

The Eye of the Xenos, Letters about Greece

(Durrell Studies 3)

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The Eye of the Xenos, Letters about Greece

(Durrell Studies 3)

By Richard Pine with Vera Konidari

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For my friends

Michael D. and Sabina Higgins

with affection and in admiration



Helen Vlachos, owner of *Kathimerini* newspaper, speaks with Erskine Childers (a future President of Ireland and at that time deputy prime minister and Minister for Health) at the inauguration of the author as President of the University Philosophical Society (Trinity College, Dublin): photo Jack McManus, *Irish Times* 30 October 1970.

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PREFACE

In 1970 my inaugural address as president of the University Philosophical Society at Trinity College, Dublin (“the Phil”) featured as a guest speaker Eleni Vlachou, the proprietor of *Kathimerini*, the leading Greek daily newspaper. She was then living in self-imposed exile in London, using the anglicised version of her name, Helen Vlachos. Vlachos had shut down her newspaper as a protest against the military dictatorship of 1967-74, just as her father, George, the founder of *Kathimerini* a century ago, had done during the Nazi occupation of Greece 1941-43.

Vlachou was a conservative and, after her return to Greece, became a MP for New Democracy, but resigned as she found politics “boring” compared to journalism. She was posthumously named a “World Press Freedom Hero” by the International Press Institute. Little did I realise in 1970 that, almost fifty years later, I would be writing a monthly column (“The Eye of the Xenos”) for the English-language edition of Eleni Vlachou’s newspaper.

I had been in Greece as a schoolboy in 1965 and had revisited in 1969 – perhaps unwisely, given the fact of the junta which had precipitated Vlachou’s exile. During my few days in a hostel in Athens in 1969, the concierge suggested we might meet some of his friends at a nearby café. They were interested in life in Britain and Ireland. The conversation went as follows:

“In London, how much freedom of speech do you have?”

“Complete freedom.”

“We don’t believe you.”

“Provided we don’t say anything blasphemous or treasonable, we can say whatever we like.”

“What kind of things?”

“If I stand outside the Houses of Parliament and shout ‘Down with the government’ no-one will arrest me. Or if I stand outside Buckingham Palace and shout ‘The Queen is an idiot’ I might be taken to a psychiatric unit as a harmless lunatic, but otherwise we have complete freedom of speech.”

“We don’t believe you.” Such was their lack of freedom of speech that they could not envisage the latitude available in other societies.

Suddenly, one of my new friends gave a signal and we left the café in haste. Outside I asked, “What is happening?” to which the answer was, “A man in that café is a police informer and he has gone to the telephone. If we hadn’t moved, we would have been arrested.” If there had been mobile phones at that time, our exit might have been less successful. The stories of what happened to dissidents and critics of the Colonels’ regime in those years have been told by my future colleague Peter Murtagh in *The Rape of Greece* and by Perikles Korovessis in *The Method*. At the time, it was I who was shocked by my companions’ disbelief that freedom of expression could be so basic a part of society. Now, reading Natalie Bakopoulos’s *The Green Shore* (2012), portraying the domestic exile of dissidents under the junta, brings home the immediacy of the fear, apprehension and pain experienced at that time.

That conversation in Athens had opened my eyes to the issue of freedom of speech, and encouraged me to invite Madame Vlachos to Dublin. On her visit, she had in fact been “quizzed” about tourism and had said, somewhat cryptically, “Greece is only for tourists – it is not for Greeks any more”.¹ Addressing a meeting of Amnesty International on that same visit to Dublin she explained: “The junta was a small group of men [sic] who decided on their own evaluation that the country wasn’t going where they wanted it to go, so they changed its course by force. We were hijacked”.²

My post-university career took me into broadcasting, firstly with the national symphony orchestra and other performing ensembles, and later in the Public Affairs division. These professional commitments meant that I was able to return to Greece only once, in 1987, to speak at a conference on local and community radio organised by the Greek agency for regional development – the meeting was held in the Athens Polytechnic, the site in 1973 of actions which had precipitated the end of the junta, so that in discussing the future of community dialogue we were also conscious of its suppression.

My first visit to Corfu – which led to my establishment of the Durrell School – came in 2000. I have described elsewhere what we set out to achieve.³ Lawrence Durrell’s lifelong commitment to Greece (he lived sequentially in Corfu, Athens, Kalamata and Rhodes and later still in British-controlled Cyprus), was profound, and deeply influenced my own attitude to Greece (which had originated in my education in classical

1 *Irish Times*, 30 October 1970.

2 *Irish Times*, 31 October 1970.

3 See my *A Writer in Corfu: an essay on borderlands, exile and metaphor* (2020).

Greek) and my decision to relocate in Corfu.⁴

Founding the Durrell School enabled me not only to establish a centre for studies of the work of Lawrence Durrell and Gerald Durrell, in the island where they both spent the formative years of 1935-1939, but also to create an international forum for discussion of topics which preoccupied them. This forum, which continues today, has included a range of speakers and a range of students who constitute an interdisciplinary and multicultural community of writers, artists, scholars and commentators whose work we have published in many volumes including *Creativity, Madness and Civilisation* (2007), *The Literatures of War* (2008), *Islands of the Mind* (2020), *Borders and Borderlands* (2021), and the memoirs of Theodore Stephanides, *Autumn Gleanings* (2011).

Through this work, which required an immersion in both local and national history and literature, I have become slightly knowledgeable about the country in which I live, and also aware of how much remained unavailable to the ξένος / *xenos* – the stranger-visitor. Having lived almost continuously in Greece since 2001, I am nevertheless deeply – even painfully – aware of my status as the *xenos* who, in the Greek mind, is to be treated with both hospitality and caution. But I also considered it worthwhile to try to give Irish readers – among whom I had lived for forty years – a sense of a country and its culture which was so much more compelling than the mere attractions for the average holiday-maker.

It was therefore very rewarding to begin a series of “Letters from Greece” in 2009 and which continued until 2020 on a monthly basis. I have included in Part Two a selection of sixteen of these columns to indicate the range of issues, from university education to austerity, from tourism to the sense of a Balkan identity.

In the meantime, due to the apparent merit of “Letters from Greece” and my book *Greece Through Irish Eyes* (2015), the editors of *Kathimerini* in 2018 invited me to contribute a guest column to its English-language edition.

This was a welcome invitation and, indeed, an honour, given my brief association with Madame Vlachos almost fifty years previously. I was offered the chance to write on any subject to which I believed I could bring some worthwhile perspective, under the generic title “The Eye of the Xenos” – hence the title of the present book.

As you will see from Part Three, these twenty-eight columns, from February 2018 to June 2020, addressed similar topics to the “Letters from Greece”: tourism, education, history and geopolitics, literature,

4 See “Lawrence Durrell and Greece” in my essays *Lawrence Durrell 's Woven Web of Guesses* (2021).

ecology, psychology, the refugee crisis and “Brexit” (almost all of which had been central topics at the Durrell School), often with reference to events in Ireland or facets of Irish life which showed strong similarities with those in Greece.

This relationship with *Kathimerini* ended in July 2020, as described in the Epilogue. These columns, and the Epilogue, have been translated for the first time into Greek by Vera Konidari, so that they may be available to non-English-speaking readers of Greek. The regular column for *The Irish Times* was written for an Irish readership and made frequent allusions to specific Irish contexts, including Irish personalities past and present and, indeed, colloquialisms and clichés, which would mean little or nothing in Greece; I therefore decided that these should not be translated.

Writing about Greece is a way of helping myself to understand Greece, and also to understand myself. In the General Introduction which follows, I try to explain this in greater detail than a mere preface can accomplish. If, in doing so, I have also encouraged a greater awareness of Greece and Greekness either internationally or at home, this will have achieved more than a merely personal record. Vera Konidari, an authority on the work of film-maker Theo Angelopoulos, introduced me to the word “xenitis” – “one who is exiled everywhere” – which features in Angelopoulos’ film *Eternity and a Day*; it emphasises that one can become a *xenos* in one’s own society, and, more than that, that the *writer*, of necessity, lives an exilic life. Commuting in my mind, and with my pen, between Greece and Ireland, makes me extra-conscious of this condition of the “xenitis” – that perhaps we all live in a world in which we are not entirely at home.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply indebted to the current and previous Foreign Editors of *The Irish Times* – Patrick Comerford, Patrick Smyth, Denis Staunton, Peter Murtagh and Chris Dooley – and to the Editors, Conor Brady, Geraldine Kennedy, Kevin O’Sullivan and Paul O’Neill, for advice and support not only during the eleven years when I was regularly writing “Letter from Greece” but also in the period since 1972 when I started writing for the paper.

Correspondingly, I am also indebted to Alexis Papachelas, editor-in-chief of *Kathimerini* and Tom Ellis, editor of the English-language edition, for their invitation and interest. Despite the fact that we parted company on an issue of principle, I value them as professional journalists of distinction.

In Athens I owe profound thanks to my friends Theo Buchelos, Yiorgos Chouliaras, Nick Malkoutzis, Yannis Palaiologos and Helena Smith (Greek correspondent of the *Guardian*). At the Irish Embassy in Athens I value the support of successive ambassadors Charles Sheehan, Noel Kilkenny (who graciously launched *Greece Through Irish Eyes*) and Orla O’Hanrahan, and also of Luke Feeney, deputy head of mission. Neni Panourgía and Roderick Beaton have been invaluable sources of advice and encouragement.

In Corfu Town, for essential sustenance – which goes far beyond the bill of fare – I thank Babis Statoris, record-breaking owner of “Chrysomallis”, which we in the Durrell School regarded as our “works canteen”; Kostas Sakis, of another refuge, “Pergola”; and Marina Beska, whose inspiring and inspired cuisine has invigorated our discussions.

In particular in the village where I live, I repeat thanks first voiced in *Greece Through Irish Eyes*: James and Wendy Chatto, pioneers of writing about Corfu; Spiro and Lola Dimitras and their truly wonderful children Sotiris, Marietta and Angelos; Thelma Miller and Steve Grocott; Polymeros, Mary and Spiro Kassaris, on the terrace of whose *kafeneio* many columns were conceived; Harry Salvanos and family for so many taverna evenings; Tomas and Vasso Siritiotis, whose inspired cuisine and locale was a source of sustenance beyond description.

I am grateful to Nefeli Mosaidi and Athena Russoglou at “Greek News Agenda” for their interest in my work; to Sudha Nair at *Insider*

magazine (Athens); and Mia Daltas and Marcus Gondolo at the short-lived *Island* magazine (Corfu).

I am indebted to Katherine Wise, not only for her photograph of Sophia Ketentzian which illustrates my discussion of the music-drama *Amiliti*, and permission to reproduce her sculpture “Three Sisters”, but also for her warm friendship and support.

In several columns for *Kathimerini* I referred to Michael D Higgins, president of Ireland, during his visits to Greece in 2018 and 2019; he has been a friend and associate since the 1980s, when he lectured in sociology at National University of Ireland Galway, and was part of a group I led to Berkeley in 1989 for an Irish Studies seminar. It is a privilege to dedicate this book to him and his wife, the actress Sabina Coyne.

My greatest sense of indebtedness is to Vera Konidari, who has translated not only these columns but also my *A Writer in Corfu* and several other key texts; it is a pleasure to join her name to mine on the title page.

Richard Pine
Greek Independence Day, 25 March 2021
Corfu

PART ONE

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

As indicated in my Preface, “Letters from Greece”, which I had contributed to *The Irish Times* since 2009, led to the writing of a book, *Greece Through Irish Eyes*, principally in order to explain why I love Greece and yet, as Kostas Karkagiannis (a journalist with *Kathimerini* newspaper) put it, “to do that, you have to be *hard*”. He meant that, in order to love Greece, one has to accept that the country has been damaged by unplanned tourism, and crippled by political and economic mismanagement and graft. My friend Yiorgas Chouliaras (whom I had met when he served as press attaché in the Greek embassy in Dublin), says, “To be a practicing Greek [...] can be both exceptionally rewarding and taxing”.¹ Due to these unpalatable factors, Greece and the Greeks have been misrepresented and misunderstood. Roy Foster (my contemporary at Trinity College Dublin) wrote to me “Greece is a country I both love and mourn”, and “loving and mourning” became the *leitmotiv* of *Greece Through Irish Eyes*, an outsider’s attempt to assess both the strengths and the weaknesses of the Greek system and the people whom it serves, and the strengths and weaknesses of the people themselves – their culture, their sense of home, family, honour, which are the hallmarks of their entire social fabric.

My talks with neighbours, academics, historians and journalists produce expressions ranging from “doom and gloom” to “we can win through”. Some unhappy people even say “at least under the Colonels [the military regime 1967-74] we had stability and increased prosperity”. I, like many non-Greeks throughout modern history, am a *philhellene* – a person who loves Greece and Greek things. (The term “Hellenic” refers to the people known as Hellenes – the Greeks.) The Greeks would call it *ελληνικότητα*, “*ellenikótita*” or Greekness, a word I employ to indicate the essential qualities of the Greek mind, a general indication of the *spirit* of Greece. But I have to be responsible about it. And that’s why my book

1 Yiorgos Chouliaras, “Modern Greek Culture”.

was, at times, an argument, not a travel brochure.

To have written a hagiography would have been unforgivable. As Oliver Cromwell said to his portraitist Peter Lely, “I desire you would not flatter me at all, but remark on all these roughnesses, pimples, warts and everything as you see me”. Some of Greece’s “roughnesses” are, to my eyes, among its virtues, although the modern bourgeois would probably disagree, but there are so many points at which its beauty is impaired by factors more serious than merely facial accidents. If I extol aspects of Greece – for example its vibrant culture – it is not to “flatter” them but to set them beside the imperfections amid which we live our lives.

The book offered some guiding principles, pointing towards what I regard as the essential “Greekness”; above all, it is necessary to respect its customs: they are what makes Greece Greek. But writing about Greece inevitably represents a subjective view – “from where I sit” – of necessity a personal account, selective and not entirely dispassionate. At its back is my own “odyssey” from London to Ireland to Greece, which makes me ask: Why do we travel to a foreign country? And decide to live there? For some, it’s a retirement dream – a place in the sun. For others, the need to be elsewhere haunts them because, perhaps, they lack something vital in their life so far, something that might be available at the end of a journey.²

I have to acknowledge Peter Levi’s admonition: “there is something phoney about ‘going native’ – to try to lose one’s identity is a mistake which I have avoided.”³ Me too. One can never become, or even pretend to be, Greek; but one’s identity does undergo a sea-change. Nicholas Gage wrote: “So pervasive and all-powerful are the land and climate of Greece that to live in the country for any significant period is to become Greek”.⁴ Gage (*né* Gatsoyannis) is Greek so he would say that, wouldn’t he? I can’t quite agree; you can take the man out of the north but you can’t take the north out of the man. Where I do agree with Nicholas Gage is in that question of home: someone said “home is where you want to be buried” and, knowing where that is for me (I will make my final border-crossing into the British Cemetery in Corfu and start my new job of pushing up orchids) establishes my sense of home.

Because there is so little human traffic between Ireland and Greece (other than tourists), one of the reasons for “Letters from Greece” was to explain Greece and Greek affairs to Irish readers. One can meet ignorance about Greece in high places. In 2012, for example, Ireland’s finance minister, Michael Noonan, made disparaging remarks about

2 See my *A Writer in Corfu* (2020).

3 Peter Levi, *The Hill of Kronos*, p. 12.

4 Nicholas Gage, *Hellas*, p. 24.

Greece that demonstrated not only his appalling lack of diplomacy but also his extreme ignorance, when he suggested that, apart from holidays, Irish people know little of Greece except *feta* cheese.

I am constantly irritated – but no longer surprised – when foreigners (mostly from the north) criticise the Greeks, usually for their laziness, procrastination and, in the public service, inefficiency. It’s as if they don’t encounter those defects in their own countries. This is particularly the case with the German and British condescension and patronising behaviour towards, and dismissiveness of, Greekness.

The attractions of tourism – the treasures of archaeology, the climate, beaches and idyllic islands – are obvious. But there are beauties and compelling factors one might not otherwise suspect, and not only beauties: the Eleusinian mysteries and the Delphic oracle were central to Greek society and its beliefs; today, we have mysteries rather darker and more disturbing to the modern mind: the internal wrangling of politicians, bribery and corruption, problematic bureaucracy and financial mismanagement. We should not overlook Heraclitus’ description of the oracle: “It neither speaks plainly, nor conceals, but gives signs [’ουτε λεγει ’ουτε κρυπτει, αλλα σημανει]”. In other words, It doesn’t tell the truth, it doesn’t tell lies, but it *hints* [*simaino* – *I signify*] - (which thus provides us with the term “semantics”). Much of modern Greece is found in-between the hints, the lines of sign-language, and we need a semantics of “Greekness” to elucidate it. In-betweenness – which Melek Chekili calls “untranslatability” and which, she argues, has its own innate qualities – is perhaps a compelling reason to be in Greece.⁵

One magnificent Greek word which, for me, encapsulates so much of what is attempted by *voyeurs* of Greece, is *skiagraphy*: technically, it’s a term for the process of x-raying (and also the construction of sundials) but literally it means “writing with shadows”, *skiá* being a shadow. This is what we do, those of us who try to describe Greece, whether we are insiders or visitors: we engage with the shadows that are all Greece is prepared to offer us, and we try to make pictures from the shadows. Maybe we achieve nothing more than a silhouette; maybe our “x-ray” reveals perspectives that might otherwise remain hidden. Who knows?

To the general reader, Greece represents two ideas, which have become clichés: historically, it’s a land of great antiquity in terms of art, drama and epic poetry, the birthplace of philosophy and democracy;

5 See Melek Chekili, “Untranslatability or a Symbol of In-betweenness and Hybridity: a Redefinition towards the Opening of Borders”.

today, it's a holiday destination of sun, sea, sand and sex. But it is more complex: culture, tradition, and character on one side; economics, social transformation, and international relations on the other.

We must also acknowledge the phenomenon that any researcher disturbs the “field” in which he or she works. If I live in, and write about, Greece, I thus inevitably become part of the “field”, and report it with *my* eyes, not Derrida's or Malinowski's or Lévi-Strauss's. A man will see Greek society quite differently to the society seen by a woman, however objective they believe themselves to be. A Marxist will see the evolution of modern Greece as a lost cause; a venture capitalist as a gross opportunity; a politician as a means to an end.

A westerner, trained in linear thinking, will find lack of connections between apparently different and discordant aspects of Greece. Philip Sherrard wrote of this problem most sympathetically in his essay “The Other Mind of Europe”, in which he introduced this western logic to its Greek counterpart: he called the former a “very arrogant and self-complacent mentality” which could not admit a mindset “still untrammelled in a network of beliefs and understandings which [...] we could only call superstitious, meaning they didn't correspond to any reality”. He therefore found himself “led [...] into much unknown and unexpected territory” which had “been written off the map of European history [and] the map of the modern western consciousness”.⁶ That journey into “unknown and unexpected” territory has been mine, too. Like Sherrard, I have found the “other mind of Europe” and in this book, as in *Greece Through Irish Eyes*, I have tried to describe it and introduce it to its western “other”.

It is not merely an issue of *west* versus *east*: there is, in political and economic terms, a difference in perceptions between the *north* of Europe and the *south* – between major economies such as Scandinavia, France and Germany, and the Mediterranean states of Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Greece – so ignominiously referred to during the economic crisis of 2010 as “PIGS”. The differences are not only economic, but emanate from a *cultural* divide between social organisation and procedures in the northern states and those in the south. As Lawrence Durrell explained, landscape and climate play a seminal role in shaping the mindset. Durrell, in his persuasive essay on “Landscape and Character”, referred to the “constant factor that we discern behind the word ‘Greekness’ [...] the enduring faculty of self-expression inhering in landscape [...] the restless metaphysical curiosity, the tenderness for good living and the passionate individualism [...] Human beings”, Durrell

6 Philip Sherrard, “The Other Mind of Europe”.

concluded, “are expressions of their landscape”.⁷

The often harsh criticism of the southern states by northern commentators *and* decision-makers is due to their difficulty in appreciating that the southern way of life is fundamentally *different* from that of the colder, darker and more linear north.

I encountered this virtual impasse during my involvement as a consultant to the Council of Europe’s cultural division (1978-83) when twenty-one municipalities from all parts of western Europe met to discuss policies and strategies for cultural development; there was a considerable – I would even say insuperable – difference in perspectives and methods between cultural administrators from the north – for example Norway, the Netherlands and Germany – and those from the south (in effect, the “PIGS”). The differences in approach were differences in the matter of living and of organising a society within which to live: northerners adopted a *dirigiste* policy of persuasion and education (the democratisation of culture) while southerners expressed the aspirations of people on the ground (cultural democracy). It made clear to me that, whether in cultural or political or economic matters, north and south do not understand each other.

Loving and Mourning

What is there to love about Greece? The relationship between landscape and character has created a grittiness which inheres in all Greeks, whether townies or villagers. It enabled the Greek army to repulse the Italians on the Albanian border in 1940-41 – the first victory by the Allied countries in World War 2. During that war, it enabled the Greeks to form an effective resistance movement against occupying German forces, despite appalling famine in Athens and other cities. It fuelled the debate about the future identity of the country during the ensuing civil war. And it provided the *animus* which preserved it from the military junta of 1967-74, especially the students who eventually defeated that regime through a protest in which many were killed.

What is there to mourn about Greece? First, the perennial irredentism which makes Greeks long for restitution of its antique glory, including the idea of recapturing Constantinople and which was a major factor in the political and economic upheavals from the 1920s onwards. Next, the era following the exit of the colonels in 1974, when successive governments, first under New Democracy and then PASOK (the Pan-

7 L Durrell, “Landscape and Character”, in *Spirit of Place*, pp. 156-58.

Hellenic Socialist Movement), created a “welfare state” based on clientelism and cronyism, encouraging a dependence on a “We’ll fix it” mentality which, along with other factors, has contributed to the present economic and social crisis.

Other aspects of Greek society which must be bewailed are the inferior educational system at all levels, which sees billions of euros being spent by parents privately (in the *frontistério* – described variously as a “tutorial school” or a “crammer”) to ensure a better future for their children. Industrial development has been a major absence in the Greek economy: there was an ambition, as part of the irredentism in the heart of every Greek, that Athens could become the financial hub of the burgeoning Balkan economic world, but that was never realised.⁸ Nevertheless, today sees Greece emerging as an economic hub of a somewhat different kind, in an east-west commerce featuring massive Chinese investment.

The lack of planning in the development of tourism, which is not only Greece’s major export industry but also coterminous with its attraction as a social and cultural magnet, leaves Greece competing badly with neighbouring countries in the provision of, for example, golf courses (there are only twelve courses in the entire country) and marinas, of which very few are of any significant size or have adequate management.

Perhaps most serious of all is the transition from a rural to an urban society which leaves many villages depopulated, without creating any technological or wealth-creating nodes on which to build.

Loving or mourning. Which? Perhaps the greatest test is the ongoing refugee crisis. Over 1.25 million refugees have arrived from Turkey on Greek island shores (or across the short land border on the Evros river), most of them from Afghanistan or Syria. The innate Greek sense of hospitality has enabled at local and national levels an embrace of people whose experience of dislocation and disfigurement have resonated in the campanile of the Greek folk memory. But, due partly to the inability of Greece to accept them satisfactorily and partly to lack of EU support, the Greek system as a whole has failed to accommodate – either physically or metaphysically – these homeless bodies and minds. The “love” of the Greek spirit applauds the welcome undoubtedly shown to the newcomers, the *xenoi*; the inadequate carry-through in administration and comprehension gives rise to “mourning”.

The love and the plusses outweigh the bewailing and the minuses. But, for the most ardent philhellene, the gap is closing.

8 The idea of Greece being a Balkan leader was floated as early as World War 2 by the then minister of information in the government-in-exile, André Michalopoulos, in his book *Greek Fire* (1943).

One could never despair of a country and a people which exhibits, in the face of adversity, such *joie de vivre* that pushes their bewilderment and misery into a corner. In the village, local expressions of opinion at the *kafeneio* are heated one minute and the next subside, as the evening continues, into equally heated games of cards and backgammon.

Greece may not be exclusively modern and forward-looking, keeping pace with the northern march towards unification and “progress”. Not least because of the idea of “*terroir*” – the rootedness of people in their locale, that intimate relationship between land and people which makes them more concerned about their vines and their olives than about a factory in a nearby town. Only the sea – *thálassa* – has been a challenge to the land, and even then, despite Greece’s continuing domination of the shipping industries, it benefits only a few millionaires and the crews of its merchant navy.

Greece’s potential is in so many areas untapped, even though the areas highlighted by economists and technocrats may not be those I am thinking of: the areas to be exploited are those that create the reasons for loving Greece.

The Greek spirit

When you enter Greece, whether by land, sea or air, and present your passport you are – to put it prosaically – crossing a political border. But *entering* Greece means much more: becoming a part, if only for a short time, of an “other” world. So it isn’t the land mass defined as “national territory” but something that lies behind the idea of a nation, which inheres in the landscape – in the sea, the mountains, the clusters of small towns and villages, the language – and which has made the Greeks the type of people they are, shaping the minds and destinies of its peoples without recourse to boundaries.

Ultimately, as Lawrence Durrell wrote at the opening of his memoir of Corfu: “Other countries may offer you discoveries in manners or lore or landscape; Greece offers you something harder – the discovery of yourself”.⁹ Whether as a tourist, a would-be resident or a commentator, what we express in our postcards, snapshots or “letters” is a discovery of Greece *and* oneself.

Is there an “essential” Greece? Many have written that in Greece a “spirit” is being encountered which *inheres* in a place; they are not hallucinating. However insensitive to antiquity one may be, one becomes

9 Lawrence Durrell, *Prospero's Cell*, p. 11.

inevitably and inescapably aware of this spirit in and through the stones. Edmund Burke's admonition, "venerate where we are not presently able to understand", may explain and facilitate this.¹⁰ It has nothing to do with scale or immensity; it is not merely physical but metaphysical in its effect. And humbling, because that immensity makes it frighteningly clear that we are so much less than what has been here before. We will never be able to comprehend the whole, but we can nevertheless put ourselves in a position to admire what is beyond us.

In the natural world, we relish the examples of the *deus loci*, the exclamation *numen inest!* which, astonishingly perhaps, has no Greek equivalent beyond πνεύμα του τόπου – *pneúma tou tóπου*, the "spirit of place" or *genius loci*. The title of Odysseas Elytis' 1959 poem *Axion Esti* (usually translated as "It is Worthy") is probably Greece's nearest expression of this belief in spirit of place.¹¹ It expresses *immanence*, a presence within landscape which is also a presence within Greekness. George Seferis called it "Hellenic Hellenism" rather than the Hellenism detected by outsiders.

Where does the fierce attachment to liberty emanate? The landscape. If the land and the sea are so unforgiving, so relentless, then they breed ferocity of spirit and the basic strategies of survival become almost entirely the business of life. So many Greeks – even city-folk – have family memories of poverty in an inhospitable land. One learns either to live in endurance or to submit. If the best option is the emigrant ship, the accompanying baggage is an innate knowledge of who you are and where you have come from: the stones that gave you birth, the sacrifice that may, or may not, (with apologies to WB Yeats) make a stone of the heart.¹²

In Lawrence Durrell's terms, "landscape values" become human values. Greece is a landscape which has bred a national character preoccupied with curiosity, individualism, good living and sensuality, which are as evident in all aspects of today's society as they were in classical Athens.

H D F Kitto, in his invaluable survey *The Greeks* (1951 and still in print) refers to "a sense of the wholeness of things" as "perhaps the

10 Edmund Burke, *Works and Correspondence*, vol. iv, p. 489.

11 The phrase "Worthy is" is part of the Byzantine liturgy, originating in the Book of Revelations (ch. 5 verse 11) "Worthy is the Lamb which was slain" (which Handel incorporated into his oratorio *Messiah*). See R Beaton, *An Introduction to Modern Greek Literature*, pp. 209-13.

12 W B Yeats, "Easter 1916": "Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart".

most typical feature of the Greek mind".¹³ Here again, the passion for integration (and, with it, integrity), for the principles which hold society together, is the contested ground of modern politics: the insistence, on one hand, on cohesion, consensus as both a domestic and a political superglue, and the denial of the validity and efficacy of that glue by those who dispute the way in which the elements of the State have been stuck together in the manner of an Airfix kit.

It was Aeschylus (in the tragedy *Agamemnon* of 458 BC) who put into the mouth of his tragic hero "Call no man happy until he is dead". The maxim remains true of Greece today: as Kitto observes, "Life, and consequently thought, were built very close to the bed-rock of Necessity, and a certain hardness, and therefore resilience, was the result".¹⁴ It requires little intelligence to perceive the same stoicism in the austerity (*austirótita*, harshness) of Greece post-2010.

In so far as I can – and want to – recognise the immanence of Greekness in landscape and its effect on its human offspring, which is primal, ordinary, and in constant danger of dilution, diminution, even extinction by the modern, I find the place where I can love Greece.

So there is an indefinable *spirit* in Greece. It's indefinable because it cannot be reduced to any specific source or cause. Wherever you are in this multi-faceted country, a factor which is not – necessarily – the sky or the sea or the language attracts you as an "other", a place apart, ultimately unexplorable but worth the journey of discovery.

Greece is not simply the land of Greece today (which only reached fulfilment with the accession of the Dodecanese islands in 1947): it is an accretion of geographical and philosophical ideas, or – to combine those two concepts – the influence of *place* on the *mind*. It is the peoples in the various places who, over the period 1821-1947, became Greece; it's the eleven million individual Greeks who will maintain their individuality and that of their families in preference to loyalty to the state, but who will unhesitatingly and proudly proclaim "I am a Greek!"

It's the peoples who came to the Greek state as refugees or repatriates – the Anatolian survivors in 1922, the Pontine Greeks even today; it's the Greek people living in the USA, Canada, Britain, Australia...

It's the Greek people who still, by various accidents of history, live outside the state: in southern Albania (aka northern Epirus), Macedonia (both the new Republic of North Macedonia and the region of

13 H D F Kitto, *The Greeks*, p. 169.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 213.

northern Greece with its capital at Thessaloniki), Istanbul (which Greeks resolutely continue to call “Constantinople” – the city of Constantine). It’s the Phanariot Greek tradition from Constantinople; it’s the fierce regionalism of the mainland: Attica, Thessaly, Epirus, the Peloponnese, and of the islands: the Ionians, the Dodecanese, Cyclades, Sporades, and Crete, which they express in their cultural differences – dialect, cuisine, understanding of history.

It’s the Jewish Greeks, those (approximately ten per cent. of the total) who survived the mass exportation to the extermination camps. It’s the Greeks of Cyprus, who attempted, in the 1950s, to become a part of Greece (through *enosis*, meaning “union”), but who now live in an unhappy relationship with the Turks who, since 1974, illegally occupy the northern part of their country.

It’s the Greek works of art in the museums of the world, but especially the sculptures taken from the Acropolis and known internationally as the “Elgin Marbles” but which Greece, insisting on their return to Greece, names as “the Parthenon Marbles”.

It’s the rich (the Onassis, Niarchos, Leventis, Chandris dynasties) and it’s the poor who constitute an enormous percentage of the overall population.¹⁵ It’s the big fat Greek mamma and it’s the slim, fashion- and health-conscious teenage girls. It’s the Orthodox *pappas* (priest) in his stovepipe hat, and the businessman in his Armani suit.

It’s the world-famous concert artists like opera diva Maria Callas or composer Mikis Theodorakis or violinist Leonidas Kavakos, and the everyday unknown artist in the local café who will make, and transmit, music and tradition in his close community.

It’s the fascists trying to take over the state and it’s the terrorists trying to abolish it.¹⁶ It’s the politicians and the civil servants who take bribes and the entrepreneurs and ordinary citizens who bribe them. It’s an administrative system that has failed the state, bringing it to its knees, economically, socially and spiritually. (All these topics are addressed in the Letters which follow.)

15 Like all statistics, the end figure depends on which organisation conducts the survey; figures for poverty (and definitions of poverty itself) range from 20% to 27%. Their severity remains indisputable.

16 Up to 2019 the neo-Nazi party, Golden Dawn was the third largest party in parliament (while many of its sitting MPs were on trial for murder or incitement to murder and hatred); its electoral defeat in 2019 should not blind or deafen us to the continuing dangers of populism masquerading as patriotism. In 2020 eighteen former MPs, the leadership of Golden Dawn, were convicted of belonging to an illegal organisation, of which one member was convicted of murder.

To say that the sum is greater than the parts is to move into dangerous territory. In fact many would argue that the parts are greater than the sum: the individual strands in the fabric of Greek life are holding the tapestry together and widening its horizons, rather than *vice versa*.

Greece may seem, to the average non-Greek observer, to be chaotic and undeveloped, and it seems like that to many Greeks, too. Not only was Greece, when it joined the then European Economic Community (today, the European Union) a fundamentally rural, minimal society but it had no industry and only a sub-standard infrastructure.

Today, the tension between the inherent strengths of Greece – the Hellenic spirit – and its current weaknesses, is not a conflict between ancient and modern, nor a matter of watching the inexorable march of “progress” before which the past must tremble. It’s much more profound than that. Many in Greece today are confident that “Greekness” complements modernity and will enable them to prevail in the adverse conditions the country is experiencing.

There has certainly been a clash between the traditional, conservative agents of history and the progressive modernisers, as in any society. But this clash does not necessarily mean the extinction of one in favour of the other. To put it at its simplest, the enduring Hellenic spirit is capable of distinguishing between the good and the not-so-good of modernism; it can accommodate what it needs in order to survive, and reject the rest. This is the crux of the current debate in Greece about sovereignty, autonomy, identity, self-respect and their place in a global society.

Not all is black. In 2004 Greece won the European football championships and in 2005 the Eurovision Song Contest (matters of huge national pride). It had opened a new international airport with a rail link to the city and had successfully staged the Olympic Games, also in 2004. It had a Hellenic Tiger tugging at the economy, making it, after Ireland, the most successful in Europe.

But this is completely at variance with the horizons and experience of the majority of Greek people, especially the large proportion living below the poverty line, and it disturbs a deep resonance within the collective memory. History is a cruel mistress. A Greek is someone who, as novelist Vangelis Hatziyannidis puts it, “spends more time planning the past than he does planning the future”.¹⁷ Or, as journalist Antonis Karakousis says, “Our country and its people, for the most part, like to live with myths, while ignoring reality”.¹⁸

17 V Hatziyannidis, *Four Walls*, p. 36.

18 A Karakousis, “From the truth to the other choice”, *To Vima*, 7 December

Those of us who live in Greece cannot ignore the present crises – economic, social and migrant – nor should any visitor, however innocent, be unaware of the social and political upheaval. Athens was the birthplace of democracy, and it is again today the debating chamber of national change and the high point of street protest. Greeks are naturally disputatious; I see this every day in the village. The raised voice, the clenched fist, the in-your-face refutation, are merely ways of saying, vehemently, “Sorry, I don’t agree with you” or “What kind of fool are you?”

Postmemory

It is possible that Greeks have, collectively, suffered from “postmemory” – the condition, so graphically described by Rony Alfandary in his memoir of his Greek-Jewish family before the Holocaust, of carrying a traumatic memory from the generation in which the first trauma was experienced, down through three or even four generations to the survivor-inheritors of the original sufferers. As it is explained by Stephen Frosh it is

a problem that revolves around the ethics of memory and history [...] It is as if they [later generations of victims and perpetrators] are haunted by the experiences of their predecessors, which is passed on in some way through stories and selective silences.¹⁹

To which we might add a clarification by the originator of the term “postmemory”, Marianne Hirsch: “the relationship that later generations or distant contemporary witnesses bear to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of others — to experiences they ‘remember’ or know only by means of stories, images, and behaviors.”²⁰

To carry the burden of history – especially when it is the burden of victimhood – is to live in the shadow of history, to inherit suffering. For the Greeks, some of whom remain insistent on the restoration of former glories, the memory of wounds (*mnisikakía*) is organically linked to the sense of a diminished honour and self-respect. Discovering a possible shadow on the soul of Greekness may be our best way of employing “skiagraphy” to understand the burden of history, under which memory

2014.

19 Stephen Frosh, “Postmemory”.

20 In her Presidential address (“Collective histories in vulnerable times”) to the Modern Languages Association, 2014.

actually becomes an *event*, constantly re-imagined, re-lived, re-negotiated. History is thus not merely “a story told from a distance”, but a story which is inhabited by its auditors, the descendants of the Ur-text, the Ur-experience.²¹

Philip Sherrard spelled out the fact that in the *interbellum* of 1918-39 Greeks were conducting, on common ground with poets and novelists, an excavation of values which seemed to have lost their meaning. He emphasised that the

search for identity tends [...] to take the form of an immense preoccupation with the question of what it means to be Greek. They cannot take their quality of Greekness for granted; and the result is that the discovery and exploration of Greece as the embodiment or personification of the values of Hellenism is or tends to be a necessary and quite conclusive stage in the discovery and exploration of their personal identity.²²

Postmemory is intimately related to Freud’s concept of the “uncanny”: he speaks of an element which “ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light [...] The uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression”. Freud adds that “an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced”.²³ Freud is therefore telling us that the uncanny comes from within, that it has been suppressed and is now forcing its attention upon us.

Greek preoccupation with the past, both classical and modern, seems to be a searching for answers which, as Elytis said of the golden fleece, may be *within* and *familiar* rather than external and foreign. As Eva Hoffman explains, “early awareness of suffering create[s] an unconscious, or preconscious, ethics”, creating “an imperative to remain loyal” to suffering.²⁴ In the same way that descendants of Holocaust victims carry this ethical memory to which they discern the need to be loyal, Greeks may carry not only the shadow, or legacy, of classical greatness in matters such as philosophy or sculpture, but also post-colonial

21 I am indebted to Rony Alfandary for introducing me to the concept of “postmemory” and for the expression “a story told from a distance”; see his forthcoming *The Cohen Family: a tale of a Holocaust postmemory*.

22 P Sherrard, “Odysseas Elytis and the Discovery of Greece”.

23 Freud, “The Uncanny”, pp. 345, 363-4, 367.

24 E Hoffman, *After such knowledge: memory, history and the legacy of the Holocaust*, p. 13.

angst as a shadow of more recent occupation by the unfamiliar, the “other”, which, in the process, has now become familiar. And yet, although it is now “familiar”, it remains remote, buried and uncanny. Burying the familiar is the strategy of denial that adds to, and aggravates, the sense of guilt in postmemory.

Perhaps, also, Philip Sherrard’s recognition of a Greekness which had been “written off the map of European history [and] the map of modern western consciousness” can help to rewrite that history, to re-define or re-draw a map through the eyes of postmemory.

If history is a means of defining oneself/ourselves/others, then the presence of the shadows it casts must be acknowledged: how Greeks have addressed this issue is a case of both loving and mourning. It calls into question the meaning of *memory* itself: whether it is a process of recollection, of a stable and inevitable set of facts, transacted between a society and its past (however welcome or unpleasant those facts may be) or a process with which we re-engage, a revisionism in which we become actors. If, as Frosh (interpreting Freud) says, “remembering something is only the beginning of a process of living freely”, then to liberate oneself or one’s society from history is to shine light on the areas of shadow, the unspoken or invisible areas which pester the imagination and seem to demand resolution.

Frosh also observes that, whereas “historical trauma is always singular”, “Universalizing trauma has poetic value”, and here I make no apology for re-introducing both Seferis and Elytis as poets of memory who, by re-inventing tradition and its pasts, make the present a liveable space. In particular, Elytis’ *Axion Esti* confronts the experience of defeat and humiliation in war which employed the Christian mythology as a way of exploring, and thereby maybe compensating for, the “memory of wounds”. Poetry may, thus, defeat politics as a way of discovering and re-living the past, and exorcising the “*post*”. If, as I alluded earlier, *landscape* is a factor in the psyche then it, too, represents both the past *and* the present (and, in tourism, the future): it, like the history that takes place upon it and to which it has given rise, has a depth which is both physical and metaphysical, both literal and psychic.

History and circularity

History repeats itself: a maxim which Greece continually proves and, it seems, approves. Greece fought a war of independence from the Turks in the 1820s. Today, its independence is once more at stake, and the subject of intense polemics (*pólemos* being the word for *war*). Its civil war was

officially fought from 1945 to 1949; in effect it, too, began in 1821 and continues in the divisions of society today. The strengths and weaknesses of the Greek character – industry and prevarication, openness and intrigue, xenophilia and xenophobia, love and bitterness – continually reassert themselves to both the honour and the detriment of this nation-state which, before 1821, was neither a nation nor a state, and, one could argue, is neither now. The view of an American traveller in the Balkans in the 1990s, that Greece was “an imaginary construct”, a nation “sustained by myth”²⁵ calls for reflection.

The Greek mind is inured to these cycles of experience. Historians will argue not about *what* happened, but *how often* it recurred. One might call it “continually re-inventing the wheel”. To write anything about Greece pre-2010 seems to be painting a scenario of a disaster-waiting-to-happen, and in a sense the systemic collapse of Greece in recent years can be seen in the upheavals which punctuate this history since 1821.

The history of Greece – from ancient to modern – is the history of an idea: a spirit, a response to the landscape, a way of thinking, a culture, a crucible of dispute. These have been present throughout history: the ideas of civil order, aesthetics, loyalties, self-expression and land-ownership are all aspects of Greekness. Thanassos Cambanis believes that “there is no such thing as national character – just culture and history” to which he attributes the Greek problems.²⁶ He is missing the point: culture-plus-history *is* national character.

Greece is a myth that grew out of many myths, which are narratives: the basis of storytelling by which wisdom is transmitted down the generations and binds a community together in belief and behaviour. Today’s Greeks are hardly different from their ancestors, in that they subscribe to myths, some of which are enabling, others disabling. So the “myth” has a much broader and deeper meaning than the mere word suggests to the western mind, where it usually connotes something unbelievable. The complexity of Greece is summed up in the final five words from Elytis’ *Axion Esti*: “Always this small, this great world!” [Αιέν ο κόσμος ο μικρός, ο Μέγας! *Aién o kósmos o mikrós, o Mégas!*].

Irredentism began with the fall of Constantinople in 1453, which led almost immediately to ballads and other imprecations for the restoration of the city to the Hellenic world. Constantinople was a thesaurus of Greek works of art and manuscripts and the centre of Christian Orthodoxy, the focus, and last hope, of Hellenism. Its loss left an empty space at the centre of Greekness. The “Song of Agia Sophia” (the city’s central church)

25 Fred A Reed, *Salonica Terminus*, pp. x-xi.

26 Th. Cambanis, *Boston Globe*, 22 August 2014.

promised that, one day, it would become “ours once more”. The declaration by Turkey’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in 2020 that this church – most recently designated as a museum – should become a mosque, was a deliberate act of provocation to Greece, which has to be seen in the context of other aspects of Greek-Turkish tensions. As indicated in my Epilogue, Turkish disregard for international law and aggressive demands for a transfer of some key Greek islands (to say nothing of its continued occupation of northern Cyprus) are in a sense the undying legacy of Ottoman history. It will not be resolved without vigorous intervention by the EU and the USA, a prospect as unlikely as airborne pigs.

In a sense – brutal though it may seem – there was no Greek history between 1453 and the first stirrings of nationalist thought in the 1780s. There is a massive period of empty time until the war of independence. It was one of the projects of Greek nationalism, in the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to re-connect itself with the ancient past, with its dignity and the tropes of civilisation which its ancestors had given to the world.

Nikos Kazantzakis referred to “the double-born soul of the modern Greek”, persisting in the idea of an ancient people and attempting to synthesise that with the modern world. The dilemma is at the base of the issues: what constitutes a “nation”, what constitutes a “state”, and how do they make a “nation-state”?²⁷ Kazantzakis opened a highly divisive issue when he referred to the Greek’s “Oriental bowels”: “the East, all darkness and mystery, rises up from deep within him”.²⁸ The tension of the east-west debate remains central to the question of Greek identity.

It may be due to this bipolar condition that Greeks have acquired a reputation for mendacity. Perhaps the most appropriate way of discussing this problem is in terms of the great “Liar’s Paradox” of the Greek mind, which has exercised philosophers, logicians and even mathematicians since at least 600 BC: a Cretan tells you “All Cretans are liars”. This means that the speaker is a liar; so how can you believe him? If he is to be believed – which on his own admission he isn’t – then Cretans are truthful, thus disproving his statement. If the statement is true, then it is false; if it is false, then it is true. The paradox illustrates perfectly the difficulty in discovering the truth or otherwise of any given situation. As Lawrence Durrell put it: “to accept two contradictory ideas as

27 On this point in particular, see R Beaton, *Greece: biography of a modern nation* and Kostas Kostis, *History's Spoiled Children: the formation of the modern Greek state*.

28 N Kazantzakis, *Travels in Greece*, pp. 166-68.