

Writing Greece: Tourist, Sojourner, Resident and Descendent

American writers have been coming to Greece for almost two centuries. Herman Melville, during his stint as a merchant marine, wrote poems on Greece while docked in Ermoupolis, Syros. Mark Twain, in *Innocents Abroad*, wrote of sneaking into the Acropolis at night: “The place seemed alive with ghosts. I half expected to see the Athenian heroes of twenty centuries ago to glide out of the shadows and steal into the old temple they knew so well and regarded with such boundless pride” (347). These and numerous other American writers came, and continue to come, enamored of the legacy of the Golden Age, from which, in part, the humanistic tradition rises, a tradition which inspired the formation of the Fulbright Association and continues to inspire its pursuits, but also a tradition which in the past two decades or so has been increasingly questioned by writers and other intellectuals. By briefly examining the work of four contemporary American poets, as featured in *Kindled Terraces: American Poets in Greece*, an anthology I recently edited, I will identify four distinct approaches to writing Greece and discuss some of the implications of each approach vis a vis the humanistic tradition. More importantly, at least for the purposes of this conference, I will suggest how each poet is helping to sustain essential features of humanism, even while questioning others, by maintaining contact with the *topos* of Greece, the perceived source of that tradition.

The first poet we'll look at, Alicia Suskind Ostriker, author of over 10 volumes of poetry and winner of a National Book Award, represents the group I call tourists. Staying here a few days or, at most, a couple weeks, members of this group tend to make only a superficial acquaintance with this country. While they are

often aware of their limitations, at times even mocking the narrow perceptions they and other tourists have, these poets 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. When they reflect on their experience here, they tend to focus on one dimension and on a few but strongly emphasized places of interest, in this instance Ostriker's fascination with Santorini's volcano as a symbol of her rage and awakening as a woman.

"[W]hen I was a child," the speaker of "Volcano" narrates:

I was an island....

[...] a small round bushy island
inside me were many

roots, rocks, ores,
flowings and crevasses wrinkled
pushing like joy, like fear's thin
fluids, like love's neediness

maybe too much
and somehow they turned all
to anger and for years
the lava poured and poured [...] (4).

Ostriker readily acknowledges her tourist stance. As she explains in the introduction to her poems in the anthology, "I fell into writing The Volcano Sequence while looking at a guidebook to [...] Santorini [...]; the first poem in the book was the voice of that extinct volcano which was also, at that time, myself,

my most destructive self, a destroyer of Atlantis." (*Kindled Terraces* 194).

Primed, as many American poets, by the romantic and humanistic traditions in English for an intense encounter with the landscape--even though, as a feminist and peace activist, she questions the misogyny and militarism that darken the heart of these traditions--Ostriker readily identifies Santorini's volcano with her personal experience. Besides connecting it to the personal, Ostriker, as most tourists, associates Greece with pleasure, sensual and aesthetic: "I have hiked, biked, and sailed in Greece. I drink retsina in the spring, wherever I am. The Poseidon in the National Archaeological Museum is my favorite sculpture on earth[...]" (*Kindled Terraces* 194). And, as with most poets who come to this land, the classical tradition offers a standard by which she measures the quality of her writing: "I would like to achieve, in at least some of my poetry," she remarks, "the clarity and vigor I identify with Greek poetry, art, architecture and landscape" (*Kindled Terraces* 194).

While tourist-poets are among the largest group of Americans who come here, the greatest number of poets writing Greece fall into the other three categories--sojourners, residents and descendents. Among the most prominent of the sojourners is Linda Gregg, recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts grant, a Whiting Writer's Award, and several Pushcart Prizes. She, like other sojourners, has spent extended periods of time here, in her case living on Paros, Santorini, Mytilene and elsewhere. Sojourners tend to penetrate deeper into Greek life, often attempting to learn the language, even, in some cases, 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.

A lyric poet, Gregg, like Ostriker, writes, in part, out of the humanist tradition. And like Ostriker, she questions the violence and misogyny of the classical tradition, in her case often interrogating the narratives that carry with them the most essential values of Western Civilization. In "Not a Pretty Bird," for example, Gregg challenges the traditional reading of the myth of Philomela:

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 (*Things and Flesh* 9).

Gregg also challenges the humanistic tradition in her elevation of the divine over the human, seeing the landscape, sky and sea of Greece as powerful, overwhelming sources of the sacred. "Maybe those months on the mountain were too much," she says in "Me and Aphrodite and the Other,"

Aphrodite loved me and I loved her back.
Taking her pomegranates each time I climbed
that starkness. I would search all day
in the heat and would sit finally happy

in the shade of the fig tree with what
I had found of her scant, broken treasures,
the goat bells clattering around as I looked
down through her light to the Aegean. In a daze
of weariness, reverence and clarity (*Alma* 5).

As a sojourner, Gregg has also encountered and, through her poetry, attempted to come to terms with the more complex, and even mundane, aspects of everyday Greece. So, in "The Design Inside Them," a poem written during her third stay, she refers to details that only someone with a deeper knowledge of, and affection for, Greece would observe. Describing a scene in the village where she was living, she writes; "The talk in Greek is too fast for me, but I can tell / it is about prices in Mytilene compared to here." And a few lines later adds:

A daughter comes through the billowing curtain
in the doorway. She is fifteen and wants a Walkman
and goes away. She will never be like them (*Sacraments* 17).

Along with Ostriker and Gregg, resident A. E. Stallings rejects some of the values embedded in traditional narratives. Speaking in the voice of Penelope, she begins "The Wife of the Man of Many Wives" by declaring to her just-returned, epic-hero-husband, "Believe what you want to. Believe that I wove, / If you wish, twenty years, and waited, while you / Were knee-deep in blood, hip-deep in goddesses." And concludes, "Kill all the damn suitors / If you think it will make you feel better" (*Archaic Smile* 36)

As a New Formalist, Stallings is inextricably bound to the traditional forms and themes of poetry in English, many of which can be traced to the classical past.

But Stallings also challenges the bias of most classicists since the beginning of the twentieth century toward fifth century Athens. Even more than Gregg, she identifies with the archaic legacy, as she explains in *Kindled Terraces*:

It might surprise, but I am not very interested in ruins more recent than the Mycenaean age, or even in much classical Greek art after the archaic. In a sense, if you've seen one Doric column, you have literally seen them all. 5th-century Athens seems an irretrievably distant past to me. On the other hand, aspects of Homeric Greece sometimes feel as fresh as yesterday. 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! (*Kindled Terraces* 150)

Stallings and other resident-poets are difficult to categorize, but the common factor they share is that they all currently live (or in the past have lived) in Greece. Some have spent decades here, becoming citizens, raising families, participating in life as any resident of Greece would. Their immersion in this country and its culture, if not complete, is deep and abiding, and their poetry usually reflects this intense, enduring connection.

As a resident of Athens, Stallings is able to write about places and events we Athenians, no matter our ethnic backgrounds, can readily identify with--empty avenues and bus stops in August, beggars on the train, the new Metro, and, as in "Aftershocks," the earthquake of '99:

We are not in the same place after all.
The only evidence of the disaster,

Mapping out across the bedroom wall,
Tiny cracks still fissuring the plaster--
A new cartography for us to master,
In whose legend we read where we are bound:
Terra infirma, a stranger land, and vaster.
Or have we always stood on shaky ground?
The moment keeps on happening: a sound.
The floor beneath us swings, a pendulum
That clocks the heart, the heart so tightly wound,
We fall mute, as when two lovers come
To the brink of the apology, and halt,
Each standing on the wrong side of the fault (*Kindled Terraces* 153)

As a post-modernist poet, Greek-American Eleni Sikelianos interrogates the most basic assumptions lyric and formalist poets hold concerning what a poem is, and, by implication, offers a critique of the values and assumptions underlying humanism as we traditionally understand it. This approach, as Robert Hass defines it,

is usually more passionate about form than content, perception than emotion, restless with the conventions of the art, skeptical about the political underpinnings of current practice, and intent on inventing a new one, or at least undermining what seems repressive in the current formed style (3).

Embracing indeterminacy and multiplicity, such poets reject what they see as the Eurocentric values of humanism. When they look at the legacy of the

ancient world, they don't see the exaltation of the dignity, potential and reason of humankind, but rather an excessive fervor for war, extreme misogyny, and smug self-righteousness and self-importance--all of which are embedded in the art and literature of Western Civilization. Sikelianos, a former Fulbrighter and author of four volumes of poetry, asserts in "Essay: Delicately" that her poem

[...] is the classic story in which a hero sets out on a voyage, like Homer's or Dante's, and along the way finds out something about her/himself, only this time there's nothing left to find out. For the world like Sappho was either small, dark, and ugly or small, dark, and beautiful (196).

Whatever their approach to poetry, she and other American poets who are descendents of Greeks attempt to incorporate the heritage of their forbears into their poetic sensibility. As she writes in *Kindled Terraces*,

I went to Greece because of a family connection. I keep going back because I love the landscape, the sea, the history, the literature, the light, the food, and (much of the time) the people. I leave each time because Greece is not my permanent home. There are many ways in which the culture is not mine, and I am sometimes uncomfortable in the balkanized view of geography and ethnicity, and in the narrow strictures that a national religion can sometimes impose. Nevertheless, I am more comfortable there in ways that I might not be in the States--there is a different kind of freedom--of which the Greeks are very proud. Greece is not my home, but it is another home for me (*Kindled Terraces* 109).

As the great-granddaughter of Angelos Sikelianos, one of the most prominent twentieth century Greek poets, she also feels a deep connection to the Greek literary tradition, which, as she acknowledges,

[...] has added another landscape, another layer of language, a whole battery of histories and writers to my resources as a writer. Even when I am not in Greece, my work continues to be informed by the place (*Kindled Terraces* 109).

If one looks at how Americans have been writing Greece since those early visits by Melville and Twain, one can't help but observe how our persistent effort to make contact with the *topos* of Greece has been, until recently, fed almost entirely by our fervor to experience a glorious past, which rises out of a deep desire to make contact with our origins. All peoples, in one way or another, yearn to re-experience their origins. But in the case of encountering Greece, this desire, unfortunately, has far too often blocked our ability to see the real Greece standing before us. "Greece has always been more of an idea than a place" (3), David Roessel tells us in *In Byron's Shadow: Modern Greece in the English and American Imagination*. Over the decades, tourists agog with book-born images of marble temples and pastoral shepherds, however much such images reflect positive values of humanism, often failed to see what is valuable and significant in modern Greece, and thus perpetuated the more negative aspects of that approach to life. Even a socially astute observer like Mark Twain was so afflicted with preconceived notions that he failed to appreciate the real Greece in front of him: while glorifying the ghosts of an imagined past, he described the landscape of Attica he was passing through as a "barren, desolate, unpoetical

waste,” and the local residents as a “community of questionable characters, [...] confiscators and falsifiers of high repute” (343)

But, as many contemporary American poets writing Greece show, whether sojourners, residents, descendants or, yes, even at times, tourists, our appreciation of the multiplicity of modern Greece has increased with our willingness to confront the arrogance, prejudice and self deceptions embedded in the humanistic tradition. Thanks to the work of Alicia Suskind Ostriker, Linda Gregg, A. E. Stallings and Eleni Sikelianos, as well as numerous other poets writing Greece, humanism and, along with it, our approach to the country from which it sprang, are being reappraised. American poets writing Greece are perhaps helping us to reorient humanism in the direction Vassilis Lambropoulos suggests, when he writes in "Modern Greek Studies and the Age of Ethnocentrism." that “[we] do not need a history of victors (the triumphalist and nationalist glorification of the past) or their victims (the counter-political record of their discrimination). What we need right now is a history of [...] achievements, of virtues, of important works, of effective innovations, of beautiful structures--a history of freedoms, equalities, values and distinctions” (204-205).

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