

Volume XXX, No. 2

ISSN 0047-7702

FALL 1998

# MGSA Bulletin

MODERN GREEK STUDIES  
ASSOCIATION

Box 1826, New Haven, Connecticut 06508



# OPEN FORUM

## A GREEK-AMERICAN SENSE OF PLACE

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Whenever I travel to Greece, I arrive not unlike a foreign traveler who has made her way to see the sights and, upon returning, speak of things worthy of recollection. In fact, the epithet foreign traveler comes close to describing my situation in Greece, since I am born elsewhere to parents born elsewhere, all of us non-Greek citizens. The Greek I speak I learned as a second language; the things I know about Greece I have acquired second-hand through newspapers, books, conversations, and travel. Additionally, I arrive as one who has left home, having passed through international airports and chanced long international flights, a traveler's triage and an experience with its own ups and downs that frames the visit. If I arrive almost as a foreign traveler, however, the place I reach is almost a second home, so that I am always left wondering, is my place that of visitor or resident?

The question becomes more acute when I write about Greece. What sense of place do I convey? When I search for a genre for inspiration, I inevitably turn to the travel memoir; but I am equally attuned to that genre's weaknesses, or at least, its divergence from my perspective. More to the point, I find travel writing does not accurately express what I call here a Greek-American sense of place.

Let me define at the outset what I mean by Greek-American. I am not talking about either the place of all Greek-Americans vis-à-vis Greece, or an exclusively Greek-American place. It is not Greek origins once or twice removed by immigration that interest me so much as the double-crossing of residence lines, the sense of belonging, unequally perhaps, to two places at the same time. This is a feeling I believe I share with others who regularly travel to Greece, especially those bound by relations, though they maintain their regular home here. It is a divided sense. First, there is the feeling that a trip to Greece is a trip away from home: away from the inexorable regularity of work and home's tyrannical processes, in the direction of something freer. This is a typical traveler's sense. At the same time, it is a trip home, where other inexorable ties bind, from which it becomes increasingly painful to remove oneself.

There is much to be learned from the traveler's memoir, with its perspective of describing a place without belonging to that place. Travel writing is writing away from home. Let me first list some of its characteristics, with a quote from a few recent travel accounts illustrating each point, as I study features of the traveler's experience that align it with a Greek-American sense of place. Then I will consider where travel writing falls short for those of us for whom travel to Greece is not some fly by night encounter but an ongoing, exciting, if also frustrating part of life. I will close with some thoughts of my own.

• First, the traveler's account is writing that crosses a divide. Arrival and departure marks the period of crossing and gives occasion to. All who know Greece through visits follow a fairly predictable path. Here is Greek-American author Harry Mark Petrakis describing a typical arrival—from Athens International Airport to a hotel to the first *volta* in the city—and expressing some common feelings: an amalgam of excitement, bewilderment, but also depression with the unfinished business left behind:

Greece! I am finally here, achieving the journey so long delayed—a good, but long flight and then the taxi from the airport to the Amalias Hotel in Constitution Square where I found all the staff I had seen on previous visits. I had forgotten the tumult of Athens and after the stillness of home it was like having rivets pounded in my head. I couldn't sleep the first day or night and by the morning of the second day was heaving with weariness and futility. I lay sprawled across my bed thinking I had been mad to come, that I should be home writing, that I had no reason to cross half the world with so many unsettled elements in my life. Some of my depression passed as I walked about the city. On earlier trips I had enjoyed breakfast at Zonars, the sidewalk cafe on Acadimias Street. The mornings are still too chilly to sit outside, but I had orange juice, feta cheese, croissants and coffee inside the dining room. The place was crowded and full of strident voices arguing politics. (Harry Mark Petrakis, *Reflections: A Writer's Life, A Writer's Work*, Chicago: Lake View, 1983: 215-16)

- Second, one finds an emphasis on motion and its effects on body and soul. The movement is usually physical, but some astute writers have captured beautifully how disorienting it is to pass from one culture to another, each with its own code of communication. Here is a Patricia Storace describing how a plate of Greek pastries pulls her in new semiological as well as physical directions:

I have never seen any confections in these shapes before, and I can't anticipate the flavor of any of them. . . . It seems I will need a new body in order to live here, that the demands of a new country begin as demands on the body. I feel the weight and alienness of the food, the light, this world where a day has a different geography, and a life moves through time and space differently. I feel the tug of Greek words as a change in the force of gravity, and as the plate of pastries in my hand posits a different conception of appetite than I know, and a different conception of pleasure, I begin to understand that this language will perceive the body, and the world itself, differently from my own. This is the moment when travel is felt most absolutely, when time and space and history and emotion exert a force on the body, and the distances you are traveling inside are as great as the distance you have traveled outside. (Patricia Storace, *Dinner with Persephone*, New York: Vintage, 1996: 10)

- Third, travel writing is obsessed with old clichés. At its worst, it thoughtlessly embraces conventional thinking, and thus ends up saying nothing more than what every other thoughtless memoir has said before. At its best, it records how earnestly the author worked to discover the narrow path through hard-earned learning, or to find a unique angle on a too familiar sight. In this case, travel writing registers the difference between those who devote themselves fully to the business of observing and those who dutifully follow routine. Here historian Peter Green recalls author William Golding's effort to make something new of his gray March visit to the Acropolis:

A curious expression came over Bill's face. He stopped, blew his nose with a trumpeting sound, and stared briefly at the Western world's biggest cultural cliché, clearly resenting its long and all-too-influential shadow. 'Aargh,' he said. Into that curious noise he injected all the censorious impatience produced by years of peddling Greek culture to

lymphatic schoolchildren. Then he found a comfortable block, and settled himself down in it—with his back squarely turned to the ostensible object of our visit. Little by little he relaxed, taking in the hazed industrial gloom of Piraeus, the squalid proliferation of sugar-cube houses creeping out to embrace the lower slopes of Mt. Parnes, the big jets whining down past us on their approach to the Ellenikón airport. . . ‘Ah,’ he said at last, ‘now *this* is what I call the right way to look at the Parthenon. (Peter Green, ‘King Fix: Bill Golding in Greece,’ in *William Golding: The Man and his Books. A Tribute on his 75th Birthday*, ed. John Carey, London, 1986, 49)

- Fourth, travel writing expresses the traveler’s openness to non-material pleasures, which comes when one is at least temporarily willing to give up material things for less tangible gains. Pre-war expatriate Henry Miller is famous for his overstated intoxication with everything from a glass of cool, clear water to rough roads traveled through Greece: “there is no trace of ugliness here, either in line, color, form, feature, or sentiment. It is sheer perfection, as in Mozart’s music. Indeed, I venture to say that there is more of Mozart here than anywhere else in the world. The road to Epidaurus is like the road to creation” (Henry Miller, *Colossus of Maroussi*, New York: Penguin, 1985: 80).

- Fifth, travel writing tends to make cultural comparisons, many of them hard-nosed and bigoted, but some worth revisiting. The state of living in parallel worlds seems to heighten an observant person’s sense of analogy. When the writer is fluent in Greek and attentive to its sounds and meanings, the comparison of words can bring thought-provoking reflections. I return to Storace, who learned Greek well enough to register the metaphorical resonance of common expressions. Her comparison of the English word “preservation” with the Greek *anapaleosi*, for example—“making something old again, reinfusing a house with antiquity, the architectural equivalent in a way of Katharevousa, the ‘purified’ Greek which was conceived in the eighteenth century, and which was designed to reinfuse spoken modern Greek with classical Greek, in the broad effort to make the new nation of Greece a neoclassical nation” (130)—moves at a stunning speed from simple observation to a worthwhile theory about how Greeks rework their past.

There is much more to be learned from writing such as this. But the genre also exhibits ambivalence and partial understanding. More often than not, the writer knows little Greek, so that an observation, no matter how careful, or a conclusion, no matter how thoughtful, finds flimsy foundation in untranslated speech or incomprehensible gestures. It gravitates to the look and sound of words without communication. Frequently, too, the writer has not had time to absorb the impact of recent Greek history. Finally, writers of travel memoirs pay their dues elsewhere, where they are likely to return. One can write whatever one wants about people one probably won’t ever to see again. One’s stake in the place bears no correspondence to one’s stake in the work.

The Greek-American situation is different. Even though it overlaps with the traveler’s on key points listed above, it raises a separate set of questions. Because the trip is a regular occurrence, associations with people periodic, and destinations recurrent, a feeling of solidarity with land and people, part of a home-experience, overtakes one with each trip. So Greece represents a parallel universe to the home life one has left behind. Greece becomes a home away from home, as easy to return to as it is difficult to leave, and vice versa, not unlike the home one

leaves and again returns to. But what makes it home? Home has its requirements. What does Greece require? What place does it give to someone like me? Secondary to these questions, but fundamental to my scholarly pursuits, I have found myself repeatedly asking, how do I speak and write about/from this place?

These questions haunt me more and more powerfully with each trip I take to Greece, travel memoirs in one hand for breezy summer reading, Greek literature or history books and newspapers in the other hand to build my reservoir of knowledge. Here I do not offer any easy answers, only the sense of urgency I felt as I encountered Greece again this year, when the usual summer arson that has charred and tarred so much of Attica's once magical surface inspired ever wilder sport, and a seared horizon sprinkled ash apocalyptically on an eerily green sea around me in the region of Mesogeia. Every year the stakes in the question of place seem to rise higher and higher. In response, I have been trying to define my attachment to Mesogeia, my adopted home away from home—specifically to the beachside resort of Avlaki near Porto Rafti to which I owe only a renter's allegiance. Here I record my reflections in abbreviated form.

I note that my initial tie to the place was coincidental, though bound by family relations. It was a place chosen by relatives for its availability and proximity to both Athens and the sea. More connections followed—notably the discovery of friends vacationing in the same region. Each new visit strengthened previous ties: new friends became old, new places grew familiar, new patterns in the shaping of a summer's day grew habitual. Stronger than any other feeling, I felt the desire to acquire a sense of history: of time having passed, people having preceded me, paths having crisscrossed mine. I needed to deepen connections by revisiting places I had encountered before. As I developed a personal history in the place—and so brought it into my own universe—I also wanted to deepen my historical sense. The place had become a part of my personal history; I wanted its history to become a part of me. Still, with every inch of Greece so steeped in history, Greece presents the strong temptation for the easier, timeless encounter. Besides, history is not a prerequisite for beachside pleasure: what must one know to enjoy a walk on the waterfront, or to lose oneself in the *pantopoleion* of the beachside *periptero*?

I discovered, however, that one's history in a place only acquires depth through a cultivated sense of the place's history. Thus I was able to greet the daily "invasion" of Pullmans from Athens with a new perspective after I read that Porto Rafti was an ancient port, where Greeks began and ended their pilgrimage to Delos; which Italian and Nazi forces invaded and occupied during World War II, barricaded in the old church of Agia Marina in Avlaki (now the roadside chapel of the Transfiguration), because they feared resistance forces would use the ancient port to launch a naval offensive; and where political exiles landed after being released from prison camps on Leros and other islands after the fall of the junta in 1975, and were greeted by a panegyric horde of friends and relatives near the church of Agios Spiridonas. I concluded that a Greek-American sense of place partakes of both the traveler's and the home experience. It always retains the intensity of a visit, which the good travel memoir records. At the same time, the visit to Greece is illuminated by the personal history previous visits bring, and by a historical sense that each successive visit requires as one makes oneself at home.

September 1998  
Columbus, Ohio