

Mapping the Country Behind the Words:

American Poets in Greece

“Why would someone write poems?” George Seferis writes in his journal, and answers, “Because, they are such mysterious things (for the one who writes them) that he considers them more important than all other things in life. A vital necessity.” That “vital necessity” is what interests me--as a poet and as the editor of *Kindled Terraces: American Poets in Greece*, an anthology which recently came out from Truman State University Press in the U.S., about which I have been asked to speak today. What is it about Greece that feels vitally necessary to so many--and so many different--contemporary American poets, enough so that they make this country, this place, a central concern in their poetic vision? And, more relevant to this symposium, why might such concerns be of interest to a Greek reader?

In order to begin answering these questions, I would ask you, the audience, to try to picture in your mind’s eye a map of Europe according to the American poetic imagination. Such a map, as I’m sure you’ll quickly see, would look much different than the actual map found in an atlas: England would be by far the largest country in Europe. France would be the second largest. But Greece would be almost as big, dwarfing Germany and Russia. For American poets,

Greece is a vast territory, densely packed with significance, dizzying at times with how much it inspires poets who venture here. But, anyone reading these maps should beware. We all know that even the most precise map is recording an ever-shifting territory, and that, as Derrida has shown us, the signs comprising the map itself are also ever-shifting. More suspect yet is the mapmaker who is a "stranger" in the territory he or she is charting. So why read such maps? Because, I submit, among other benefits, these texts tell us a lot about the mapmaker and how he or she pursues here in Greece that "vital necessity" that Seferis mentions.

In the decades since World War II--the period covered by *Kindled Terraces*--a steady stream of American writers have been coming to Greece, most looking for the Golden Age of ancient Hellas or the primitive paradise they read about in Henry Miller, Lawrence Durrell and Nikos Kazantzakis. Some, unfortunately, perpetuated the blind spots of their predecessors. But gradually writers started expanding and deepening the range of their approach, sometimes synthesizing various elements of the historical and pastoral, and eventually taking in more and more of the multiplicity of modern Greece.

From the 1950s on, then, one can distinguish four different types of poets who have come to Greece--tourists, sojourners, residents and descendents. These

distinctions are based in part on what motivates the poet to come and, even more so, on the degree to which each poet has immersed him- or herself into the actual culture of Greece. Those poets who come as tourists, such as William Pitt Root and Alicia Ostriker, though they arrive with great affection for Greece, tend to skim the surface without immersing themselves deeply in any one place. Staying here only days or a couple weeks at the most, they rarely struggle with the language or get caught up in the concerns of daily life. Greece is a holiday, albeit one so significant that as poets they write about it. The maps of Greece these poets make tend to focus on one dimension, the places of interest few but strongly emphasized--Root's love of the poetry of Ritsos or Ostriker's fascination with Santorini's volcano as a symbol of her rage and awakening as a woman. Lest we dismiss such poets too quickly, it's important to note that, though they can view Greece superficially, they can also be aware of their limitations, at times even mocking the narrow perceptions they and other tourists have.

Sojourners, on the other hand, spend much more time here--months, even a year or two--and tend to make return trips. Whether they live in urban environments, such as Moira Egan and Christopher Bakken, both of whom taught at Anatolia College here in Thessaloniki, or in rural settings, such as Joseph Stroud on Karpathos, or Thomas McGrath in the Peloponnese, they tend

to penetrate deeper into Greek life, often, like Dave Mason, attempting to learn the language, or even, like Charles O. Hartman, writing poems in Greek. They travel extensively about the country, but also get to know one place intimately, forming lifelong friendships with Greeks and gaining an awareness of the landscape and culture beyond the relics of a golden age or the pleasures of lotus-eating.

The residents, who make up the largest single group of poets in the anthology, and who include such well known figures as James Merrill, Rachel Hadas and Peter Green, and the lesser known but legendary poets Alan Ansen and Robert Lax, are more difficult to generalize about. The common factor this group shares is that they all live--or in the past have lived--many years in Greece. Some, like Jeffrey Carson, Laurel Mantzaris or Becky Denison Sakellariou, have spent decades here, becoming citizens, raising families, participating in life as any resident of Greece would. Their immersion, if not complete, is deep and abiding, and their poetry usually reflects this intimate, enduring connection.

The final group, the descendants of Greeks, is also difficult to generalize about. Some, like Lonnie DuPont and Rina Ferarrelli, have only visited Greece briefly, though Greece as the land of their ancestors has obvious significance for them. Others, like Adrienne Kalfopoulou, live here permanently. Still others, like

Nicholas Samaras and Eleni Sikelianos, the great-granddaughter of Angelos Sikelianos, grew up in a Greek-American environment and visit Greece on a regular basis.

As the above distinctions suggest, American poets are drawn to Greece for a variety of motives which in turn influence their expectations of and responses to Greece. But whatever their duration of stay or intensity of encounter, those who come here reflect the diversity and complexity of American poetry. Former Poet Laureate Robert Hass, in his introduction to *The Best American Poetry 2001*, separates contemporary poetry in the U.S. into three main movements:

[...] a metrical tradition that can be very nervy and that is also basically classical in impulse; a strong central tradition of free verse made out of both romanticism and modernism[...]; and an experimental tradition that is usually more passionate about form than content[...].

All three of these approaches can be found in *Kindled Terraces*. A small majority of the poets in the anthology write in free verse, including such recognized masters of the craft as Jack Gilbert and Michael Waters. While these poets tend to be oriented toward rural, island Greece, they are not exclusively so.

Conversely, the poets identified with more formal approaches --James Merrill

and A. E. Stallings, for example--tend to be attracted to urban settings. But as the work of Peter Green and Rachel Hadas shows, this is certainly not always the case.

Representatives of the third stream of American poetry include concrete poet Robert Lax; language poets Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Eleni Sikelianos; and experimental poet Charles O Hartman. Other groupings that reflect movements in contemporary American poetry include gay poets James Merrill, Alan Ansen and Edward Field, and the feminist concerns of, among others, Alicia Ostriker and Rachel Blau DuPlessis.

While perspectives, of course, differ from tradition to tradition, as well as from poet to poet, generation to generation, and one degree of immersion to another, there are certain ways of framing Greece that most post-World War II American poets share. For example, any reader of American poems on Greece quickly comes to understand that, for good or nought, Americans first "know" Greece through texts--through the works of Homer and Aeschylus, Sappho, Theucydides and Plato, through ancient myth and Christian scripture originally written in Greek, and through translations of Constantine Cavafy, Nikos Kazantzakis and other modern Greek writers. Greece, more than any other country in the Western world, enters the imagination of a North American

through reading literature, philosophy, history and drama, and through viewing art and architecture. Let's hear what two poets, representing two completely different strains of contemporary poetry, have to say about why they came to Greece. Lyric poet Bill Mayer writes,

Greece was introduced to me first through the writings of Richard Halliburton, an adventurer of the twenties and thirties who wrote the sort of books that enabled a sensitive boy to clamber out of the prosaic world and let his imagination go wild. [...] What I wanted was magic, and Greece gave that. The myths burned into my brain, the sculpture and architecture were more beautiful than anything I had ever seen, and the plays and poetry were harsh and true.

Language poet Rachel Blau DuPlessis says of her connection to Greece:

My work on H.D., a poet deeply affected by Greece and Greek materials, my long commitment to teaching Greek playwrights and thinkers in humanities courses at the university level, and my interest in contemporary feminist work in the classics all led me repeatedly to Greece. Greece is a spiritual and cultural site deep at the heart of our tradition, a site in which one may travel imaginatively as well as in reality. I have done both; my travels to the museums,

temples, and landscapes of Greece have helped form and sustain my imagination.

For the American poet, then, Greece is part of the "story" of Western Civilization, and as such influences how Americans, especially American poets, consciously or unconsciously construct a sense of self. Such sources of tradition and identity are particularly important in New World cultures, where other, closer at hand sources are less available. A poet working in the English language is constantly confronted with the pervasive presence of Greece--at virtually every phase of that language's literary tradition--from the medieval to the renaissance, neo-classical, romantic and modern ages. Even post-modernists, many of whom eschew the Hellenic legacy as being, for various reasons, corrupt and prejudice, can hold Greece to be an important source of inspiration, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis' comments above confirm. The fact is, for an American poet, Greece, in one manifestation or another, is unavoidable.

But the significance of Greece is not only based on the pervasive influence of its literature. Greece as a place--the idea that such a place so deeply embedded in the imagination might actually exist, and that one could even live in such a place--is a magnet to those pursuing that "vital necessity" of poetry. For an American poet--whether reared on classical, romantic, modernist or

post-modernist traditions--the desire to find "the country behind the words," as Rachel Hadas identifies her initial reason for first coming to Greece--to see the text come alive before one's eyes--is a powerful impulse that draws numerous American poets to these shores.

Perhaps the most deeply rooted "text" that American poets identify with Greece, and so yearn to see come alive when they venture into this land, is that of mythology. From cradle stories to canonized literary texts, from the cinema to the therapist's couch--American poets, at every stage of their lives, encounter the archetypal heroes and heroines, gods and goddesses that comprise classical mythology. Any visitor can't help but sense, to some degree, that those narratives, and the figures and places they evoke, live on in Greece.

Attracted to Homer's Greece, A. E. Stallings writes that,

There are scenes in modern Greece at almost no remove. The wildflowers and the countryside and the sea, the feast of lamb and bread and wine, words still in everyday parlance that were spoken by Achilles. Indeed, they still might be spoken by an Achilleas! I love where the contemporary and ancient rub shoulders, with no sense of irony: the moving van labeled "metaphores"; the goatherd ushering home his goats from his Nissan pick-up truck, at the rising of Sappho's evening star, calling his wife Penelope on the cell-phone. Here more

than elsewhere you remember that all literature is, to the reader,
contemporaneous.

For most American poets, mythology takes on concrete significance once they've come to this country, so much so that recounting the myths often becomes a critical means by which a poet processes his or her experience of this land. Diane Thiel, for example, struggling with a more modern American saga--that of the Kennedy family--turns to classical mythology in order to come to terms with the sudden death of John F. Kennedy Jr. In "Legacy" she asks,

[...] How could we not collectively think
of a curse on your house? On Greek TV,
I see the photos of your childhood
framed by your father's desk and casket.

[...] You seemed to be emerging from the hollows
of this century, somehow unscathed--Still,
you sought the skies' escape, like Icarus,
Phaethon, so many legendary children.
It was the legacy you couldn't trade
that brought you everything too early on--
a changeling sent at three into the sun.

However, some poets, like Christopher Bakken, see the proliferation of people, places and things associated with mythology as a poetic problem to be solved.

Reflecting back on his two year stay, Bakken writes:

Words and place-names suggested too much there: Sparta, Thebes, Athens, Corinth. The Muses, those daughters of Mnemosyne, had to be resisted; memory in this landscape was almost too accessible, lying open to the elements everywhere in various states of ruin. Joseph Brodsky tells us that "There are places where history is inescapable, like a highway accident--places where geography provokes history." This was one of those places.

For others, such as lyric poet Linda Gregg in "Not a Pretty Bird," once myth becomes reality, then reality must come to myth: the old stories must be challenged, even revised, based on modern sensibilities:

She was not a nightingale

as the Greek said.

Philomela was a woman.

The sister of the new wife.

Raped, tongue cut out by the husband.

Locked away.

Not a swallow, not the bird of morning
and late evenings that end so swiftly.

Not a myth. She was a girl.

That is the story: the empty mouth,
the bloody breasts. The outrage.

Not the transformation.

Poems focusing on mythology may not always present Greece in a way that a Greek reader would readily recognize, but they can reveal what vital, nourishing elements are missing from the American imagination's native soil.

It may be startling for you to learn, as it certainly was to me, how many American poets claim to have found a home in this country. "When I first arrived in Greece," Edward Field recalls, "I instantly felt more at home than anywhere I'd ever been. It was as though I had found my people." Such statements more than anything else reveal what is lacking in the "air-conditioned nightmare" of America--to use Henry Miller's term. Americans--especially American poets--often feel alienated in their own country. They turn to poetry for a sense of history and tradition--something of significance to connect to beyond the personal--or to come to terms with deeply seated and sometimes inexplicable

feelings of exile and loss. Often coming from broken homes and estranged relationships, they may lack intimate emotional bonds, or perceive deeply that lack in others around them. Raised to focus their lives mainly on professional and material success, caught up in the inherent contradiction of conspicuous consumption on the one hand and the protestant work ethic on the other--small wonder that these poets report a sense of belonging in a country that elevates family, personal relationships and human interaction--in all its manifestations--above efficiency and personal space.

If one adds to this disconcerting mix the marginalized status of poetry in America and the all-pervasive promotion of progress and technology, then one can also readily understand why American poets would respond viscerally to the sense of history and tradition they "discover" in Greece and seek to escape the trappings of modernity. In rural, island Greece Americans find--or so they perceive--a place of startling, primitive beauty, stripped down to the elemental, the essential, a place bathed in light that "strikes the alien eye strongly, irrevocably," as Moira Egan describes it.

Those American poets with a more classical bent have also found in Greece an essential source of poetry, though they're usually more drawn to urban settings. Poets like James Merrill and Alan Ansen came to Greece in the 1950s and '60s,

not for the stripped down pleasures of island life, but for the freedom, vibrancy and sensuality of the city, where sophisticated conversation was an essential part of daily life, where the streets were filled with the sounds and smells that made American city life seem drab in comparison, and where they could escape the oppressive morality of post-war America. Urban Greece still attracts American poets, as much of the work in the anthology shows. From Michael Waters' poem on buying olives in a central Athens neighborhood, to Moira Egan's description of Thessaloniki sunsets during the war in Kosovo, to A. E. Stallings' poems about empty Athenian avenues and bus stops in August, beggars on the subway, and the earthquake of 1999--many American poets are busy mapping out the contours of modernity in Greece, even as others continue to flee it.

For poets who immerse themselves more deeply into the daily life of this country, it is the encounter with the modern Greek language that is the most compelling, fusing as it does so many disparate aspects of their experience. For others it's the challenge of living in a different culture. Americans--even Greek-Americans--usually feel a kind of dislocation of self as the cultural assumptions they grew up with in the U.S.--whether having to do with gender or public behavior, communication styles or perceived indicators of politeness--are challenged by the ways of Greek culture. But while poets have no special

dispensation from the pain of culture shock--on the contrary, many tend to feel the shock of living abroad even more acutely--engaging in the creative process, as Nicholas Samaras suggests, can help them process clashing perceptions. In fact, he, like other poets, sees immersion in another culture as a way to challenge himself and grow:

Living abroad is a colouring, a way of self-discovery and self-evolving[...] As a writer, I deal with what affects me, what I experience, and writing is my way of expression, of making sense of things. Every writer cannot, must not stop growing. And anything foreign and new is an impetus, a catalyst.

The question we've been focusing on in this talk today is why should a Greek read poems by Americans on Greece. Due to the briefness of this presentation, I have focused on one important reason: because these poems enable the reader to gain a better understanding of the American creative imagination and why that imagination is so powerfully drawn to Greece. In concluding, though, I would like to suggest two other benefits. First, a close look at American poems on Greece will enable a Greek auditor to challenge the often too hastily accepted stereotypes regarding how Americans respond to Greece. As I hope this talk has shown, American poets are not just wide eyed, naive tourists enamored of the Golden Age; not just lotus eaters basking away on Aegean beaches while

contemplating their navels; not just diehard romantics traipsing in the well worn footsteps of Lord Byron and Henry Miller. These poets are often very aware of the superficial perceptions tourists can form of Greece; some even write poems mocking such responses--theirs as well as those of others. Others question and problematize the way we Americans gravitate to islands and see those places as wild, Edenic, sacred and sublime--while all too often ignoring features of island life that contradict those readymade perceptions. Poets in the anthology write about the modern Greek experience of war and dislocation, the more recent war in Bosnia and the NATO bombing of Belgrade. Nicholas Samaras writes of his time on Mt. Athos, Donald Brees about election week, Rachel Hadas about the slow dissolution of her marriage to a Greek while living on Samos--topics that don't fit the usual stereotypes.

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly of all, these poems, at least certain ones, can give Greek readers a perspective on their own culture they wouldn't get from any other source. The critical observations of post-colonial criticism notwithstanding, a full reading of American poems on Greece cannot ignore the fresh insights that sojourners, residents and descendents sometimes offer.

Moreover, not all American poets writing about Greece are simply outsiders.

Robert Lax, Becky Dennison Sakellariou, Philip Ramp and several others in the anthology have lived the majority of their lives, especially their creative lives, in

this country. Their experience of Greece, even if rendered in English, cannot be dismissed out of hand. Many poems in the anthology speak of people and places these poets have come to know intimately, offering in the process glimpses of Greece from within.

"You'll see a different cosmos through the eyes of a Greek," the speaker in James Merrill's "Kostas Tympakianakis" tells us. And he's right. But, regarding the work of writers such as those in *Kindled Terraces*, who pursue the vital necessity of poetry while in this land, the opposite is also true. Paraphrasing Merrill, one can also say, "You'll see a different Greece through the eyes of an American poet."

Don Schofield
Symposium: "American Poetry in Greece"
Hellenic Association for American Studies,
Aristotle University, Thessaloniki, Greece
October 23, 2004