have to struggle to find an infrastructure and society of writers to support them in their efforts. Though in the past there have been groups that socialized and shared work together--most notably expatriates and visitors associated with either James Merrill or translator Kimon Friar (*Modern Greek Poetry*, Efstathiades, 1997)--many writers today

either feel they can't find a community here in Greece, or don't want to. Others find community through email or regular mail. Some prefer to associate primarily with Greek writers. Those groups that do form usually only last a few months at most, mainly because expatriates here, as anywhere, are transitory.

The monthly reading series at Compendium Bookshop in Athens, coordinated by expatriates Rick Shulein and Eleni Vainas, is an important exception. Though readings in English do happen at such cultural centers as the Hellenic American Union and the British Council, or at American schools, such as Deree College and the University of La Verne, there isn't another steady forum for poetry in Athens. "The reading series gives poets a chance to have work heard in front of an audience--very difficult here," says Vainas.

Another important source for cultural activities in English is the Athens Centre, which has been a venue for readings by Americans for well over three decades. "William Burroughs read from his late novels in the early '70s," recalls director John Zervos, "Gregory Corso was poet-in-residence . . . in 1972. . . . Jimmy Merrill gave his last reading at the Athens Centre a few months before he died." The list of poets who have read or taught at the Centre over the years, either in Athens or in its programs on Aegina or Spetses, is a long one, which would include from just this past summer Annie Finch (*Eve*, Story Line Press, 1997) and Randy Blasing (*Second Home*, Copper

Beech Press, 2001)--thanks to the Muses Workshop, a poetry conference initiated by the Centre this year, and coordinated by A. E. Stallings.

Books in English are relatively easy to find in Greece (but expensive), primarily due to the popularity of American literature among a population with a high level of English proficiency. In Athens, for example, Compendium Bookshop sells only English books, while the biggest bookstore chain, Eleftherothakis, has large sections devoted to English literature in each of its stores. Journals are another matter. The major American literary magazines are hard to come by here, except on the Internet. But fortunately there are a handful of English language journals published in Greece, the most prominent of which are *MondoGreco* and *POETRY Greece*. *MondoGreco* publishes a variety of material--poetry, essays, fiction and photography--all having to do with Greece. *POETRY Greece* publishes poetry and reviews, and doesn't restrict itself to work with a Greek focus. "You can get tired of reading about 'the intense blue skies of Greece,'" says one of the editors, British expatriate Wendy Holborrow, "particularly when living and working here in the heat of July and August when a grey cloudy sky would be welcome."

Whatever they're looking for in Greece--whether it's the legacy of the past, the simplicity or richness of modern life, a landscape that seems to emanate a spiritual

quality, the warmth and expressiveness of its people, the timelessness of its way of life or simply a good place to retreat to and find oneself--American writers keep coming. Sometimes their imaginations are infused with such idealized images that they fail to notice the real Greece, at least in the beginning. And often when they do see it, they struggle with the vicissitudes of immersion into this new, surprisingly strange culture. But in spite of--or maybe because of--these adversities, the varied experiences these writers have in Greece often make them better writers. Living among a people who take pride in their language and literature can be very heartening for those writers and poets who have suffered under the relative neglect of such concerns in the U.S. And being able to tap into a language and literature that have been evolving continuously for three thousand years is an opportunity that few American writers have. This is perhaps why poet Nicholas Samaras (*Hands of the Saddlemaker*, Yale University Press, 1992), who has spent long periods of time in Greece, can say, "I, as an American writer, became a better writer because of my experiences in Greece.

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