

Letter 1

from Dimitris Papanikolaou
University of Oxford

‘What did I find upon my return to Greece? The same provincial hell, parochial ideas, and unsolved contradictions that I had left behind [when I started travelling] some years earlier.’

Kostas Tachtsis, *To Fovero Vima* (1992)

Dear Annita,

I need to make clear from the outset how much I admire your commitment to collecting this rather ‘forgotten’ if not minor genre of Modern Greek literature, travel writing. However, I am in complete disagreement with the framework you adopt. To say that ‘Greece is a lonely nation, racially, linguistically and culturally’ is a debatable statement. To make it the starting point for an inquiry on writing (and travel writing at that) is simply nonproductive. As a descendant of ‘Arvanites’, the ‘racially’ and ‘linguistically’ Albanian peasants who fully adopted ‘Greek’ identity/ies in the nineteenth century (with some of their clans supporting or engineering uprisings against the Ottomans, such as the one you allude to, in Messolonghi), I can assure you that Greece is not, and has never been, as lonely as you assert.

Having said that, your statement is valuable in that it puts the focus on the constructions of Greece/Greekness that supported the process of nation-state building. As you know, the construction of the Greek nation-state resulted, as everywhere in the Balkan peninsula, in projections of continuous histories, imagined (stable) topographies and glorified (as centre-of-the-world) homelands. Travel writing becomes very interesting when it is called on to serve various ideological functions within these purposes. You point towards some of them, albeit, I sense, without being fully aware of doing so. You remind us that Greek travellers felt ‘different’ but by no means inferior to their Western contemporaries, that against Europe’s modernity, Greeks ‘put on the scales a classical past’, that Greece was to be found everywhere, and that Greek travellers sought Greece in an

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imaginary landscape from Sicily to Trieste to Afghanistan – thus doubling the imaginary topos of origin, to a corresponding imaginary destination. All these are ideological constructs that written travels were at various moments called on to serve.

To be sure, travel writing can both serve *and* unmask these ideological workings: as writing, it enters into a complicated dialogue with, say, the memoirs of foreign travellers to Greece, or the polyphonic past of the Greek topos. This writerly mode is put very beautifully by Nikos Kazantzakis in his *Travelling: Morias*, where he describes ‘the face of Greece’ as ‘a *palimpsest of writings* one on top of the other [...]. You sit in a little corner of Greek land and you get won over by *anxiety*. A deep tomb with [...] voices reaching out and shouting. Which one should you pick up?’ (Kazantzakis 1969: 191).

‘Writing Greece’ and ‘writing the outside of Greece’ thus become the result of constant negotiation, often acknowledged by those writers who may be really adept at finding Greece anywhere they go, but who also share a profound anguish for the construct that is their place of origin. I remember here George Seferis’s famous phrase, ‘Wherever I travel, Greece wounds me’, or the verse from a song by Dionysis Savvopoulos, ‘Greece: that blind hole in geography’. With them I am reminded of the semiotic presence, *in writing*, of those gaps – the empty spaces that ‘stable’ constructions of Greekness and the Greek topos strive to silence. To do justice to Greek travel writing we should look, I believe, at this ‘other side’ of all those texts, whose surface rhetoric you have done the great service to assemble and summarize.

Yours,

Dimitris

Letter 2

from Maria Kostaridou
London

Dear Annita,

The following response to your paper is informed by a reading of your book on Greek travel literature (Panaretou 2002), which you so kindly sent me. Both your paper and your book raise a number of important issues in a consideration of travel writing within a national and international context and I would like, first of all, to acknowledge the importance of your work in this relatively neglected area of Modern Greek studies. However, I find myself disagreeing in some fundamental ways with your interpretation, and I would like to take the opportunity afforded by this discussion forum to begin exploring what you see as the ‘peculiarity’ of Greek travel writing and your conclusion that it ‘cannot be easily included in a broader Balkan context and does not contribute significantly to the formation of a common Balkan travel literature’.

In your book you quote the French traveller Jacques Lacarrière, who writes: ‘I managed finally to break free from the place of my birth, to cut this phoney umbilical cord that so many creatures drag along with them throughout their lives. It is there that my apprenticeship as a real traveller began’ (Panaretou 2002: 30). ‘Phoney’ is the operative word here, with its connotations of something that can be imagined, constructed or fictitious; a bond so varied, complex and ingrained, that it stops one from becoming a ‘real’ traveller. You pick out this word a little later, where you make a point which seems instrumental in your perception of the ‘peculiarity’ or specificity of Greek travel writing: whereas, say, for a Frenchman this cord can be seen as both ‘phoney’ and ultimately dispensable, for Greeks ‘the umbilical cord [...] proves to be anything but phoney [...] They carry Greece with them precisely because it is the particular country’ (Panaretou 2002: 49). You qualify this further in your article by saying that this is because of the ‘very fact that Hellenism as a conscious national identity existed for a long time before the shaping of more permanent ethnic identities in Europe’, something which in turn ‘means that the Greek national identity had already been formed before Greeks came into regular contact with other European peoples. Thus, Greek national

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identity not only was not influenced by Western or Eastern Europe, but it actually significantly influenced the shaping of Western European identity, mainly through the '*restitutio antiquitatis*', which was the driving force of the Renaissance'. Your stance implies, first, that there existed an unchanging sense of Hellenism, fixed and immutable, transcending boundaries of space and time; secondly, that this Hellenism has always been inextricably bound to antiquity and the legacy of a classical heritage; and, maybe more significantly, that this sense of selfhood and nationhood was neither constructed nor imagined – or in any way and at any point projected upon the Greeks – but was, somehow, real.

Writing on travel is a fascinating instance of the attempt to write both about something real and about the self; the genre, at least as it is generally understood today, is what one critic calls 'participant literature' (Edwards 1992: 270), where writing is an extension and continuation of travelling. An event or experience is communicated through narrative: this, in turn, becomes the scene of another encounter as identity, both personal and national, is brought into sharp focus, examined, constructed and *negotiated* through the act of writing. The example of Nikandros Noukios provides a convenient starting point for thinking about this issue. The narrative of his travels through mid-sixteenth century Europe highlights both the marginality of Greece at the time (barely touched by Renaissance and Reformation, it is, along with its Balkan neighbours, under Ottoman rule) and the way Europe's relation to it was largely achieved through reference to a classical past rather than an Ottoman present. Partly in response, Noukios weaves an image of Greekness which is to be found not in geography but in memory, decentred, scattered and fragmented, recreated entirely in and through narrative. You mention Noukios in your article, where you see him as an example of cosmopolitanism, of the way early Greek travellers 'did not visit Europe as "poor relations"' and you include his text among others which constitute 'the foundations for the way Greek travellers and writers confronted Europe, which did not differ dramatically from the stance that prevailed later'. Your attitude here bears a striking resemblance to Seferis's essay on Noukios, 'A Greek in the England of 1545' (Seferis 1981a: 101–111). He, too, sees the earlier traveller as the first in a line of voyagers who illustrate a 'certain psychology, a Greek behaviour' towards

the ‘countries of the West’ (106): Noukios travels in the great courts of Europe ‘without putting on airs’, as ‘an equal among equals’ (108). Writing in 1952, Seferis – himself a diplomat with experience of exile and, like Noukios, confronted with the aspect of a Europe recently devastated by wars – bridges a distance of four hundred years by creating an unbroken correspondence between Greeks past and present through the double emphasis on Byzantium and the Mediterranean. Noukios is defined not simply as the heir to a glorious Byzantine past (108), but also as a ‘Mediterranean’ fascinated by the first sight of the ocean (107). Crucially, ‘Mediterranean’ is the word Seferis uses to define himself in his diaries, when mistaken for ‘an Englishman or an American’ in a restaurant at Marseilles (Seferis 1986a: 242). It is also in his diaries that I came across his assertion, after a visit to Palmyra, that it is ‘frightening sometimes with what clarity a Greek can see the distance which separates him *both* from the East *and* from the West’ (Seferis 1986b: 69), a phrase which seems to me to sum up your position on Greek ‘uniqueness’ and ‘peculiarity’. Seferis’s point of view is also illustrative of a certain liberal ideology of the so-called Greek ‘generation of the ‘30s’. I would suggest that, instead of treating it as a product of historical circumstance, you take it for granted and allow it to colour your overall perception of the place of Greek travel texts within a Balkan and wider European context.

The extent to which concepts of self and national identity are neither fixed nor unchangeable can be finally illustrated with reference to a cluster of texts from the pre-independence period and from the 1990s. Different aspects of Greekness are treated in these texts, which become spaces of contesting identities, formed in constant dialogue with Europe. The *Letters From Amsterdam (Grammata apo to Amsterdam, 2002)*, by the near-illiterate apprentice Stamatis Petrou, for example, capture two fundamental (and contradictory) aspects of Greek self-definition. Tracing the profound effect that travel has on the young Adamantios Korais, Petrou highlights both the conservative anti-Westernism of a section of the Greek population (through his own outright denial of Europe) as well as Korais’s gradual dissociation from Byzantium and turn towards classical heritage in the general context of European Enlightenment. Living in the same community, the merchant Ioannis Pringos shows a deep distrust of Western Catholicism, turning instead towards the East

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and the Orthodox Russians, while at the same time appreciating fully the importance Europeans place on education and urging his compatriots to do the same (Pringos, in Andriotis 1931). More recently, in 'Travemunte' Dimitris Nollas sketches the changing faces of post-Cold War Europe, while problematizing the concept of the umbilical cord that binds Greeks to their homeland, through his discussion of the way Greeks from the 'East' are received at 'home'. Moreover, in his texts of his travels through the Balkans he deftly establishes links between Greeks and their northern neighbours through reference to a common legacy of Orthodoxy and Byzantium (Nollas 1999). All in all, these texts constitute moments of a history that is neither entirely common, nor entirely separate – a series of contacts and relationships that traces the complex process of self-definition through reference to antiquity and Byzantium, Orthodox Christianity and Ottoman legacy, the Mediterranean and the Balkans.

I look forward to your reply.

Yours,
Maria

Letter 3

from Ivana Bajić
University College London

Dear Annita,

I remember our conversation in Athens last year about Greek travelogues and the question of whether they can be discussed within a Balkan context. This forum is an excellent opportunity to build a framework for discussion of the specificities of Greek travel accounts.

But before we proceed, please allow me to pause for a moment at one issue in your present paper. You claim that Hellenism is a 'national identity [which] existed for a long time before the shaping of more permanent ethnic identities in Europe'. How can we speak of Hellenism, the civilization of pre-Christian Greeks, as a 'national identity' if we understand the modern nation as a nineteenth-century product? Let me just briefly refer to one old Greek anecdote cited by Vangelis Calotychos

in his recent study *Modern Greece: A Cultural Poetics* (2003: 61): ‘A Greek scholar, who upon meeting the renowned klepht Nikotsaras around 1800 addressed him by the name Achilles, was met with the reply: “What rubbish are you talking about? Who is this Achilles? Did he by any chance shoot down a lot of enemies with his gun?”’

More to the immediate point, you find it problematic to discuss Balkan travel writing because such an attempt contains an ‘inherent generalization’ and you single out Greece as a case that does not fit into this framework. But is not this singling out yet another generalization about those who do fit the Balkan paradigm? If you leave Greeks aside on the grounds that they cannot be lumped together with the other southeast Europeans because of their *specific* historical circumstances, do not you disregard the possibility that *each* of the peoples of the Balkans might have had specific historical circumstances that could have distanced them from their neighbours?

In debating Greek travel writing in a Balkan context, we should focus on the discursive literary elements of these texts, their production and the social and political circumstances in which they appeared, and see which characteristics they share with other southeast European travel accounts. Then we might realize that ‘see(k)ing home’ is not an exclusive characteristic of Greek travelogues. Regardless of different historical circumstances, other Balkan travel writers also affirm their nation’s worth by identifying traces of their homeland around Europe. It is very useful to put southeast European travelogues next to each other and see which specificities and peculiarities emerge, instead of dismissing the comparative approach on the basis of the Balkan peoples’ different historical circumstances.

A travel writer from the Balkans is always categorized by Western observers in the same way as he categorizes them. The gaze of a traveller returns back to him and he comments on his own image in a mirror held by those whom he describes. If we accept Bakhtin’s view that ‘the self is a gift of the other’ and agree that travelogues reveal more about a traveller than about his ‘travelees’, then these travel accounts could give us clues to the dynamics of change and help us deconstruct notions of ‘Romiossini’, ‘Hellenism’, ‘Greekness’, ‘Balkans’, ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western Europe’ in different periods. At different times a travel writer is

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interpellated by a different name and categorized differently. At times he is recognized as a 'Hellene', at other times as a 'Greek', 'Romios' or 'Mediterranean'. However, he does not always reply accordingly to this hailing and considers this interpellation to be a misrecognition of his 'true' identity. It is in his resistance to this 'misrecognition' that we can see how ideology works at different times and how the concepts of identification mentioned above were constructed. This resistance to 'misrecognition' in travel accounts proves that neither the Greeks nor other southeast European travellers were passive 'Others' to Western Europe. On the contrary, they had a very active role in the process of construction of all these concepts of identification. A traveller's identity was contested and renegotiated in every encounter with his 'Other'. In this way both 'Eastern' and 'Western Europe' emerge as ideological concepts that are negotiated and contested in every encounter between the traveller's self and the travelee's other.

Leaving Greek travel accounts out of the Balkan paradigm would result in an incomplete image of the negotiations between and the mutual ideological constructions of East and West. Moreover, it would be very difficult to grasp the dynamics of interaction between Greeks and their neighbours in intra-Balkan travel accounts from the twentieth century. Only when we compare their specificities with those of other Balkan travelogues can we come up with constructive arguments about how peculiar and different Greek travel accounts really are. I hope that this issue of *Journeys* will provide us with the tools for discovering some of the common characteristics of Balkan travelogues and give us guidelines for further analysis of these texts and of their connotations.

Yours,

Ivana

Reply

Annita Panaretou
Athens

The misinterpreting of the deeper Greek spirit by foreigners [...] makes our communication difficult and we are responsible for this. Unfortunate Greece, – if it was only for the foreigners, that would be OK; but Greeks, as well? And if it was just the Greeks in general, that would be again OK; but the intellectuals too? [...] Well, I'll make a confession [...]: I feel like an aristocrat who has – who alone has - the privilege of using for 'sky' and 'sea' the very words used by Sappho and Romanos, thousands of years ago.

Odysseus Elytis, 'The Chronicle of a Decade' (1982b: 321)

Dear Dimitris, Maria and Ivana,

I fear our discussion has slipped, to some extent, towards other issues which are undoubtedly interesting in themselves, but which do not, however, strictly focus on our main issue, Greek travel writing itself. To make things easier for the readers of this discussion, I will summarize a response to the main issues raised in your responses: Greek identity and its influence upon encounters with 'others' (Western Europeans); Greek travel literature; and the specificities in the formation of Greek travel writing. Greekness, or Greek identity, is a complex concept/reality, consisting of the influences of various historical circumstances (the extract by Kazantzakis about the palimpsest of writings, cited by Dimitris, affirms this). Two contradictory realities, that of the past and the contemporary one, which often disagree dramatically, make up today's Greek national identity. Modern Greeks carry (and must carry) both realities, and so do Greek travel writers: it is the same burden that they carry when they travel, unable to leave either reality behind. The presence of the Greek past, which is to be found almost everywhere – and in various expressions – in the Western world, has a double impact on Greek travellers and travel writers: it influences the way they feel when they wander abroad and it grants them a great consolation for the reality of the present (again, Dimitris affirms this when he writes about the constant negotiation by writers who may be really

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adept at finding Greece anywhere, but who also share a profound anguish for the construct that is their place of origin. Seferis also wrote, in 'The Language in Our Poetry' (1981b:175), 'I am not blind to our defects, but I have the freakishness to believe in us'). The contradiction is reflected in their travelogues, thus affording them a certain peculiarity.

When I write 'lonely nation', I do not mean isolated – on the contrary, Greece's geographical position encouraged a constant and intense contact with East and West, as well as significant influences from either side. Let me just remind you, in a simplified and unscientific manner, how lonely one may feel with dozens of others around. Let me put it this way: linguistically, culturally and ethnologically, Greeks do not belong to some broader group of peoples: they are not Arabs, not Slavs, not Latins. Or, to put it otherwise: 'Hellenism [...] became the conscious servant of a continuous assimilative energy, which used material taken both from the East and the West and continuously created models of civilization [...] not just the counterbalance of the two worlds but a third world' (Elytis 1982a: 403). And, by the way, apart from 'that blind hole in geography', Dionysis Savvopoulos also welcomed 'Greek loneliness' and sang 'Here's to Greece and to everything else that is lonely in this world'.

As for the definition of Hellenism and its flexibility, which seems to have caused some confusion, 'Greek history as a whole consists of journeys, acquaintances, taking root, and dialogues in distant places that always come to a conclusion sealed with this particular seal which is instantly recognized and is called Hellenism' (Seferis 1981c: 26–27). Furthermore: 'This special element of Hellenism [all the precious things preserved by the older generations] is, every now and then, incarnated in various forms (which happen to be opposing or contradictory) and cannot be defined. However, we feel it; it has a taste of its own [...]; but there is no recipe for it' (Seferis 1986c: 133–34). Fortunately or unfortunately, Hellenism has been bound to antiquity and the legacy of a classical past. Especially in the eyes of the rest of the world, the word Greece almost always automatically refers to antiquity. But there are many other historical periods that stamped their seal on Greek national identity. Hellenism is not just the civilization of pre-Christian Greeks, it is the Greek nation as a whole. And I should stress that it was the modern Greek *state* and not *nation* that was created in the nineteenth century.

I cannot easily accept that selfhood and nationhood were in any way constructed, imagined or projected onto the Greeks during certain periods of their history, especially not during the Turkish occupation, when they lacked organized spiritual guidance (proof is offered by the major chapter of Greek literature known as folksong or folk poetry). And, in reference to Ivana's comment, Nikotsaras did not know Homer – most of the Greeks of the time were illiterate – but he was conscious of his origin from the 'old Greeks', whose remnants people could find when plowing their fields.

Apart from the travel texts that are so eloquent, the way Greeks feel when they travel abroad is also illustrated by Elytis:

it may look strange but, prior to the two World Wars, the subject of this small state breathed the air of an empire, more or less. His potential to move around without a language passport covered large parts of Italy and Austria, the whole of Egypt, southern Bulgaria, Romania, Caucasian Russia and, of course, Constantinople and its surroundings and south, along the Aegean, in what is today called Southwestern Turkey. I know it is difficult to evaluate today's lead as yesterday's gold: if, however, you want to be objective [...] you have to do it. If anything, to realize how differently someone may think, someone who feels himself at home from Vienna to Odessa and from Trieste to Port Said' (Elytis 1980: 22–23).

I did not imply that there were no links between Greece and its northern neighbours – I think that my article is quite clear on this point. I do not exclude Greek travel literature from the Balkan context (or from the broader European context) and, of course, I believe that *every* national literature is unique. Let me explain the last paragraph of my article in a better way: with the concept of 'travel text' – and, in a wider sense, 'travel literature' – literary criticism has grouped together a set of texts that have significant elements in common. Travel literature, because of its nature (dealing with a given reality which is perceptible by the five senses and is common to all who experience it) has to obey certain rules and consist of certain conventional components: description, information, and efforts to render the spirit of a place. And these elements are to be found in every travel text, regardless of its origin (Romanian, English, Greek, Canadian, Chinese etc.).

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But travel literature is written by different individuals, and this is the point where the personal element – also a common element in travel texts, but dubious, unexpected and not given – enters the game. The influence of origin plays an important role here – and a traveller's *national* identity cannot be renegotiated in any encounter with others. When the individuals have common origins, corresponding similarities are – or are expected to be – found in their texts, thus contributing to the formation of national travel literatures. One step further we have the formation of travel literature of yet broader geographical areas (e.g. Balkan, European or Latin American), which include the travel literatures of neighbouring countries, with common cultural elements originating from common historical experiences and influences. When a country does not 'fit' precisely within a broader geographical area, its travel literature cannot be regarded as representative of this area's travel literature.

To conclude: Greek travel literature, loyal to the general rules of the genre, contributes with its countless pages to the formation of a Balkan (and European) travel literature corpus. On the other hand, the influence of origin upon the personal element led Greek travel literature to a specificity that does not facilitate its incorporation into a common perception of Balkan or European travel literature's essence. In other words, if someone sought a reliable idea of the character of Balkan or European travel literature, reading Greek travel literature alone would only mislead and confuse them.

Sincerely yours,
Annita

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