

## CHAPTER THREE: The Crisis Years (1922-1927)

'I will write a sad ballad to the uncelebrated poets. There are those who take their place in history, and there are those who make history. It is the latter I honour.' (Terzakis 1987: 76)

### I

Bakhtin's dialogic approach can provide a valuable perspective on the biographical narrative, highlighting the multiplicity of situated sites within it, the corporeal nature of subjectivity and memory, and the writer-biographer's location in the writing process. In this chapter I have approached the narrative by constructing a broad historical and literary framework of the period and by exploring Alekos Doukas' letters and manuscript's in relation to the contexts of his locations. I have used Bakhtin's concept of the 'chronotope' in both its literary and extra-literary sense to historically position the texts under scrutiny. Genre is given attention as a 'master category of dialogism' which allows us to read the texts in relation to the changing genres of the period (Holquist 1990: 144). This offers biographical discourse a generic analysis of texts through a diachronic perspective and interplay of textual and non-textual mediations. The biographical self is not sculptured in a vacuum but in direct relation to others, much as a hologram appears in three-dimensional space through its placement within a surrounding field. Far from being a simple interaction of two fixed entities, the self/other relationship is dynamic and contested, giving rise to distinctive identities which are never entirely stable or static (Holquist 1990: 135). This relationship is another aspect of intertextuality, and a literary biography is nothing if not an exploration of this endless web of intertextual dialogue.

My construction of the life narrative does not aim to create a perfectly remembered world but one recalled through concrete texts, images or words which sculpt a located subjectivity. Just as Benjamin (1999: 603) recalls the military spirit of WWI through the fragment of a popular verse I too have tried to reconstruct the mental and emotional turmoil of the aftermath of the ‘Catastrophe’ through the fragmented and multi-thematic texts available to us through the Stratis Doukas Archive. Language may be an ‘instrument’ of memory and recall, but it is also its ‘theatre,’ the site of its physical excavation (Benjamin 1999: 611). The past is a foreign country where ambiguity is ever present and it is the dialogic multiplicity of meanings and references that I wish to convey in my narrative.

## II

### **Historical Framework**

The magnitude of the chaos that followed the Greek military defeat in Turkey in September 1922 and the mass influx of refugees into Greece is difficult to grasp today. Descriptions by observers invariably convey a sense of shock and poignancy at the sudden transformation of the human landscape (Morgenthau 1929, Yiannakopoulos 1992: 32-34). The severity of the physical conditions endured by homeless refugees is reflected in the statistic that within the first year of arrival twenty percent died (Yiannakopoulos 1992: 33). This was accompanied by a heightening of political polarisation after the pro-Venizelist military coup in September and the court martial and execution in November of six monarchist officers and politicians deemed responsible for the defeat. The executions avoided a deeper examination of the Campaign and the rapid shift from the term ‘mishap’ (*atihima*) to ‘catastrophe’ cast the event

in supra-human terms (Chatzei Joseph 2003: 46-47). The exacerbation of the 'national schism' became associated in the interwar years with the division between refugees and locals which constituted a deep cultural and social divide that at times erupted into violence (Katsapis 2003, Yiannakopoulos 1992: 36, Voutira 1997: 119-120).

The interwar period has generally been seen in Greek historiography as one of consolidation through rapid industrial growth, urbanisation, increased agricultural output and greater state regulation and infrastructure (Vergopoulos 1978: 17-100). The refugee influx, restrictions on U.S. migration and the world recession are seen as accelerators in the national economy. Whilst keeping in mind that the refugee factor has tended to overshadow important processes already at work, there is no doubt that the period was characterised by sustained political crisis, as well as social and cultural tensions, in which the refugees were a central presence.<sup>1</sup>

After 1922, the term 'refugee' functioned not only as a social and political signifier but also a bureaucratic discursive construction that facilitated the reception and assimilation of a large heterogeneous mass of people (Varlas 2003: 150). In the refugee experience, distinctive Ottoman identities became secondary to that of the needy and dependent newcomer. Not all Ottoman Greeks arrived as refugees however and as a group they were only superficially homogenous (Giannuli 1995: 272, Gizeli 1992: 70-73). Many well-off Aivaliots had shifted their wealth to Greece before 1922, refused to register as refugees, avoided refugee suburbs and, on a social level at least, integrated more easily into society (Panayotarea 1993: 106, 161-167). The more resourceful refugees were also more likely to accept their uprooting as

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<sup>1</sup> Chatzei Joseph (2002) argues that the dominant historiographical view has uncritically used the influx of refugees to explain a rupture in a presumed linear history.

permanent, while the poorer ones clung to the belief that their situation was temporary.<sup>2</sup> The signing of the Lausanne Compulsory Exchange of Populations Agreement in January 1923 was the first setback to the possibility of return. It signalled a new international regime that legitimised the logic of religious-ethnic separation of peoples into nation-states (Gizeli 1992: 66, Giannuli 1995: 278, Hirschon 2003).<sup>3</sup> The right of the Ottoman Greeks and Muslims of Greece to live in their traditional abode was now tradeable at the diplomatic level. The Greek refugees had suddenly become 'the remainder of what was left over in the calculation of Greek irredentism' (Tzedopoulos 2003: 15).

In the 1920s the lost homelands represented a traumatic break with a tangible past: the family home, the neighbourhood, relatives, village or town, a way of life that had generational continuity (Liakos 1998, Giannuli 1995: 278). The refugees responded to the racist attitudes of locals with their own sense of identity which tended to stress connections with ancient Greece, hospitality, morality, religiosity and the superior level of their past material and cultural life (Giannuli 1995: 277-278, Hirschon 1989, Katsapis 2003: 113-118). Identities open to them were now circumscribed by the discursive constructions in the popular press and institutions of government, refugee associations, press, literature and music, as well as more intimate modes of oral culture (Varlas 2003). The refugees showed considerable resilience in their ability to survive, drawing on the support of close-knit families, community networks and broader political and cultural associations. Though marginalised by Greek society, they inhabited a 'margin of cohesion' (Gizeli 1992: 76).

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<sup>2</sup> The recurrent image in the accounts of Aivaliots was of refugees in Mytilini staring across the sea to the familiar mountains and lights of their hometowns (Panayotarea 1993: 142).

<sup>3</sup> For an overview see Clark (2006) Chapter Two. For a discussion within a larger European context see Voutira (1997).

Unlike the poorer refugees who were forced to accept emergency relief and set up home in the urban shantytowns or rural settlement program, the Doukas family possessed cultural and social capital that insured them against the extremes of destitution. The earlier experience of exile, as well as access to the wider family reserves of finance, allowed them to set up a wholesale olive oil business in Mytilini and Xanthi. The family was typical of the tightly-bound Asia Minor family, including the patriarchal tradition by which the eldest son became the decision-maker after the father's death (Panayotarea 1993: 185). It shared the social attributes of upper-class families of Aivali whose womenfolk were not expected to work or marry below their class. The family's social and cultural networks extended beyond the immediate family to former compatriots, friends, school associates, business and professional acquaintances. This comprised the family's social community, existing within and parallel to Greek society and as an imaginary community of the lost homeland.

The rural settlement of over half of all refugees in Northern Greece was not simply a temporary measure to deal with displaced refugees; it had territorial, economic and ideological motivations. It aimed to Hellenise the new territories, as well as being a social strategy for dealing with the growing influence of communist ideology (Voutira 1997: 117, Kontogiorgi 1992, Petmezas 2003: 204-207). The belief in the economic and social importance of a strong agricultural sector of small farmers was supported by newly-established institutions such as the University of Thessaloniki and the Salonica International Fair.<sup>4</sup> Greece's rural reforms in the interwar years created an 'ocean of small rural landholders' who struggled to remain viable (Petmezas 2003: 208). The rural radicalism that this generated was expressed by a politically ambiguous mix of leftwing socialist and rightwing monarchist and nationalist ideas (Vergopoulos 1978: 45-51, 130-136, 145-150). In

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<sup>4</sup> Both were set up in 1926. See Mackridge (1997b: 176).

the 1920s there are certain connections between Alekos Doukas' thinking and the ideas of ruralism. It is not coincidental that in his letters Alekos echoes the views of the Rural Party's theoretician Avrotelis Eleftheropoulos who believed that Greece was in need of 'great leaders' whose absence was due to the fall of the ancient Greek world and the loss of its unique 'social consciousness' (Vergopoulos 1978: 131).<sup>5</sup> Ruralist ideas were influenced by geographical determinist views of culture and society that subscribed to the politics of the classless organic State (Vergopoulos 1978: 146-153). There were also communist influences in ruralism that stressed socialist revolution and Balkan unity against imperialism.<sup>6</sup> In this brew of ideas it is possible to locate Alekos Doukas' embryonic political views and neo-romantic ideas on nature and social retreat. It is a brew that included the seeds of both a fascist and communist outlook, both of which later dominated the 1930s as rival political discourses.

Alekos experienced the interwar years both as refugee and war veteran, the latter often more decisive in his everyday life, although together they brought about a 'profound sense of personal discontinuity' (Leed 1979: 2). His letters and fictional writing are consistent with the psychological syndrome of the veteran and he self-consciously applies the term 'neurasthenia' to his condition. The war affected consciousness of time and place; in Bakhtinian terms, it represented a significant shift in 'chronotopic' relations in both life experience and fiction. Moullas (1993: 65) notes that the interwar years posed 'a problem of relationship to place. Wandering, escape, travel, campaigns, marches, migration, refugees: words that come and go

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<sup>5</sup> Letter 7.10.1924. Stratis Doukas Archive, Department of Medieval and Modern Greek Studies, Aristotle University, Thessaloniki.

<sup>6</sup> Indicative of ruralism's ambiguous political space is the fact that leaders of the Rural Party, along with communists and sympathisers, were under surveillance by the anti-communist agencies set up by successive Greek governments in the interwar years (Mazower 1997: 140). On the other hand, the Rural Party was often attacked by the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) as 'rural fascists' and 'petit-bourgeois' (Vergopoulos (1978: 132-134).

defining at the same time the realm of reality and the imaginary.’ The conjunction of war and dislocation is reflected in literature with a revived symbolist preoccupation with the beyond:

The dominion of death, a site that plays a predominant role and functions antithetically referring to ‘somewhere else’ (as much as to the ‘somewhere else’ of peaceful life behind the lines as to the ‘somewhere else’ of the beyond)... (Moullas 1993: 65)

War often brought soldiers to the very limits of their bodily existence, posing a serious opposition within them between public duty and the inviolable nature of the body (Moullas 1993: 70). This presented itself as a moral dilemma for Alekos in the postwar period. He also experienced an estrangement and disillusionment with home as an alternative to the front and a place of rehabilitation from trauma. He was driven to search ‘somewhere else’ for his mental and emotional tranquillity (Moullas 1993: 65). The drive to escape, often described by Alekos as a flight from the vengeful ‘Furies,’ was inextricably linked to his war experience.<sup>7</sup> It is a central theme in his intellectual and emotional life in the 1920s.

The cultural, social and geographic space of Alekos Doukas’ life in the period 1923-1927 were ‘the New Lands’ of Northern Greece and the north-west Aegean where in many places refugees made up half the population (Yerolympos 2003: 140-141, Kontogiorgi 1992). Refugee intellectuals played an important role in the cultural Hellenisation of the New Lands through magazines such as *Makedonika Grammata* (1922-1924) and the newspaper *Efimeris ton Valkanion* (1918-1950) which provided a space for writers in a movement that aimed to cultivate a new literary environment (Mackridge 1997a, 1997b, Kehaioglou 1997, Anastassiadis 1997).<sup>8</sup> Stratis Doukas is a prime example of the refugee cultural activist in this period. After his army discharge he was a key organiser of Anatolian and local Greek art

<sup>7</sup> See letters 20.9.1924 & 4.1.1925. Op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> See Christianopoulos’ (1999: 113-117) account of Thessaloniki’s first literary magazine published in Northern Greece in 1921 by Alekos Doukas’ first cousin Vasilis Chatziandreou (1902-1960).

exhibitions, a contributor to various publications, a promoter of the cultural heritage of Mount Athos, the artistic director of the refugee ceramic art company 'Kioutacheia' (Kütahya) and an editor of the literary art magazine *Filiki Etaireia*.<sup>9</sup> Stratis is often associated with a group of writers and artists from north-western Asia Minor (Ilias Venezis, Fotis Kontoglou, Panos Valsamakis et al) who injected an Anatolian element into a renewed Greek literature and arts.<sup>10</sup> These writers and artists had long embraced literary demoticism, and although strongly influenced by European literature, offered a certain nativist sensibility that drew on popular Byzantine traditions of narrativity and iconography.<sup>11</sup>

The dialogical dimensions of Alekos Doukas' writing and thinking in the 1920s can only be grasped in relation to a broader backdrop. The book-end periodisation of Greek literary history between the two wars often becomes synonymous with the view that the Catastrophe coincided with a major rupture. While it was a landmark event, it was not a clean break between the old and new, tradition and modernity, which in literature was associated with the gradual movement from naturalistic 'ethographic' prose to more interior and subjective forms of writing, culminating around 1930 in the emergence of the urban novel. These larger processes of change were characterised by the coexistence of old and new elements, traditional and hybrid literary genres.<sup>12</sup> The image of the burning Smyrna harbour often functioned as a symbolic reference to change, an emblem of a dying and sinking world, the

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<sup>9</sup> *Filiki Etaireia* (Friendly Society), an ambitious but short-lived magazine (1924-1926). See S. Doukas (1976: 21) and Korfis (1988: 92).

<sup>10</sup> The term 'Aiolean school' is occasionally used without being widely adopted in the histories of literature and the plastic arts. Although these refugees did contribute in a significant way to literature and art, they have been largely assimilated in accounts of the past. Stratis Doukas' generation has always retained an awareness of itself as having a double identity as active participants in Greece's cultural life but also as refugees with their own distinct past and identity.

<sup>11</sup> See interview with Panos Valsamakis in Panayotarea (1994: 181).

<sup>12</sup> Winter (1995) argues that modernism as an 'aesthetic project' did not involve the setting aside of traditional forms; on the contrary, it often involved a preoccupation with them in a transitional phase. See Tziovas (1989: 20).

failure of an older generation and the difficult starting point for a new one.<sup>13</sup> Generational differences seemed to have been exacerbated in the interwar years due to a decade of wartime experience and dislocation.<sup>14</sup> In Alekos Doukas' letters there are constant references to traumatised youth and its betrayal, as well as the search for a way forward.<sup>15</sup> Alekos' complaint in 1924 that 'The youth in our time are not suffering from a lack of knowledge but from the indifference of their elders...' was not an isolated instance but a symptom of a wider social malady.<sup>16</sup>

The generational categorisation of Greek literary history has often led to biological age being emphasised to the detriment of the discursive formations of texts (Moullas 1993: 20, 97-109). While it is true that generational terms mostly arise within contexts of literary power struggles, and the 'generation of the thirties' represents an enduring ascendancy of a particular group of poets and novelists, such terms are shorthand ways of discussing specific historical experiences and differences.<sup>17</sup> It is in this sense of generational contrasts, based on concepts that are 'half-real and half constructed' that I wish to locate Alekos Doukas (Moullas 1993: 99). Vergopoulos (1978: 181-182) contrasts the literary generations of the 1880s and 1920s and finds that the latter were involved in a symbolist search for escape from social reality. This widely-adopted analysis is based on the significant growth of a Greek symbolist or

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<sup>13</sup> Giorgos Theotokas' 1929 essay 'Free Spirit' is often quoted in this context (Theotokas 1973: 63). See Moullas (1993: 38-39) and Vergopoulos (1978: 182).

<sup>14</sup> Athanasiadis (1987: 1475) describes the generation of the 1920s as 'an angry generation of psychologically traumatised people.' The conservative writer Spiros Melas explained the phenomenon of symbolism in post-1922 as 'the gunpowder-blackened Greek youth [...] searching for a manly voice to sing their suffering and glories' (Vergopoulos (1978: 163).

<sup>15</sup> The frequency of the adjectives 'new' and 'young' in the interwar period has been commented on by other writers (Tziovas 1989: 23-24). Liakos (1988: 37 & 67) believes that in Greece and elsewhere the category of 'youth' widened after WWI. He contrasts the generation that grew up in WWI with the older prewar generation who believed in an 'evolutionary philosophy' whereas the younger generation, with its experience of the war and the changes brought about by the October Revolution, was more militant in its political discourse.

<sup>16</sup> Letter 27.11.1924. Op cit.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of how the term 'generation of the thirties' was launched see Moullas (1993: 99) and Tziovas (1989: 23-24).

aestheticist literary movement in the interwar period.<sup>18</sup> One of the most conspicuous representatives of the symbolist penchant for ‘escape towards the absolute’ was Fotis Kontoglou, whose writings can serve as a literary and intellectual gauge for Alekos’ thinking which operated within a similar literary discourse.<sup>19</sup> Most writers tend to see the 1920s as a period of co-existence between the generations of the 1920s and 1930s with the latter dominating by the end of the decade (Moullas 1993: 99, Kayialis (2003).<sup>20</sup> Moullas (1993: 99) contrasts these two generations in the following way:

The first [the generation] of the 1920s: a miserable, petit-bourgeois generation marked by the Asia Minor catastrophe, by symbolism and *Kariotakismos*.<sup>21</sup> The second, a high bourgeois, Venizelist generation that realises a restoration, combining tradition (Makriyannis, Theofilos) with a surrealist avant-garde and opening the road to Europe and the Aegean (because with the Aegean it simultaneously rejected the ethnographic village and the neighbourhood environment of the city). If we extend the logic of this concept further we could attribute to the generation of 1920s the subdued lyrical expression, the prose poem and the short story, while to the generation of 1930s, the effort towards composition, the novel and the essay.

In this schematic comparison, Alekos Doukas shows greater affinity with the earlier generation, although it would be a mistake to see the generations as exclusive, given that certain impulses in the symbolism of the twenties served as stepping stones for the thirties.

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<sup>18</sup> Following most Greek literary histories, I use the terms ‘symbolist,’ ‘decadent’ and ‘aestheticist’ interchangeably. Vergopoulos (1978: 165-166) traces the symbolist influence from the beginnings of the twentieth century and partly explains the rise of the movement in the 1920s to the similarities between this period and France of the last decades of the nineteenth century. Both were ‘periods of rapid change and consolidation of capitalism, a change from ‘old-liberal capitalism’ to a ‘newer interventionist State.’

<sup>19</sup> For references to Kontoglou as a representative of Greek literary symbolism see Vergopoulos (1978: 182, 190-191), Moullas (1993). Tellos Agras, a critic and writer in the 1920s, considered Kontoglou one of the heirs to Kostas Chatzopoulos’ symbolist writing. See Agras (1935), Moullas (1993: 86), Dimadis (1991: 25), Panselinos (1971: 497-499), S. Doukas (1976), Cavarnos (1957, 1985), Zias (1986) and Tziovas (1989: 14-15).

<sup>20</sup> A. Argyriou (2002) avoids the term ‘generation of the thirties’ and calls the eventually dominant literary movement ‘the modern generation of the interwar years.’

<sup>21</sup> Kariotakis was an acclaimed symbolist poet whose suicide in 1928 made him a byword for the impossibility of living the dream of symbolist escape, hence ‘Kariotakismos’ (Kariotakism).

In the broad terrain of literary and aesthetic discourse the dominant sites of opposition were those between materialism and idealism, and nativism (Hellenocentricism) and Europeanism, with permutations allowing a degree of fluidity in their expression.<sup>22</sup> In the background to these oppositions the texts of writers like Giorgos Skliros and Periklis Giannopoulos loomed large; the former a socialist-materialist, pro-liberal Europeanist and the latter a geographic determinist and extreme nativist.<sup>23</sup> The symbolist movement appeared as a new and vibrant expression of opposition, a neo-romantic movement with a heterogeneous mix of anti-liberalism and anti-classicism, as well as an identification with anti-bourgeois rebelliousness (Dounia 1996: 29-53, Vergopoulos 1978: 185-187). Rather than regard Greek symbolism as a 'negation of life' it is more fruitful to see it as a 'dominant interwar ideology' that expressed a certain impossible idealism (Vergopoulos 1978: 189, 219). Alekos Doukas is located within this movement although his views were often characterised by contradictory impulses. It now remains to look at some of the features of this movement.

The interwar period can be seen as a broad aesthetic and philosophical opposition between new and challenging forms of subjectivism and the need for a renovated hegemonic bourgeois objectivism that invariably became identified with a new form of 'classical' or timeless Hellenism (Tziovas 1989: 51-52).<sup>24</sup> The models and inspiration for the growing subjectivist outlook were sought in foreign literature, primarily French, with Scandinavian and Russian fiction finding particularly fertile ground in Greece. Symbolist fiction was characterised by the interior tones and moods of such works and K. Chatzopoulos' *Autumn* (1917) was widely

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<sup>22</sup> Moullas (1993: 76-77) describes these binary terms variously as 'cosmopolitanism' 'internationalism,' 'Europeanism,' 'avant-garde,' 'modernism,' 'modernising' which were opposed to 'nationalism,' 'Hellenocentricism,' 'Greekness,' 'tradition,' 'eternalists.' See also Kayialis (2003: 314-315).

<sup>23</sup> The key texts are Skliros (1907, 1919) and Giannopoulos (1961).

<sup>24</sup> For a schematic analysis of the aesthetic and philosophical issues see Ioannidis (1988).

praised for introducing the psychology of Scandinavian fiction into Greek literature.<sup>25</sup> The influx of such literature created something of a publishing and reading phenomenon that was undoubtedly related to the needs of the interwar generation (Chourmouzos 1940: 47-48). The fiction of Knut Hamsun exerted such an influence in Greece that it spawned a genre of ‘vagabond fiction’ (Chourmouzos 1940).<sup>26</sup> The fine translations of Hamsun by the Mytilinian writer Vasos Daskalakis are often cited as an added appeal. Writing in 1940, Aimilios Chourmouzos analysed this type of fiction as a vehicle of escape from social reality and analysis, a restrictive fictional space that was only interested in ‘emotion’ and not the ‘study of our social life’ (Moullas 1993: 48).<sup>27</sup>

Stratis Doukas’ circle of friends also included writers who were key figures in this ‘literature of wandering’ whose lineage, Korfis (1991: 248) argues, can be traced through Daskalakis, Kontoglou, Themis Kornaros, Yannis Skarimbis, Nikos Velmos, Stratis Doukas and others. There is no doubt that this fiction had a strong appeal for Alekos Doukas and influenced his early writing. In addition to Hamsun, Maxim Gorky’s vagabond characters also captured the reading public’s imagination, not so much as ‘a type of studied escape’ but as a social realist description of proletarian poverty and wretchedness (Moullas 1993: 51-59). A group of writers, the ‘Bohemians of Bankeio,’ gathered around the Wildish poet Napoleon Lapatiotis, wrote about marginalised groups and proletarian characters (Dounia 1996: 33,37-39).<sup>28</sup>

Although Alekos Doukas rejected communism as a system and was scornful of what he saw

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<sup>25</sup> Chatzopoulos had earlier successfully translated Geijerstam’s *The Book of the Young Brother* into Greek. Moullas (1993: 88) likens Chatzopoulos’ interior fiction to the ‘creation of chamber music.’

<sup>26</sup> According to Moullas (1993: 50) Hamsun’s success in Greece began around 1900 and increased over the following decades. Missios (1994a: 587) describes Hamsun’s appeal as a literary mania.

<sup>27</sup> In these studies of Greek ‘vagabond fiction’ there is no attempt to contextualise the phenomenon of ‘wandering’ and restlessness within the profound changes of industrialisation and European imperial expansion. See a discussion of ‘discourses of rootlessness, displacement, and diasporisation’ in Laliotou (2004: 5-6). See also Plate (2005).

<sup>28</sup> Stratis’ close friend Nikos Velmos belonged to this group of writers who were attracted to an underground life that included drug use, prostitution, homosexuality and other socially prohibited activities (Dounia 1996: 27-29).

as revolutionary posing by Nikos Velmos, there is no doubt that he shared a number of attitudes of these symbolist or early 'proletarian' writers. These included a romantic identification with the worker and the wandering labourer, an emphasis given to 'honesty, lived experience, spontaneity and enthusiasm in expression' and a high regard for writers who lacked formal education (Dounia 1996: 35).

The 1920s also saw the emergence of a European cosmopolitanism in popular fiction that portrayed the life-style of the rich – metropolises, trains, fast cars and jazz. On one level it was a superficial and escapist fiction while on another it was, as in Giorgos Theotokas' novels, a novelistic realism imbued with the new liberal humanist spirit of Greece's educated upper classes. In his 1929 essay where he challenges the old ethnographic literary sensibility in favour of a modernism, Theotokas (1979: 23) wrote: 'The folk singer, Solomos and Papadiamantis did not foresee Singrou Avenue, our trains and aeroplanes, the tour of Europe in a few days, jazz.' In the opposition between tradition and modernity, Alekos Doukas often appears in an ambivalent position.<sup>29</sup> He felt uncomfortable with cosmopolitanism and Bohemianism although he showed a certain openness to modernity and new technology. Moullas (1993: 75) notes a cross-over between cosmopolitan literature and travel-writing based on the idea of the journey, which was usually towards the west. In the early 1920s, both Alekos Doukas and Kontoglou used travel narratives in their fiction that turned eastward, either in search of an absolute orthodoxy or an Eastern spiritualism. Alekos also shared something of Theotokas' liberal ideology that sought movement and change, as well as a similar contradictory relationship to Greece as both a source of inspiration and a narrow space of misery and humiliation (Tziovas 1989: 101-105).

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<sup>29</sup> There are interesting parallels here between Alekos Doukas and the Cretan writer Andreas Nenedakis. In his ethnographic biography of Nenedakis, Herzfeld (1997: 164-165) concludes that it is not possible to make clear-cut distinctions between a subject as either a bearer of tradition or modernism. He argues for a more complex state of transitoriness and the continuation of older traditions in different forms.

The move to greater interiority in literature in the 1920s was not unrelated to changes in genre, and as Moullas (1993: 89) notes, it initially involved a 'shrinking of literary forms' in which the short story or newspaper-length chronicle dominated. The shorter form offered greater possibilities for subjective expression.<sup>30</sup> From the beginning of the century, symbolism and the merging of prose and poetry into the short 'prose poem' or 'prose song' had led to new generic modes of writing. This tendency towards the mixing of genres and the expression of a rich mental interior had precursors such as Ion Dragoumis whose political writings were read in the 1920s with renewed interest (Moullas 1993: 92).<sup>31</sup> The use of the short prose poem, ephemeral and autobiographical writing in a mixed generic style was also what distinguished Stratis Doukas' writing.<sup>32</sup> As the decade progressed a tension developed between the genres of the short story and the emerging urban novel, but with a considerable degree of terminological indeterminacy between the two (Moullas 1993: 109-118). In this sense, the writing of Alekos and Stratis Doukas can be seen as containing elements of symbolism whose interiority was a growing element in Greek literary discourse. Both of them favoured the genre of the lyrical prose poem, while Alekos wrote a number of short stories and, in 1924, a longer prose work that was comprised of short self-contained entities. Indicative of the terminological indeterminacy of the period, Alekos never specifies its generic identity. This larger work is a mix of current vagabond fiction, older models of

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<sup>30</sup> The philosophical roots of this preference for the shorter lyrical form can be traced to early European romantic poetry which was a reaction to the 'stifling rules and constraints of the neo-classical approach to art' (Paolucci 2001: xiii-xiv).

<sup>31</sup> Moullas (1993: 92) notes of Dragoumis' writing that 'In essence, we are dealing with texts that contain heterogeneous material: diaries, autobiographical and travel notes, reflections, ideological declarations, dialogues-monologues, descriptions, narratives etc.'

<sup>32</sup> Moullas' (1993: 93) comments about Dragoumis 'writing method' can be applied to Stratis Doukas' newspaper columns, the publishing of his letters to Alekos as a discussion of aesthetics and his use of oral narrative in his 1929 novella *A Prisoner of War's Story*. Stratis used the medium of the personal letter as his everyday 'diary writing,' a source he continually revised and used for later publication.

ancient Greek adventure or romance novels and an autobiographical narrative of religious redemption reflecting Alekos' reading and his combining of traditional and modern genres.<sup>33</sup>

### III

#### **The Hospital**

Alekos Doukas experienced the chaotic days of the Catastrophe and its immediate aftermath as a hospitalised soldier. The first extant letter from this period was sent from a military hospital in Thessaloniki on 19 September 1922 to a family friend. Believing his family were still on the island, he asked the friend to inform them that he had survived. His first letter home contained a note of anger and bitterness:

Write me news of our island that is now lost for ever. They say America will accept refugee families for settlement. You'll prosper if you decide to go. I'm a Greek but I hate this country so much that I doubt if I'll stay. It's shameful for me to say these words but they come from the heart.<sup>34</sup>

On the following day he learnt that his family had crossed to Mytilini and his two brothers in the army were alive. In the meantime he was transferred to Evangelismos Hospital in Athens for further therapy on the damage caused by that 'crazy bullet'.<sup>35</sup> This period of Alekos' life, one of physical and mental recovery, was spent in the space of the hospital which provides us

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<sup>33</sup> Some of the texts that appear to provide a background to this work are: Knut Hamsun *Pan*, *Hunger*, *Victoria*; M. Gorky *Creatures That Once Were Men*; Lucian *Dialogues*; R. Tagore *Gitanjali*; L. Tolstoi *The Kreutzer Sonata*; O. Wilde *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; *Old and New Testaments*; V. Alfieri *Saul*.

<sup>34</sup> Letter 7.10.1922. Op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> Letter 8.10.1922. Op. cit.

with a particular vantage point in the biographical narrative, a chronotope that provides a 'means for studying the relation *between*' the letters and their historical time (Holquist 1990: 113). The ward, the white sheets, the disinfectant smells, the wounded soldiers in rows, news from 'outside' muffled by the murmurous repetitive routine of the hospital, all seep through Alekos' letters as I reconstruct these critical months. They give shape and colour to the imaginary space in which we read his letters, a space of temporary asylum and surgical operations, and a time for thought and recovery. At the entrance of the neo-classical hospital building were the *New Testament* words 'I command you, to love one another.'<sup>36</sup> For the soldiers fresh from the front, they may well have eerily echoed the very opposite command of war to kill and maim, the parallel world they had just exited. As we shall see, Christ's message of love would offer Alekos a way through the crisis.

The story of Alekos' life intersects with the story of the bullet which struck him in the face and was now lodged deep in the tissues and bones of his left shoulder. His left eye had been affected by the bullet's path. In the following months he would undergo repeated surgery to remove fragments of bone from his jaws and electrotherapy to improve the nerves in his mouth. The surgeons were reluctant to remove the bullet which in one split second had radically altered his life, and which might now stay forever. Metal, bone and flesh welded together.

As Alekos slowly regained his strength he was drawn outside, although he felt a certain antipathy for the city. He was drawn to its open areas: the hill of Likavitos above the hospital, the fields of Patisia or the sea at Faliro. His six months in hospital were spent mostly in the company of other young wounded soldiers. The slow passage of time and the close bonds of

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<sup>36</sup> 'ΤΑΥΤΑ ΕΝΤΕΛΛΟΜΑΙ ΥΜΙΝ ΙΝΑ ΑΓΑΠΗΤΕ ΑΛΛΗΛΟΥΣ.' John 15: 17 *New Testament*.

the soldiers in this recuperative space are conveyed in casual remarks in his letters.<sup>37</sup> He spent his days strolling around the hospital courtyard or reading the *New Testament*. To Stratis he wrote: 'I need this reading to pour a little tranquility into my soul.'<sup>38</sup>

This period was not only one of physical recovery but also of emotional and intellectual turmoil. To Stratis he stresses how his ideas are in a state of flux: 'My ideas about everything are so jumbled that to put them back in order I need some psychological tranquility and mental calm.'<sup>39</sup> In another letter he openly alludes to his precarious mental state which he characterises by likening his head to 'a broken clock.'<sup>40</sup> The search for emotional calm and intellectual order are interrelated elements in Alekos' subject space and I am interested in exploring these 'moments of crisis' that illuminate history at the micro-political level (Laliotou 2004: 12). The larger event of the 'catastrophe' (his word), his physical wounds, mental turmoil and depression permeate each other:

In a moment one can be maimed but to become well again requires so much time. The dark days have started again.... I feel the storm approaching and I don't know where this curse that is hounding me will take me. I'm trying to find an aim in my life to be able to hold myself together but I find none. Everything seems empty and without meaning.<sup>41</sup>

In this subject space, a conglomerate of intellectual, political and emotional currents intersect and compete, swirling about in sudden changes of mood and thought. At times he gives vent to anger and revulsion at his predicament and the society around him. He writes to Stratis

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<sup>37</sup> Letter 11.1.1923. Op. cit.

<sup>38</sup> Letter 17.1.1923. Op. cit.

<sup>39</sup> Letter 12.11.1922. Op. cit.

<sup>40</sup> Letter 5.1.1923. Op. cit.

<sup>41</sup> Letter 12.12.1922. Op. cit.

about his desire to abandon the hospital before his recovery because of the ‘social and political revulsion’ he feels over his predicament:

I placed myself voluntarily in the front line and now I hear a voice blaming me and saying I had a greater responsibility to my body which the good Lord gave me to live with...<sup>42</sup>

I quote this extract because it illustrates the point raised in the earlier section about the moral dilemma faced by veterans who were forced to review their social subjectivity in terms of a maimed body. It is also relevant to the theorising of biographical writing in a Bakhtinian sense in which the text and body both connect to the world. Alekos’ thinking and experience need to be seen in close conjunction to the body’s vulnerability to war, exile, trauma and depression. These are not separate or abstract phenomena but tangible events that enter the body and consciousness. A corporeal reading of individual experience and memory is also, in a dialogical sense, the reading of a collective culture.<sup>43</sup> Alekos’ moods in the hospital oscillated between social revolt and transcendent religious acceptance at his witnessing of ‘social indifference, wretchedness of the State, abandonment of the victims.’<sup>44</sup> These oscillations ‘relay’ the wider mediated political and social interpretations of such experiences (Richter 2000: 164).

A convenient entry point to Alekos’ thinking in this period is his plans for the future, keeping in mind the ‘multi-thematicity’ of the letters which move from one subject to another at lightning speed (Moullas 1992: 15). To Stratis he made it clear that he wanted to join the

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<sup>42</sup> Letter 17.1.1923. Op.

<sup>43</sup> Richter (2000: 164) writes that ‘Benjamin insists on the vital relays between the ways in which the subject struggles to make sense of its own materiality and the mechanisms by which its culture strives to come to terms with itself.’

<sup>44</sup> Letter 20.9.1924, op. cit. in which Alekos recalls this period in hospital

Greek merchant marines.<sup>45</sup> Whether due to life experience or to literary fantasising, it had become a persistent idea. However, he felt strong family opposition to this, especially from his eldest brother Doukas who wanted him to continue the family tradition of commerce. When he confronted Doukas over the matter in a letter he argued that his mental state was not suited to such an occupation.<sup>46</sup> In fact, he felt so strongly that he spoke of ending his life rather than being forced to follow another path.<sup>47</sup> These plans for the future embrace a complex of tensions: family authority and obedience, views about the social status of manual work and the uncertainties of refugee life. Alekos was determined to assert himself: 'I've asked and obeyed others for too long; it's time for me to obey myself now.'<sup>48</sup>

Alekos' desire to follow a life of manual labour was more than just the result of shattered nerves, it stemmed from deeper philosophical impulses. It concurred with his view that 'Theoretical intellectual work that does not go hand in hand with action is a lie.'<sup>49</sup> The idea that pure intellectual work was somehow morally suspect was connected to a certain ideological crisis in the interwar years when the worker was often portrayed in political texts and symbolist fiction as a figure of resurrection, the revenger of the bourgeois betrayal.<sup>50</sup> Although not a socialist, Alekos did adopt a certain materialist view of mental life. When writing to Stratis about his desire to go to sea he extolled the beneficial affects of a free outdoor life: 'You might say I place too much importance on the material side of life. But isn't the starting point of mental work the material world?'<sup>51</sup> With a certain literary

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<sup>45</sup> Letter 12.11.1922. Op. cit.

<sup>46</sup> Letter 1.1.1923. Op. cit.

<sup>47</sup> Letter 1.1.1923. Op. cit.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Letter 12.11.1922. Op. cit. Compare this to the description of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde (1979: 149): 'no theory of life seemed to him to be of any importance compared to life itself. He felt keenly conscious of how barren all intellectual speculation is when separated from action and experiment.'

<sup>50</sup> K. Vergopoulos (1978: 196-202) cites the works of the writer K. Chatzopoulos, a symbolist and socialist who was one of the first translators of *The Communist Manifesto* into Greek. See also Dounia (1996: 29-53).

<sup>51</sup> Letter 11.1.1923. Op. cit.

affectation he describes office work as a cowardly and dishonorable path for himself.<sup>52</sup> The idea of remaining true to one's beliefs was a constant theme. He was particularly scornful of Nikos Velmos, the poet, actor and Stratis' bohemian friend in Athens. Velmos, according to Alekos, was a hypocrite who called himself a communist but looked down on 'common people.'<sup>53</sup> In the description of his meeting with Velmos, we have an indication of Alekos' thinking:

I told him that the common people around me would not prevent me from developing and studying the world in my own way, and that the tearing down of prejudices would make me into a free bird...<sup>54</sup>

He appears to believe in the liberating path of individual self-reliance and the casting away of social prejudice through a movement away from one's familial world. This liberal view of personal freedom was connected to Alekos' rejection of communism. On his disagreement with Velmos he writes:

Anyway, I told him I had no belief in communism. Its principles are noble but unattainable. As soon as the quality of spirit or mind is present in a future communist society it would create an aristocracy of the mind that would be followed by an aristocracy based on inheritance, a material aristocracy, and we'd end up where we are today. The human race needs to begin its disorganising task elsewhere.<sup>55</sup>

This view reflects the influence of H. G. Well's dystopic vision of communism in the

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Letter 21.12.1922. Op. cit.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Letter 21.12.1922. Op. cit. Compare this with the long letter 17.1.1923. Op. cit.

*The Time Machine* and L. Tolstoi's neo-Christian speculations in *The Kreutzer Sonata*, both of whom Alekos felt in tune with.<sup>56</sup> His thoughts on communism and the social question continue the discussion he had pursued at the front. He sees political movements entering the fray with 'Herculean ideologies' but quickly expiring in the 'rotten foundations of the present system.'<sup>57</sup> Although he regards the world's ills as systematic and structural, requiring 'disorganising' (αποδιοργανωτικό) work, he is not drawn to political solutions. Instead his search is directed towards metaphysical and psychic speculations, as well as a Christian spiritualism and celibacy that Tolstoi advocated.<sup>58</sup>

Alekos also disagreed with Velmos' *The Social Book* (1921) which was full of anarchic attacks on established bourgeois morality. Although he appears to have had sympathy for some of its content, its radical views on the state and war such as 'Love the deserters of your country. Those who desert from the ranks of its army, desert from the ranks of the betrayers of truth' very likely touched a raw nerve (Velmos 1921: 17). Alekos' ambivalence towards such ideas may explain his antipathy for Velmos. For many years he would refer to Velmos' call for revolution as a mistake.

In this period of crisis, Alekos began to read the Bible in a comparative study of Greek and Judaic mythology as he characterised the *Old Testament*.<sup>59</sup> This 'scientific' approach however did not apply to the *New Testament*, and the figure of Christ emerged as a powerful spiritual example.<sup>60</sup> In this blend of contradictory intellectual impulses there is an attempt to construct an epistemic foundation, to reconcile metaphysical and rationalist tendencies. While believing

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Letter 4.12.1922. Op. cit.

<sup>58</sup> Alekos appears to have adopted celibacy early in his life, and Tolstoi's Christian thinking was certainly an influence in the 1920s.

<sup>59</sup> Letter 11.1.1923. Op. cit.

<sup>60</sup> Letter 2.3.1923. Op. cit.

in a 'supreme power' governing the world with 'strange but independent laws,' Alekos announces to Stratis that he wants to study science, in particular Darwin's 'theory of the origin of the species,' so he can 'put down foundations for the social question.'<sup>61</sup> Parallel to this was a strong philosophical interest in issues of freedom and necessity, and the relationship between metaphysical and physical realms.

In two long letters to Stratis in January 1923, Alekos expounds a series of arguments on these matters. His first argument is that necessity is a higher power, and therefore what actually happens in life is of a higher order than what is merely potential.<sup>62</sup> This relates to Alekos' belief in a Heraclitean view that life is driven by perpetual 'strife' between opposites.<sup>63</sup> 'Necessity creates struggle and struggle the externalisation of life.'<sup>64</sup> He explains how inorganic matter, like the potential of a seed, gives rise to living matter. He then proceeds to argue for the existence of a metaphysical world: 'Like the material world, one can also assume a potential world; the first is discernible, the second, to become perceptible, requires appropriate (externalising) conditions.'<sup>65</sup> What is significant is Alekos' argument that the metaphysical world is governed by the same unified laws as the physical world. In this context, although he believes in the continuation of the spirit after death, he hypothesises its slow decay.<sup>66</sup> Just as Creation recycles matter, so too the spiritual self returns to the

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<sup>61</sup> Letter 29.11.1923. Alekos was very likely read Nikos Kazantzakis' 1915 translation of Darwin's *Origin of the Species* in the series published by Feksis.

<sup>62</sup> Letter 17.1.1923. Op. cit. These arguments appear to derive from various sources: Aristotle, the pre-Socratics, and the medieval scholastic tradition. Interestingly, the argument about potentiality and actuality, although typically Aristotelian, also figures strongly in Saint Augustine's *Confessions* where it is assumed that existence possesses an axiological hierarchy. The lower on the hierarchy of existence, the less the value a given thing has. For example, the depths are lower than the earth which is in turn lower than life. What has form is superior to what has no form, what exists is superior to what is nonexistent.

<sup>63</sup> See Mautner (2000: 245-246).

<sup>64</sup> Letter 17.1.1923. Op. cit.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

‘storehouse’ of its world.<sup>67</sup> What is important is not so much the consistency or validity of these arguments but Alekos’ attempt to reconcile such disparate discourses. The two dominant threads are spiritualism and Darwinism, the latter often synonymous with Social Darwinism. Alekos believes for example that the primordial instinct of plants reaches the level of spirit in humans through a type of mental evolution. In other words, a pyramidal upward movement from the material to the spiritual, a model that represents an attempt to fuse theocratic and materialist evolutionary views. This explains Alekos’ belief that the ‘social question’ cannot be solved by communism because the spirit will cease to evolve.<sup>68</sup>

In his letters there is an interlocking complex of ideas radiating through different discursive spheres – social, political, philosophical and religious. These ideas are not expressed as final conclusions but tentative views offered to Stratis whose replies, more crafted and considered, constitute the other half of a dialogue.<sup>69</sup>

Preoccupied in this period with finding emotional stability, Alekos invoked the philosophical tradition of stoicism to deal with the indifference he felt around him. Urging Stratis to do the same, he likens happiness to a ‘distant peak’ which mankind strives to reach.<sup>70</sup> Those who die before reaching it are more fortunate ‘because those, who after great suffering reach the peak, find on this mountain the same banality as on all the others.’<sup>71</sup> Happiness is as an absolute condition and by its nature impossible to achieve. Alekos relegates this ‘snow-covered peak’

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> An example is Stratis’ reply to Alekos’ views on the primacy of necessity: ‘But this is only half of the truth. The other half is that for something to happen differently we have to work at it. If the past cannot be altered by us, the future however can be delineated by us. We have a say over it. We insert our soul into the future, some more and others less. How this occurs, is another story altogether’ (S. Doukas (1975a: 33).

<sup>70</sup> Letter 30.11.1922. Op. cit.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

of happiness to the divine or metaphysical realm.<sup>72</sup> In this way, Alekos uses the textual tradition of stoic detachment as a way of dealing with his vulnerabilities.

During his time in hospital Alekos met up with Fotis Kontoglou, although he initially felt too highly-strung and depressed to see anyone. Alekos felt that his brother's friend helped him clear up his 'mental confusion' and to better understand himself.<sup>73</sup> He was impressed by Kontoglou's religious conviction: 'He's worked it all out; his road is full of tranquility.'<sup>74</sup> In these early postwar years, Kontoglou's literary and religious example will be critical for Alekos.

During his hospitalisation, Alekos' life was intimately bound up with the reading of fictional and instructional literature: translated fiction, cosmography, geology, paleontology, mineralogy and ancient authors. He also read *Men in Battle* by Andréas Latzko, one of the early European anti-war novels.<sup>75</sup> Commentators have noted that Greek literature lagged behind European anti-war literature both chronologically and in the absence of explicit anti-militaristic focus (Moullas 1993: 65-70, Dounia 1996: 68-70). Greek writers appear to have disengaged slowly from the dominant nationalist climate of the campaign and the Catastrophe to be able to critically confront the soldier's experience. Alekos continued his literary preoccupation with war and in hospital wrote a short prose piece 'Cain and Abel,' a biblical story of fratricide.<sup>76</sup> The final paragraph, with references to 'transgression,' the impossibility of expiation and the growing thirst of the world for blood, is clearly an allegorical reference to

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<sup>72</sup> Letter 10.4.193. Op. cit.

<sup>73</sup> Letter 8.3.1923. Op. cit.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Written originally in German in 1917, it was widely translated.

<sup>76</sup> Ironically, it was published by Stratis twenty years later, obviously for its wartime theme. *Ksekinima tis Neiotis* (New Start for Youth) May 1943, p. 5.

the war. Its recourse to biblical narrative and oblique reference differentiates it from the political repudiation of war by the European realist novels.

The bullet in his shoulder, ‘a small brass Mauser,’ was finally removed on 14 December 1922.<sup>77</sup> Alekos would remain in hospital for another three months, and the delays and complications often played havoc with his nerves.<sup>78</sup> His fear was that the discharge tribunal might find him fit for non-combatant duties, provoking fears of a future mobilisation.<sup>79</sup> However, on 10 March 1923 he was finally discharged with a disabled classification.

With his physical wounds still healing and his mental vulnerabilities pronounced, Alekos was a civilian again. On 14 March he set sail for his family’s new home in Mytilini, across the waters from Aivali, the two worlds now divided by the great abyss of the recent war and massive exchange of people.

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<sup>77</sup> Letter 15.12.1922. Op. cit.

<sup>78</sup> Letter 20.11.1922. Op. cit.

<sup>79</sup> Letter 27.1.1923. Op. cit.

## IV

### **Lesvos – the home front**

Alekos' spent five months in Mytilini with his mother, Eleni and Doukas. Dimitros had gone to Xanthi to run the wholesale outlet. Stratis was awaiting his demobilisation in Northern Greece. Alekos described this time as one of his many 'transitional periods' but it was to be one of extreme crisis.<sup>80</sup>

As soon as he arrived, Alekos tried to find work as a seaman on his uncle's motorised boats and the larger ships berthing at the port but his attempts to secure the required documents were maddeningly slow.<sup>81</sup> His brother Doukas appeared unwilling to help, although Alekos realised that his injured shoulder was still too weak for a seaman's life. Even so, he believed that such an occupation would help him recover from what he names 'neurasthenia,' the general medical term available at the time to describe a range of nervous disorders.<sup>82</sup> A letter to Dimitros reveals an articulate awareness of his condition:

I am a broken motor now; I've spent all my vigour and moral strength. The crisis I'm going through is terrible. Don't think I don't know that a seaman's life calls for a strong constitution. But I think my neurasthenia will only be cured through heavy work. God help me if I try to do intellectual work.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Letter 2.4.1923. Op. cit.

<sup>81</sup> Letters 6.4.1923, 15.4.1923, 30.5.1923 and 25.6.1923. Op. cit. The uncle was very likely his maternal uncle, Apostolos Hatziapostolis.

<sup>82</sup> According to Babiniotis (1998), the term entered the Greek lexicon in 1893.

<sup>83</sup> Letter 27.4.1923. Op.cit.

With no employment eventuating and deteriorating health, Alekos became more agitated and distressed. A striking image of his desires and dreams in this period appears in a brief description he sent to Stratis:

Yesterday I was at the rock near the lighthouse. The South wind was whipping the sea into a frenzy and a large steamer was sailing out of the harbour toward the open sea. Tears came to my eyes; if only I was on board, unnoticed, a stranger, heading into the great world of the good Lord.<sup>84</sup>

This image of escape and movement into a wider world combines a complex of psychological, literary, religious and vocational desires. It would sustain his dream of transoceanic travel and migration for years to come. The image of himself sailing away on a ship was based on a deeply-held belief that such a life would lead to a new social reality: ‘And when I will be no longer tied down by prejudices and social lies, and living in an honest and simple circle of people, then my mental recovery will come of its own.’<sup>85</sup> Although much of Alekos’ unhappiness and frustration with his family was focused on his eldest brother Doukas, it was also due to his own highly-strung character and, without a doubt, his wartime trauma. His letters to Stratis are filled with despairing references to his nervous state.<sup>86</sup> His constant state of restlessness is expressed in a passage which follows a recapitulation of some of the high points in his life: ‘Now I think you’ll understand your Alekos a little, and the reasons that are pushing me to leave; eternally leaving. Not to stay for even a moment, like Cain pursued.’<sup>87</sup> These words, while specifically reflecting Alekos’ own experience, have a remarkable correspondence to the literary tropes of interwar restlessness which is captured in the statement ‘Greece in the meantime is travelling, always travelling’ (Moullas 1993: 19).

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<sup>84</sup> Letter 10.4.1923. Op. cit.

<sup>85</sup> Letter 16.4.1923. Op. cit.

<sup>86</sup> Letters 6.4.1923 & 10.6.1923. Op. cit.

<sup>87</sup> Letter 10.4.1923. Op. cit.

Although the latter has a cosmopolitan connotation, Alekos' words connect to another literary trope of the generation of young veterans psychically damaged by war, that of the image of 'Cain pursued.'<sup>88</sup> Alekos was aware of a certain rigidity and perfectionism in his thinking that made him vulnerable. This tendency was expressed in terms that can be linked to the symbolist writing of the 1920s which sought to 'escape to the domain of the absolute' (Vergopoulos 1978: 190). Alekos too expresses this mode of thought: 'I want everything I come across to be covered by the uncertain veil of a dream; because if I come to know them well, I will observe that at heart everything is mundane and common.'<sup>89</sup> In a later letter he acknowledges this tendency as a liability: 'perhaps if I were a little more flexible I wouldn't be in my present mental and physical mess.'<sup>90</sup>

As a civilian, Alekos began to feel the psychological impact of his injuries. He felt estranged from the social environment and a burden on his family.<sup>91</sup> As he desperately tried to obtain his seaman's documents his wounds deteriorated: 'What an irony! Now I've finally understood that I'm a pitiable cripple who'll have to get by in life in whatever way he can.'<sup>92</sup> He had become what Carden-Coyle (2005a: 149) has called a 'form of infamy,' the disfigured veteran as a living anomaly of the idealised figure of the immortal soldier hero. The signs of depression are numerous in his letters and feelings of anger and bitterness surface as in the following bitterly ironic and circular reasoning: 'And naturally, if I weren't a cripple then those supernal Judges would not have classified me as non-combatant.'<sup>93</sup> Soon after his arrival in Mytilini, with his arm still weak from the operation and the wounds open in his mouth, his right eye flared up to such an extent that he began to lose his sight. The pain was

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<sup>88</sup> Terzakis (1987), a writer of this generation, consciously uses such imagery in his essays on the period.

<sup>89</sup> Letter 10.4.1923. Op. cit.

<sup>90</sup> Letter 27.4.1923. Op. cit.

<sup>91</sup> Letter 20.9.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>92</sup> 9.5.1923. Op. cit..

<sup>93</sup> Letter 22.5.1923. Op. cit.

so intense that one night Alekos appears to have contemplated suicide.<sup>94</sup> In *To Struggle, To Youth* (1953: 291-296), the episode acquires an added dimension as Young Brother's inflamed eye is initially diagnosed as a syphilitic symptom. His reaction is one of shock, disbelief and cynicism towards the doctors. Syphilis as a disease carried such negative metaphoric connotations that Young Brother's horror is an expression of social reaction against moral contagion (Chatzeiouseph 2003: 80). There is no mention of the disease in the letters but it is possible that at the time Alekos avoided discussing such an odious subject, even with Stratis.<sup>95</sup> His apparent sexual virginity may have made it even more distressing, adding to his already precarious mental state.

In this crisis the influence of Fotis Kontoglou, who visited Mytilini to organise an exhibition of his drawings of Byzantine icons from Mount Athos, seems to have been critical in pointing Alekos towards Christian faith and away from a more rationalist secular view.<sup>96</sup> Alekos' framing of his crisis reveals both the 'infamy' mentioned above and a Darwinian subtext:

In such moments I think that I no longer have any rights on life. Only whatever is strong and necessary must live, whatever is no longer beautiful must die. In such moments I fell back on cold philosophy, as Velmos called it. I began to see things as though I was at the peak of the absolute, judging creation. This blasphemy was pointed out to me by Fotis. 'Why look for the cause and the consequence? The deeper you go the more you will always stop at the "why."'<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> See Letters 27.4.1923, 20.9.1923, undated letter (1924) and 10.9.1924. Op. cit. See also Doukas (1953: 291-296).

<sup>95</sup> There is evidence that Alekos did see a specialist in Thessaloniki in this period. See letters 14.11.1923 & 30.4.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>96</sup> See letter 20.9.1924. Op. cit. Zias (1975) mentions Kontoglou's exhibition in Mytilini.

<sup>97</sup> Letter 16.4.1923. Op. cit.

Revealingly, Alekos sets Velmos, the socialist and rationalist, against Kontoglou, the aestheticist who advocates surrender to divine reason.<sup>98</sup> Alekos' struggle to deal with his 'neurasthenia' seemed to find its greatest strength and succour in such surrender. However, before this occurred, Alekos describes a period in Mytilini when his faith was severely tested. He narrates his mental state as a conflict in a personal relationship with Christ: 'The horrific days I went through in Mytilini caused such discord with him that I often thought we would part.'<sup>99</sup> His mental harmony is correspondingly expressed as religious reconciliation with Christ, as a deep friendship and love. As we will see in his prose work 'Phrygia,' God becomes the 'ideal friend' (*oneirodis filos*) that awaits one in the metaphysical world, though never in the real one.<sup>100</sup>

The question arises as to whether Alekos' rediscovered Christianity led him to venture deeper into a spiritualist and metaphysical outlook or whether it led him back to a tradition of Orthodoxy (or its re-'invention') as it did with Kontoglou (Hobsbawm 1983).<sup>101</sup> The answer lies more in an affirmative answer to the first part of the question, although not in a simple way. What seems to have occurred is that, while adopting a neo-Christian outlook, Alekos combined it with a particular spiritualist or metaphysical view of life. As he recollected in 1956 he had begun to read the Bible in hospital 'not as a theist, but as a metaphysicist.'<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Compare this to the description by Benjamin (1999: 615) of a Paris afternoon when the pattern of his life became clear to him through the connections he perceived between himself and significant persons in his life.

<sup>99</sup> Undated letter (1924). Op. cit.

<sup>100</sup> Letter 16.4.1923. Op. cit.

<sup>101</sup> One could argue that Kontoglou took up an extreme form of Orthodox or Byzantine aestheticism as an extension of his literary aestheticism, rather than returning to an unbroken tradition. There seems to be a profound similarity between his Byzantine outlook and the more extreme views of symbolism. For example, the aestheticism of Oscar Wilde that holds that art is superior to life, more beautiful and eternal, and that the carnal world is one of decay and imperfection, is not at all alien from Kontoglou's Orthodox aesthetics. See Zias (1975) and Carvanos (1957, 1985).

<sup>102</sup> Letter to Gikas Biniaris 31.7.1956. Op. cit.

Unable to go to sea or find other employment, Alekos turned to his brother Dimitros who seemed the ‘only port of salvation’ left for him.<sup>103</sup> In late August 1923 he sailed to Xanthi, the inland city perched below the Rhodope Mountains and overlooking the Northern Aegean, to begin work in the family business.

## V

### **Xanthi – a new start**

Alekos arrived in Xanthi with great hopes, perhaps overly so in regards to Dimitros whom he describes as ‘infinitely good.’<sup>104</sup> His first letters ‘home’ are upbeat and filled with those quotidian images of an era that Barthes finds so alluring in their physical evocation (Barthes 1975: 53): ‘The octopus which I’m cooking in vinegar is boiling loudly on the gas stove.’<sup>105</sup> His requests for underwear to be sewn at home and sweets of quince evoke a picture of domestic peace and routine that punctuates his daily routine of bookkeeping. It was only to Stratis that he revealed his inner world: his feeling of confinement, dreams of travel and episodes of depression. Walking in the Rhodope mountains, he looks down on the city and feels dissatisfaction: ‘I involuntarily hastened my steps, and for a moment everything and everyone seemed alien to me. A stab of pain in my eye reminded me that I’m a cripple and that above all I must look after my rotten body.’<sup>106</sup> In dealing with his ‘rotten body’ as he half-jokingly called it, he found consolation in Christ’s words ‘the spirit indeed is willing, but

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<sup>103</sup> Letter 20.9.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>104</sup> Letter 30.8.1923. Op. cit.

<sup>105</sup> Letter 5.10.1923. Op. cit.

<sup>106</sup> Letter 16.10.1923. Op. cit.

the flesh is weak.’<sup>107</sup> In the same letter he writes how the *New Testament* is opening up ‘entire worlds.’<sup>108</sup>

It was to Stratis that he finally confided the ‘terrible chasm’ that had opened between himself and Dimitros.<sup>109</sup> This falling out with his brother is revealing in its intellectual and emotional complexity. For years he had felt deep affection towards him but now after a short spell of cohabitation he considered him a weak and contemptuous person.<sup>110</sup> His conclusion that ‘Distance gives things a lustre that in reality they don’t have’ concurs with a general pessimistic outlook.<sup>111</sup> The falling out was connected to Alekos’ ingrained feeling of duty, now experienced as a conflict between duty to family and his ‘crippled self.’<sup>112</sup> This involved a conflict he felt between the moral dangers of commerce, ‘the mire of Mammon,’ and duty to oneself to attain freedom and moral integrity.<sup>113</sup> Ostensibly, he disapproved of Dimitros’ gambling and visits to Xanthi’s brothels, but his letters also suggest other emotional factors. Alekos emerges as a highly-strung young man who had high, often unrealistic, expectations of others.<sup>114</sup> In trying to explain the quarrel, Alekos refers to ‘very delicate springs.’<sup>115</sup> The contrast he paints between them is more revealing of his own character than that of Dimitros. It is expressed in Biblical and spiritual language: ‘he walks the crowded avenue, I the humble and deserted pathway. He fears the future, I strive to feel the present.’<sup>116</sup> Despite the gulf between them they continued to share a room, work and eat together. In fact, the changeable nature of Alekos’ state of mind can be seen in his admission to Stratis that whenever he saw

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid. Mathew Chapter 26 Verse 41.

<sup>108</sup> Letter 16.10.1923. Op. cit.

<sup>109</sup> Letter 21.3.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Letter 12.4.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>114</sup> Letter 20.9.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>115</sup> Letter 12.4.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

Dimitros overwhelmed by personal or business problems he immediately took on ‘the role of the loving brother.’<sup>117</sup>

### Religion as healing

Alekos’ study of the Bible in this period of crisis was undoubtedly a part of a self-healing process. Looking back to the summer of 1922 he now interpreted his mental crisis as a loss of ‘piety’ and a ‘cynical disrespect’ for the ‘governance of God.’<sup>118</sup> The biblical ideas of suffering and humility offered him a potent interpretation of his condition and a pathway to personal salvation. The ‘Nazarene’ appealed directly to his sense of damaged body and lost youth, restoring in him a ‘faith in beauty.’<sup>119</sup> The letters suggest a long period of struggle and study, rather than sudden conversion. His physical injuries and depression fuelled this struggle. The deeper he entered the biblical texts the more he saw his suffering as divine providence and test of faith.<sup>120</sup> His conversion entailed a belief in a patriarchal Christian God, a punishing but ultimately forgiving Father.<sup>121</sup> Alekos’ renewed religious faith also occasioned ecstatic wonderment and joy, evident on his long walks in the mountains where it was often expressed as religious exaltation.<sup>122</sup>

Alekos read the *New Testament* as revelatory and salvational and the *Old Testament* as traditional wisdom.<sup>123</sup> His favourite section in the *New Testament* was John 21: 15-17 in which the fisherman Simon Peter is made to thrice profess his love for the risen Jesus. In the

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Undated letter (1924). Op. cit. This inadvertently suggests that prior to his crisis his life had had a largely secular orientation.

<sup>119</sup> 30.4.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>120</sup> Undated letter (1924) & 8.10.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>121</sup> Letter 28.10.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>122</sup> Letter 30.4.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>123</sup> Letter 11.11.1923. Op. cit.

*Old Testament* he was drawn to Genesis, Ecclesiastes and the Psalms, particularly those of David. His favourite passage was David's lament for Jonathan:

How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle! O Jonathan, even the slain ones upon thy high places! I am grieved for thee, my brother Jonathan; thou wast very lovely to me; thy love to me was wonderful beyond the love of women. How are the mighty fallen, and the weapons of war perished! (II Samuel 1.25-27)

Describing the passage to Stratis he wrote that David 'doesn't know what he should weep for more, the destruction of his nation or his friend Jonathan...'<sup>124</sup> It resonates on a number of levels with Alekos' wartime experience. There is also a homoerotic undertone in the passage that can be understood as the expression of underlying androcentric assumptions of such textual traditions. There is undoubtedly in Alekos' letters and writings a certain element of homoeroticism and homosociality that, though largely unconscious, cannot but be read in its relation to broader homoerotic discourses in classical Greek literature and the modern writing of authors such as Oscar Wilde or Walt Whitman who introduce homosexual themes in coded literary language. While not postulating Alekos as a closet homosexual, I am suggesting that his sexuality presents in his texts through homoerotic themes. It appears to have been sublimated early in life in a religious outlook and an adoption of celibacy. Although sexuality is almost entirely absent in Alekos' life story it surfaces every so often in his writing as a return of the repressed.

Alekos' personal Christianity was not simply a retreat into religious mysticism, but rather an attempt to forge a personal and stable moral philosophy. Deeply emotional, it was also a search for a larger unified belief system. It begins with the individual's relationship with the

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<sup>124</sup> Letter 28.5.1924. Op. cit.

world but ultimately encompasses a Western-orientated universality. Alekos writes to Stratis that 'One must reconcile with oneself, and when one has done this he'll be reconciled with everyone and everything.'<sup>125</sup> He rejects the idea that reconciliation is conformity to the 'herd,' believing instead that it represents an individual stand. Christ's example is held up as uncompromising and morally imposing. Though expressed in a religious context, Alekos' argument is a liberal one with certain older aristocratic connotations. He draws a distinction between 'natural evil,' cited as the case of the Zulu (supposedly) engaged in cannibalism, and 'artificial evil' which is conscious wrongdoing castigated by Christ. This expresses a view of Western subjectivity that ascribes to itself moral conscience and to the primitive Other, innocence and amorality.<sup>126</sup> Alekos concludes in typically male-gendered language: 'Consequently reconciliation with everyone does not entail uniformity but a great man, a great soul, so great that he can forgive his fellow man.'<sup>127</sup> This becomes Alekos' code of morality: reconciliation with the world through a process of individual struggle and moral stand, accompanied by forgiveness and love as the means to personal peace and harmony. Inherent in it is a belief in a tradition of 'great men' whose level of consciousness determines universal truths.

The corollary to Alekos' biblical view was a politics of retreat and asceticism. Society is a 'lie' and liberation can only be attained through retreat to the 'ancestors' caves.'<sup>128</sup> Innocence can only be regained through an escape 'from the claws of the society of our own kind.'<sup>129</sup> These views are however moderated in other letters, even contradicted, when for example Alekos writes that one cannot return to the cave and that one's obligations to society and the

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<sup>125</sup> Letter 4.7.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Letter 19.7.1924. Op. cit.

material demands of life are necessary for the achievement of freedom.<sup>130</sup> In short, Alekos often engaged in hyperbole. Even so, the Biblical landscape and narratives that locate God and truth in the wilderness, and hypocrisy and immorality in the city, clearly had a strong hold on him.

Alekos' interpretation of Christianity involved an attempt to find a balance between a series of dualities: rationality and faith, intellect and heart, idea and material, words and action. He sees Christ as the divine philosopher-teacher who had achieved the ultimate balance. In his discussions with Stratis he argues that if classicism is 'a balance between spirit and body' then only Christianity is truly classicist.<sup>131</sup> In his reply Stratis gently chides him by arguing that one can't judge the Greek age by 'the standard of Christian *aretology*' (S. Doukas 1975a: 39).<sup>132</sup> Despite the idea of balance, Alekos regards knowledge as hierarchical and qualitative. As a positivist mode of thought, science is seen as limited and incapable of dealing with larger questions of meaning. It has value only within a larger framework of a benign divinity: 'All the sciences etc, all this raw but not at all negligible material, once it falls into the crucible of biblical ideas emerges pure processed gold.'<sup>133</sup> For Alekos, faith in divine creation is a first-order level of knowledge, and science, equated with a strict empiricism, a second-order. This view was reiterated by Stratis who believed that science had 'placed man at the centre' and consequently man had lost the 'philosophising spirit' (S. Doukas 1975a: 36). Such views appear as a reaction in the interwar years to the Enlightenment verities of science, positivism and reason. Alekos' spiritualist speculations can be understood within a wider European turn to spiritualism in WWI and its aftermath. Winter (1995) argues that such a turn

<sup>130</sup> Letter 28.10.1924. Op. Cit.

<sup>131</sup> Undated text 'Goethe's Pseudoclassicism' in letter book 'My Young Brother's Pain' Vol. 2, pp. 56-57. Stratis Doukas Archive.

<sup>132</sup> Their discussions of classicism are also based on Alekos' reading of Eckermann's *Conversations* (with Goethe), Greek translation by N. Kazantzakis, 1913. See Eckermann (1901, 1913).

<sup>133</sup> Letter 30.4.1924. Op. cit.

was a social and cultural reaction to the carnage and grief of the Great War that people were forced to deal with.

It is not surprising in this context that Alekos' study of the Bible was greatly influenced by his reading of Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali*, whose ancient Indian philosophy was read as a spiritual antidote to the West's alienated experience of the world.<sup>134</sup> This resulted in a highly personal and hybrid interpretation of the biblical texts. For example, Alekos sees in Ecclesiastes (I.2-8) a strong resemblance to the Indian philosophy of the cycle and he believes in reincarnation, not simply as the resurrection of a soul but as the recycling of matter.<sup>135</sup> Thinking of his constituent matter being recycled in the world he feels ecstatic joy: 'I thank the whole world, the whole universe and together my God, that they brought me into this life and judged me worthy of being a humble part of their Great and beautiful world.'<sup>136</sup> In addition, he refers to Tagore when he proffers the view that religion or metaphysics provides insights that science will only discover after centuries. In this he includes Heraclitus' idea of constant change that he believes has been validated by Darwin's 'Law of Evolution.'<sup>137</sup> It is to Tagore's *Gitanjali* that Alekos also owes much of the spiritual imagery of his prose narrative 'Phrygia' which will be examined shortly.

An interesting comparison can be made between Tagore's liberalism and anti-nationalism in the interwar years and Alekos' politics of spiritual retreat. Trivendi (1993: 62-63) notes that Tagore's 'transcendental apolitical' internationalism, in reality a political position of 'liberal

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<sup>134</sup> Rabindranath Tagore *Gitanjali* (*Song Offerings*) was published in 1909 and translated into English in 1912, winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. In the Introduction to the 1912 edition W. B. Yeats writes that Tagore's poetry is reminiscence of a lost European past. He believes that Tagore writes about nature and the seasons in a way that in the West was once known 'before our thoughts had arisen between them and us.'

(Tagore 1986: xix)

<sup>135</sup> Letter 30.4.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>136</sup> Letter 4.7.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>137</sup> Letter 17.11.1924. Op. cit.

humanism,' was sustained for a long time by a belief in the 'civilisational supremacy of the West.' Alekos followed a similar path of spirituality and transcendence, as well as a gradual disillusionment with British liberalism.

### Mount Athos – 'Phrygia' and *Letters to My Young Friend*

The period 1923-1924 was an intense one in the correspondence between Alekos in Xanthi and Stratis on Mount Athos where the latter spent ten months writing and studying at the monasteries with his painter friend Spiros Papaloukas.<sup>138</sup> The correspondence included the manuscripts for 'Phrygia,' personal news and discussions which Stratis later used as the basis for his aesthetic philosophical text *Letters to My Young Friend*.<sup>139</sup> Their intimate and wide-ranging dialogue often ends in agreement but not always closure.<sup>140</sup> Stratis is the mentor who helps Alekos 'sort through the unprocessed material in [his] brain.'<sup>141</sup> 'Phrygia' was primarily written for Stratis, which explains the narrator's occasional asides about his wartime experiences.<sup>142</sup> Although a fragmented series of entries in Stratis' letter books, the text can be read as partially autobiographical and as an exploration of aesthetic and philosophical issues. It needs to be read in the context of its immediate circle of influence: Alekos' discussions

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<sup>138</sup> For a description of Papaloukas' period of painting on Mount Athos and his subsequent exhibition in Thessaloniki, a landmark in its cultural life, see S. Doukas (1957).

<sup>139</sup> This text, an edited version of Stratis' letters to Alekos in 1924, was first published as 'Hugo's Letters' in the newspaper *Eleftheros Logos* Mytilini 1927. It was also published in *The Third Eye* 4-6 January 1936 and S. Doukas (1975a). It bears an affinity with Rainer Maria Rilke *Letters to a Young Poet* in its homiletic style and tone.

<sup>140</sup> Letter 20.9.1924. Op. cit. See also the last sentence of Stratis Doukas (1975a: 46) 'It is possible that someone else's experience might lead them to completely opposite conclusions.'

<sup>141</sup> Letter 22.12.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>142</sup> 'My Young Brother's Pain' Vol. 1, op. cit. p. 666.

with Stratis, the latter's writings from Mount Athos, Kontoglou's novel *Pedro Cazas* and prose collection *Vasanta*, and Tagore's *Gitanjali*.<sup>143</sup>

The upheaval that Asia Minor intellectuals experienced with the loss of homeland, though not of itself the cause of sudden changes in thinking, may have accentuated existing tendencies. Anticipating the impending disaster and uncertainty, Kontoglou had described the harbour of Mytilini in June 1922 in an atmosphere of oppressive heat and paralysis:

History has become a myth, full of shadows like the moonlight at dawn... The heavy books that hold within them the incalculable quantity of the lost energy of my fellow man, appear now as treasuries of lies... Faith has died... Everything has gone... Everything is fading... The heat numbs my skull...' (Kontoglou 1967: 113)

The passage communicates a mood of apocalyptic doom. The preoccupation with burning landscapes and a resurrection that glimmers from beyond are common in Kontoglou's writing.

Alekos' Phrygian landscape is also one of burning, the narrator commenting on the etymology of (*phrygo*) to burn.<sup>144</sup> In the aftermath of 1922, both Alekos and Kontoglou experience their lives in terms of religious crisis. The similarities in outlook are numerous, although their expression is idiosyncratic. After his return from Paris, Kontoglou lived in Aivali teaching in the High School during the Greek-Turkish war. In a letter to a friend he wrote in January 1921 that if 'one can't live in nature' then it is in books that one lives, immediately adding, 'The other shit: society, politics and the like are so filthy that their stench reaches your nostrils' (Kontoglou 1967: 120). The lines encapsulate the Greek symbolist desire for escape from

<sup>143</sup> Stratis Doukas published *Pedro Cazas* in 1920 in Aivali during a period of army leave (S. Doukas 1976: 13-16; 1957: 45). It quickly attracted notice as a novel with a new sensibility and style. *Vasanta*, a miscellaneous collection of texts, was published in 1924. See Kontoglou (1967).

<sup>144</sup> Manuscript 'Phrygia' Vol. 1, op. cit. p. 47.

society to art, romantic worship of nature, rejection of politics, and the aesthete's contempt for mundane social life.

Kontoglou's first novel *Pedro Cazas* expresses a high form of 'aestheticism' that cultivates an image of the author as an exotic figure who lives far from the centres of civilisation. It also declares a credo of anti-literariness while disingenuously disavowing its own highly literary lineage.<sup>145</sup> Something of this inconsistency was picked up by Alekos, who despite his admiration for Kontoglou, found the latter's attitude to his readers discordantly misanthropic.<sup>146</sup> Kontoglou (1967: 74) first begs for the readers' belief in the narrative and then turns on them. Alekos detected a similar inconsistency in *Vasanta* and he criticised Kontoglou and others, who, while 'castigating present society's evils,' remain aloof from their solution.<sup>147</sup> Replying to Stratis' argument that he needs to judge such writing simply as art, Alekos pointed to the inherent contradiction this involved. 'Then he [Kontoglou] shouldn't stray from his independent role as an artist. He shouldn't mix in sociology where it doesn't belong.'<sup>148</sup>

There is little doubt however that there are strong similarities between *Pedro Cazas* and 'Phrygia' and Alekos consciously draws parallels and contrasts.<sup>149</sup> Alekos describes his writing as an attempt to depict a 'philanthropy' or love for the world. Like Kontoglou, he practices a type of writing that has recourse to the invention of 'chimaeric' scenes and supernatural phenomena.<sup>150</sup> Kontoglou (1967: 14) describes this as the 'absolute freedom to think up and invent things that didn't exist before.' Alekos' aestheticism was not just literary,

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<sup>145</sup> Kontoglou (1967: 14). The work draws directly on Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.

<sup>146</sup> Letter 1.5.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>147</sup> Letter 19.7.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid. See also 1.5.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>149</sup> Letter 1.5.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>150</sup> Letters 31.3.1924 & 1.5.1924. Op. cit.

it carried over to an attitude to everyday life whose ‘monotony’ one can escape through ‘the iron grasp of Chimaera’ that allows one to escape to ‘an ideal world you yourself control.’<sup>151</sup>

*Pedro Cazas* is the story of a Spanish-Portuguese seafarer from Goa who in the late nineteenth century experiences a macabre encounter with a reincarnated spirit.<sup>152</sup> Whilst cast in the genre of the supernatural adventure, it is preoccupied with a search for harmony with God. ‘Phrygia’ is also a seafaring story about two contemporary seamen bound by an ethereal friendship that finds its consummation in a supernatural and metaphysical turn of events.<sup>153</sup> Its narrative chronotope, while occasionally introducing shafts of contemporary time and space, operates primarily on ‘adventuristic time’ in which events have no bearing on the experience of the narrator (Bakhtin 1981: 99). Consistent with its religious theme, the final denouement is the collapsing of real time into a divine timelessness. As with Kontoglou’s story, God is ultimately the real protagonist and at the end the narrator comes ‘face to face with the Mighty Lord.’<sup>154</sup> This meeting reflects the thematic influence of Tagore’s *Gitanjali* that is based on the devotional idea of God as lover and intimate stranger.

Both texts are examples of the European ‘imperial narrative’ whose white protagonists restlessly wander the colonial sea routes searching for an exotic otherness or to lose themselves (Brandabur 2000: 321-322). Kontoglou’s (1967: 29) narrator describes his friend, the Englishman Corke, who dies hunting elephants in Africa in imagery reminiscent of

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<sup>151</sup> Letter 1.5.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>152</sup> The Epigraph to the novel reads: ‘The original story of a Spaniard pirate who either lived for three hundred years or else returned from Hell. Printed from a strange Portuguese manuscript that fell into the hands of Fotis Kontoglou in Oporto’ Kontoglou (1967: 19).

<sup>153</sup> See Appendix I for an extended plot summary sent to Stratis in the letter 31.3.1924.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid. ‘Phrygia’ bears some generic similarities with the autobiographical narrative of Saint Augustine’s *Confessions*. For Augustine, individual subjectivity is false when not in accord with the supreme subjectivity. His quote from 1 Corinthians (13: 12) ‘*at present I am looking at a confused reflection in a mirror, not yet face to face*’ is strikingly similar to the theme of ‘Phrygia.’ See *Confessions* (10.5).

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: 'Africa drew him more than India, perhaps it was unknown to him, and his simple heart, drunk with desire, revolved around this enchanted centre.' The narrator of "Phrygia" also travels to remote colonial ports and the 'new world' of the Americas and Australia. He too has an 'Englishman' friend, Fred Mogelson, and the narrator, clearly Alekos' autobiographical persona, in the course of the story takes on his dead friend's name, thus signifying an act of cultural impersonation. This merging of personas serves the narrative theme of the oneness between kindred spirits and God, and also draws on the religious imagery of *Gitanjali*.<sup>155</sup> Both texts use the authorial allographic device of the found manuscript to contrive an entry into the mysterious past and both express a strong narrative urge towards asceticism.

'Phrygia' is more closely autobiographical than *Pedro Cazas*, the narrator sharing a closer identity in time and space with the author. The narrator grew up on the Asia Minor coast, suffered traumas in a recent war and wants to escape a narrow family circle by joining the merchant marines. Alekos explicitly refers to the close biographical connections, even claiming that he knew 'how a person dies.'<sup>156</sup> In addition to the strong generic similarity to *Pedro Cazas*, 'Phrygia' directly responds to *Vasanta*, in particular Kontoglou's translation of the Prologue to *Studies of Nature* by the French romantic writer Bernadin de Saint-Pierre.<sup>157</sup> A religious-philosophical element that Alekos and Stratis share with Saint-Pierre is his expression of monism. Alekos reads it as an 'old and familiar chord' while Stratis writes that at a 'tender age' he felt a 'perfect correspondence' with monism (S. Doukas 1975a: 38).<sup>158</sup> Kontoglou (1967: 224-225) celebrates Saint-Pierre as a romantic poet who writes movingly of

<sup>155</sup> The theme of cultural identity in fiction is explored by Said (1966: 156-157).

<sup>156</sup> Letter 1.5.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>157</sup> Saint-Pierre's novel *Paul and Virginia* had been translated into Modern Greek as early as 1824. Alekos had read it while in hospital in Athens.

<sup>158</sup> Letter 20.7.1924. Op. cit.

the power of religious faith over the illusory charms of ‘systems of science.’ Alekos appears to share this rejection of the secular critical spirit, although his views on science are more moderate, his writing often drawing on scientific literature. There are of course differences between Alekos, Stratis and Kontoglou, but, in Bourdieu’s terms, they share a certain ‘habitus’ where these differences can be understood primarily through their deeper commonalities (Bourdieu 1971: 191).

Stratis’ response to ‘Phrygia’ is also important in the context of its writing. He finds its texts moving and praises them for their ‘inventiveness, poetic contradictions’ and frequent ‘delicate lyricism’ (S. Doukas 1975a: 18). He is sympathetic to writing that strives to intimate the metaphysical and divine aspect of life and therefore commends what he sees as Alekos’ results in this direction: ‘In truth, you were able to take a human emotion, deepen and widen it, taking it out of the sphere of the senses and casting it into the metaphysical, thereby turning it into a meaning and thus “delivering it to the bosom of the infinite God from whence it springs”’ (S. Doukas 1975a: 30).<sup>159</sup> The other unique element he discerns is the search for the ‘perfect friendship’ that has ‘now come from another world, like an incredibly enchanting reality’ (S. Doukas 1975a: 30). Alekos’ literary efforts in the early 1920s are clearly articulated within a symbolist and neo-Christian religious movement that has a particular Anatolian refugee perspective.

### **Cultural renewal and Mount Athos**

Stratis Doukas was a key intellectual figure who articulated a movement for cultural renewal in this period. Though not exclusively a refugee movement, it was closely associated with

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<sup>159</sup> The idea that art can ‘spiritualise’ the gross flesh also occurs as a theme in Wilde (1979: 93-94, 145).

figures like S. Doukas and Kontoglou who advocated a return to Byzantine religious and artistic traditions through a certain modernist perspective. The visual and textual treasures of Mount Athos became a symbolic site for this renewal. Papaloukas' paintings from Athos were a clear expression of this conjunction. Stratis' regular column 'Letters from Mount Athos' in *Efimeris ton Valkanion* gives an idea of its spirit and direction:

After Fotis Kontoglou's historic pilgrimage last year to Mount Athos we now have the presence of another Greek artist, the indomitable painter of the Asia Minor Campaign, Mr Spiros Papaloukas. In an age when the name of El Greco is at a zenith in the west it is only natural for Greek painters to be devout pilgrims of Byzantine mysticism whose youngest son was El Greco. But even if the contemporary spiritual movement of neo-Christian idealism wasn't international, for us Greeks there was never a doubt that sooner or later we would return to the Byzantine tradition.<sup>160</sup>

The extract illuminates the national and international context of the movement and its connection to a 'neo-Christian idealism' which in his letters Stratis characterises as the discarding of 'hardened traditions' and a new reading of the Gospels (S. Doukas 1975a: 26). In this analysis, the movement is not a simple return to tradition but part of a wider modernist interpretation of the past, although with a contemporary Greek physiognomy. Stratis writes about Papaloukas' paintings as 'A Spring In Art' and he connects them to the publication of Kontoglou's *Vasanta*, whose title in Sanskrit means 'spring.'<sup>161</sup> Related to the idea of renewal there is an underlying theme of crisis and trauma in Stratis' writing that requires communion with nature and God. Many of his short lyrical pieces from Athos are contemplative celebrations of nature in which he desires to bury himself to 'recuperate and forget.'<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Undated newspaper clipping titled 'Treasures of Mount Athos' in the folder 'First Publications,' Stratis Doukas Archive, Aristotles University, Thessaloniki. It belongs to the period December 1923-September 1924.

<sup>161</sup> 'A Spring in Art.' Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> 'Hidden in the Thicket.' Ibid.

Kontoglou had also sought solace and healing on Mount Athos the previous year and the words ‘tranquillity’ and ‘peace’ appear frequently in his texts, as they do with Alekos, as a deeply desired state (Kontoglou 1967: 129).

In these early years, Stratis Doukas and Kontoglou’s views on art are particularly close. In *Vasanta*, Kontoglou (1967: 234-235) is highly critical of ‘realism’ which simply represents reality in its ordinary sense and ‘does not place things in their open circle, nor locate them in the infinity of things.’ Stratis (1975a: 10, 31) uses similar phrases in his rejection of art which mirrors reality in a one-to-one photographic relation. Common to both is in the centrality of ‘style’ or ‘expression’ in art, and by extension divine manifestation (Kontoglou 1967: 233). Stratis repeatedly stresses this idea to Alekos: ‘without expression I cannot comprehend how art can exist’ (Doukas 1975a: 37). The issue of feeling or thought versus expression is a constant in their letters; Alekos insisting that expression will always remain second best to perception and feeling.<sup>163</sup> Both Kontoglou and Stratis articulate a modern perception of art and discourse, one in which meaning is identified with style, although neither asserts that art is *simply* this. Kontoglou however wants to look beyond style, beyond the boundaries of language towards a divine silence (Kontoglou 1967: 44). Stratis feels a similar need to go beyond words:

...we must learn to see things without our impressions being tainted by what we have become accustomed to understand by saying or hearing their names; let names not exist any more, but the things themselves, letting ‘the things themselves fall on our spirit with their weight, wild and indifferent, bare of that friendly inclination that human language gives them in our eyes’...<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Letter 19.6.1924. Op cit.

<sup>164</sup> Letter from Stratis to Alekos. 5.6.1924. Bound volume ‘Grammata’ pp. 122-123. Stratis Doukas Archive. Op. cit. The quote is from *Pedro Cazas* in Kontoglou (1967: 44).

The quote, from Kontoglou, is indicative of the proximity of their views. Even so, there is already an embryonic difference between them that will grow in the ensuing years. It consists in a certain contradiction in Kontoglou who gravitates towards a more traditional view of language and thought as drawing from a pre-discursive divine source. According to Kontoglou, the artist creates something that already exists: 'Simply, art offers the opportunity for things that are sleeping within us to awake' (Kontoglou 1967: 236). This is clearly enunciated in the view of the 'poet' as a 'Gatekeeper of the common treasure' and 'Language of all humanity' that lies 'silent... within its misty bowels' (Kontoglou 1967: 236). Kontoglou hovers on a modern understanding of language and art but simultaneously clings to a religious interpretation. The question posed earlier, as to the direction the 'neo-Christian idealism' might take them, can be tentatively answered in Kontoglou's case by pointing towards his embrace of a traditional Orthodoxy and gradual rejection of modernism and the whole secular Renaissance tradition (Zias 1975, Carvanos 1957, 1985). Even at this early stage, Stratis was more inclined to follow through the modernist understanding of language and art in his writing practice, cultural work and politics. This view is clear in June 1924 when he writes to Alekos that 'Nothing is ours but that which found expression within us; that is what we are.'<sup>165</sup> Stratis had embraced the modern twentieth-century idea that 'perception is inseparable from expression,' a view which regards discourse as the determinant of 'reality.'<sup>166</sup> He advises Alekos to cultivate his revelatory insight that goes beyond common sense and to become attuned to the absolute correspondence between 'precise expression' and the truth of things.<sup>167</sup> To do this, he writes, Alekos needs to clear his thinking 'from the

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<sup>165</sup> Letter from Stratis. 5.6.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

darkness that a faulty upbringing and an atrocious education have caused.’<sup>168</sup> Alekos however appears in these years to stubbornly follow his own path, somewhere between Kontoglou and Stratis, in a struggle to weather the physical and mental storms of his life.

## VI

### **‘Dreaming of Steamers and Ships...’**

Alekos’ resolve to migrate to Australia arose in conjunction with two events: his failed attempt to sign up as a seaman in Mytilini and a letter he received in April 1924 from the Australian seaman Charlie that alerted him to an opportunity to board the *s/s Katoomba* in Port Said in June.<sup>169</sup> Alekos desperately tried to obtain his passport but was delayed by the Greek Military Office.<sup>170</sup> Four months later he declared to his brother Doukas that his decision to migrate was irrevocable: ‘Absolutely nothing can turn me from my purpose, only God himself.’<sup>171</sup> Over the next year, he continued his efforts to obtain a passport. The labyrinthine workings of Greek bureaucracy in processing the papers of a refugee veteran tested his nerves and patience. His frustration often occasioned negative comments about his ‘new’ homeland: ‘One not only has troubles when he tangles with the Greeks but just as many when he wants to be done with them.’<sup>172</sup> By late November he was so frustrated he accused Doukas of deliberately delaying things, although he later apologised for the outburst.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Letter 12.4.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>170</sup> Letter 27.8.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Letter to Doukas 21.10.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>173</sup> Letters 28.11.1924, 13.12.1924 & 31.12.1924. Op. cit.

There is a certain ambivalence surrounding the reasons Alekos variously offers for his decision to migrate. To Stratis he reveals feelings of resentment towards his brothers, the suffocating atmosphere of the family circle, the 'state,' 'society' and his troubled life in general.<sup>174</sup> He also writes of his dream of travelling and finding a new circle of friends, a dream sometimes traced to his childhood or, more often, to the time he worked as a checking clerk in Thessaloniki. The decision was also undoubtedly related to his mental condition which he believed would improve amongst strangers with whom he might create a bond such as he had experienced at the front.<sup>175</sup> To other family members he stresses the good prospects migration offered young men who in turn would benefit their families.<sup>176</sup> After his sister's romantic disappointment, he saw his support for her as another reason to migrate.<sup>177</sup> In short, his desire to migrate is expressed as a contradictory set of emotions and reasons, evident in the following: 'the only reason I am leaving is to be useful to my family, seeing that our characters are not compatible, and it's impossible for us to live together our whole lives.'<sup>178</sup> He also ascribes his decision to the narrow economic opportunities in Greece and the workings of the state. An undercurrent of anger against Greece occasionally erupts: 'No-one can keep me inside the dirty borders of this miserable place of ugliness and obscenity.'<sup>179</sup> While Alekos' decision to migrate was due to a multiplicity of factors, his subjective rationalisations varied according to his emotional states and family interactions.

What happened next reads like a twist in a fictional narrative. On January 20 1925 Alekos received news that migration of Greeks to Australia had been restricted. His application had

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<sup>174</sup> Letter 12.9. 1924. Op. cit.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Letter 10.9.1924 Op. cit.

<sup>177</sup> Eleni was in love with a young man from Moschonisia but in 1925 he became engaged to another girl from the island. See 'Eleni Douka Diary' (16.11.1924-20.4.1925), Stratis Doukas Archive. Op. cit.

<sup>178</sup> Letter to Doukas. 31.12.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>179</sup> Letter to Doukas. 28.11.1924. Op. cit.

missed out by six days!<sup>180</sup> His letter to Stratis on the same day, while expressing his determination not to give up, reveals an underlying vulnerability to depression.<sup>181</sup> He doggedly continued to dream of a future in Australia: he wrote directly to the Mayor of Melbourne, began to study English and, by correspondence with a Belgian school, poultry farming.<sup>182</sup> Seven months later he was still preparing migration documents, but this time he instructed Doukas to write on the application, ‘professional poultry farmer.’<sup>183</sup> But now his life had taken another turn, in addition to bookkeeping in Xanthi, he was renting a small farm outside the city.

### ‘Long live “agriculturalism”...’

The farm at Kourou Kōi which Alekos was working by January 1925 is approximately seven kilometres east of Xanthi.<sup>184</sup> It seemed to be the fulfilment of his dream of rural retreat about which he had so often written to Stratis.<sup>185</sup> Farming life represented more than an occupation, it was mental therapy and a realisation of his romantic yearnings:

I spent half the day in the forest and the other half working on the farm. Everything is beautiful and tranquil. It is so peaceful its infinite ocean wipes clean every ambition. ‘Vanity of vanities, human [endeavours]...’ you feel this in all its depth. But within you not one deathly breath; everything is health and kindness, work and spiritual cleansing.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Letter 20.1.1925. Op. cit. For this period of Australian migration history see Price (1963: 88).

<sup>181</sup> Letter 20.1.1925. Op. cit.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid. & 12.3.1925. Op. cit.

<sup>183</sup> Letter 17.8.1925. Op. cit.

<sup>184</sup> The village’s Turkish name ‘Kuru Köy literally means ‘dry village.’ It has subsequently been Hellenised to *Akarpo* meaning ‘barren, infertile.’

<sup>185</sup> Letters 17.11.1924 & 4.1.1925. Op. cit.

<sup>186</sup> Letter 26.1.1925. Op. cit.

Yet, even as he seemed finally contented, a shadow hung over him. He felt something was missing, that this may not be his life's dream. Nevertheless, the small mixed farming operation, in partnership with two friends, progressed reasonably well, absorbing his energies and satisfying his interest in scientific farming. In the wider context of rural politics, although Alekos appears to have had some sympathy for the movement of 'ruralism' (*agrotismos*) given voice by the Rural Party, his views on agriculture and rural life were complex and idiosyncratic. He tended to see the city as site of decadence, alienation and disease, and the countryside as a site of morality, truth and health.<sup>187</sup> What is clear is the ideological nature of these perceptions and their relationship to broader social and philosophical views, as well as literary traditions from the ancient world to the modern romantic period.<sup>188</sup> Alekos' apparent aversion for cities is not unrelated to a view of history in which modern life is seen as lacking the moral vigour of an ancient past in which 'great men' set absolute standards.<sup>189</sup> The gendered and sexual bias inherent in the adverse comparison between the ancient and modern world becomes apparent in Alekos' description of the latter as 'a derailed mechanism' which has created 'degenerates and feminine city types, Bohemians and dandies.'<sup>190</sup> Such thinking shared a discursive space with a certain interwar authoritarian political outlook in which homophobia and misogyny are interwoven as legitimising and popularising attitudes.

Another strand in Alekos' thinking relates to the religious or existential dimension of the relationship between man and nature within the context of the ideas of progress and evolution. In a letter to Stratis, he describes the imaginary conversation between himself and the forest

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<sup>187</sup> Letter 26.1.1925. Op cit.

<sup>188</sup> Examples that spring to mind are the Bible, Longus' late Hellenistic pastoral idyll *Daphnis and Chloe* and Hamsun's novels.

<sup>189</sup> Letter 7.10.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

which he was slowly clearing on his land.<sup>191</sup> The inevitability of cultivation and progress in which man is pitted against nature is underpinned by an original cleavage between the two, an event symbolised by the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden as punishment for their eating of the fruit of knowledge. Alekos explains the relationship of man and nature through the simultaneous interlocking of biblical and evolutionary narratives. The destruction of the forest is accompanied by the banishment of the nymphs and satyrs, who, in contrast to the Christian narrative, are mythical creations. The narrative here is similar to the theme Alekos pursued in his short story 'The Old Oak Tree and the Axe' written during the war (see Chapter Two). These narratives construe human action as inevitable, driven either through divine providence or 'scientific' law governing the survival of the species. A social and political analysis of human society and industrialisation is absent. Beneath the narrative surface lurks the logic of social Darwinism.<sup>192</sup>

Alekos' social contacts in this period included neighbouring farmers who were refugees and local, Turkish-speaking Muslims. His descriptions reveal a respectful and friendly disposition towards the latter, a comfortable familiarity with religious and linguistic difference.<sup>193</sup> In Xanthi, he made acquaintances among the young, more intellectually orientated youth whom he enlisted as subscribers to the new literary magazine *Filiki Etaireia* that Stratis was editing in Athens. The magazine had a cultural agenda of renewal, offering new Greek writing, modern and religious art, and translations of foreign authors. Alekos managed to enlist thirteen subscribers, a disappointing result he attributed to the absence of intellectual life in the provincial city. His comments about young people's preoccupation with 'billiards and car rides and the rest of cosmopolitanism' and the anti-intellectualism of athleticism are common

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<sup>191</sup> Letter 4.1.1925. Op. cit. See Appendix II for complete text of letter.

<sup>192</sup> Alekos' reading of H. Spencer is not unrelated here.

<sup>193</sup> Letter 26.1.1925. Op. cit.

complaints in the period.<sup>194</sup> Despite these attempts at cultural activity, Alekos emerges in his letters as a loner, sitting at the coffee house under the plane trees reading his paperback.<sup>195</sup> In *To Struggle, To Youth*, Alekos' retrospective view of himself, the narrator describes Young Brother as a 'recluse' who had 'closed his eyes to the real Xanthi' (Doukas 1953: 297).

Alekos' writing continued in this period but at a slower pace, with additional pieces for 'Phrygia' and ideas and for a new work entitled 'Bithynia.'<sup>196</sup> This work was an attempt to develop the religious theme of harmony with God and the world to a higher plane, to 'create a revolution of love.'<sup>197</sup> The short prose poems he wrote for this work are hymns to nature which express a oneness between the poet and the world, signalling a state of mental healing in which 'the storm has passed into the distance.'<sup>198</sup> Before he had even finished writing 'Phrygia,' Alekos had decided that he was in no hurry to publish.<sup>199</sup> He had rejected the idea of pursuing writing as a career which he could only envision as being possible in journalism, something he felt was paramount to selling his ideals.<sup>200</sup> On the farm in Kourou Kōi he reached a point in his life where a feeling of religious peace was more important than writerly ambition:

I only feel my heart beating with a desire for life. For a life inside the house of our Lord. If something good is to come of all this, I can't imagine it at this moment. My Phrygia and Bithynia stand like symbols inside my suffering heart. I guard them like a

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<sup>194</sup> Letter 12.3.1925. Op. cit. Alekos' comment in this letter that athleticism 'makes thick sinewy muscles and thicker minds' is similar to sentiments expressed in 1930 by Petros Spandonidis, the editor of the modernist literary magazine *Makedonikes Imeres* (Macedonian Days), about the youth of Thessaloniki who 'are too busy playing football and flexing their muscles to cultivate their inner world' (Mackridge 1997b: 179).

<sup>195</sup> Letter 15.4.1925. Op. cit.

<sup>196</sup> Letter 5.11.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>197</sup> Letter Stratis. 27.11.1924. Op. cit.

<sup>198</sup> 'The Forest's Supper' in Letter book, Vol. 2, p. 61, op. cit. Published in *Efimeris ton Valkanion* 1924 (n.d.).

<sup>199</sup> Letter 27.11.1924. Op. cit. A similar theme is pursued in Eckermann (n.d.: 56-57).

<sup>200</sup> Letter 28.10.1924. Op. cit. For a discussion of 'career' as a discursive construction within 'fields of possibility' see Carter (1989: 36).

secret treasure. But my ambition to paint them on joyless paper has been erased. Like the reality that has been erased from the map of 'Greater Greece'... A hen is cackling outside. I must go and see if she has laid an egg.'<sup>201</sup>

In these lines there is a conjunction of literary and extra-literary chronotopic perspectives: a newly-found hope and 'desire for life,' texts embodying the struggle for healing now transformed to symbols, literary and political ambitions erased from the maps of the world, and the triumph of the here and now in the image of the lowly hen and the life-engendering egg.

In May 1926 Alekos' mother, Eleni and Doukas moved from Mytilini to Xanthi, a move Alekos had been urging for two years for reasons of financial economy and better management of the business which had been experiencing periodic crises.<sup>202</sup> Alekos hoped that Dimitros' gambling problem would improve with the presence of the family. He himself was emotionally buoyed by the presence of his mother and sister.<sup>203</sup> By July however the news he sent to Stratis was disquieting. The business was facing bankruptcy. His brothers were considering their options, one of which was to find positions as employees wherever they could. Alekos not only worried about the family debt to their maternal uncle and the social stigma of bankruptcy, he was afraid of his own mental state.<sup>204</sup> Events unfolded quickly and by the end of August the family was desperately seeking cash to avoid bankruptcy procedures. To avoid humiliation and legal consequences, Alekos and his brothers borrowed and sold whatever they could, including their mother's personal jewellery.<sup>205</sup> By November 1926 the family was in Thessaloniki and Alekos was on his way to Verroia, a small city west

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<sup>201</sup> Letter 5.4.1926. *Op. cit.*

<sup>202</sup> Letter to Doukas. 18.4.1925. *Op. cit.* During the Easter of 1925, due to poor communications, they had no stocks of oil at a time of high demand.

<sup>203</sup> Letters 10.5.1926 & 10.6.1926. *Op. cit.*

<sup>204</sup> Letter 30.7.1926. *Op. cit.*

<sup>205</sup> Letter 30.8.1926. *Op. cit.*

of Thessaloniki, where he had acquired a position in the accounts department of a branch of the Refugee Settlement Commission.

Alekos' letters in this period reveal a relatively happy and calm state of affairs: he was busily engaged working in the accounts department, sending money to his family, making efforts to obtain approval for his migration, and finding time for reading. His determination to migrate remained steadfast. In a letter to his family in Thessaloniki he wrote to a female cousin to 'keep a record of shipping news according to flag and tonnage and send them to console me, because I'm dreaming of steamers and ships.'<sup>206</sup> Although in high spirits, the underlying tensions with his brothers Dimitros and Doukas remained, confirming to him the need to maintain a distance and solitude.<sup>207</sup> In July 1927 Alekos experienced a bout of malaria but in the same month he was also a step closer to achieving his dream, his papers finally complete and ready to be submitted to the British consulate in Thessaloniki. After a promotion and a short spell in Sidirokastro in Northern Greece, he arrived in Piraeus on 21 September to board a ship bound for Port Said. Three days later he wrote to his family: 'At this moment I've just boarded the ship and I'm writing to you. I'm completely well and strong, even more so than I was up there in recent times.' His last contacts in Athens were with a family friend Mr Marios and Stratis' friends Spiros Papaloukas, Nikos Velmos and Minas Pesmatzoglou.

As a final twist to the story, forty-hours before his departure, Alekos was arrested by the police as a suspect for fraud and embezzlement. It was of course a case of mistaken identity, but his temporary imprisonment was like a nightmare farcically intruding into his waking life. With the help of Stratis' friends he managed to obtain his release and his account of the

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<sup>206</sup> Letter. 11.11.1926. Op. cit.

<sup>207</sup> Letter 11.12.1926. Op. cit.

episode the following day was light-hearted.<sup>208</sup> His joy at finally embarking on a journey he had dreamed about for so many years shines through the letters. The words of Walt Whitman's verse that he had responded to so favourably four years earlier aptly express his buoyant mood.<sup>209</sup>

JOY! shipmate - joy!  
 (Pleas'd to my Soul at death I cry;)  
 Our life is closed - our life begins;  
 The long, long anchorage we leave,  
 The ship is clear at last - she leaps!  
 She swiftly courses from the shore;  
 Joy! shipmate - joy! (Whitman 1975: 510)

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<sup>208</sup> Letter 24.9.1927. Op. cit.

<sup>209</sup> 'Finally... my receipt of Whitman was delayed but from a quick glance through his last [poem] "Joy, Shipmate, Joy" he looks good. I haven't read anything of his till now.' Undated letter (1923). Vol. 2, op. cit. p. 55.



## **CHAPTER FOUR: The Migrant ‘Voyage South’ (1927-1928): Diaspora and Colonialism in Australia**

### **I**

‘History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time but time filled by the presence of now.’ (Benjamin 1969: 263)

This chapter aims to locate Alekos Doukas as a migrant subject in Australia in the interwar years at the intersection of two tangential but related discourses of European settlement: those of the dominant white colonial society and the Greek diaspora which mediated the existence of Greek communities in Australia in the early decades of the twentieth century. The biographical narrative tracks Alekos on his migratory voyage to Australia in 1927 and his first ten months in the country, drawing on letters home to his family and brother Stratis Doukas, in Greece.

The epigraph from Benjamin’s essay on the philosophy of history introduces the critical idea that history writing is a continuing process of contestation rooted in the present. This idea informs Nicholas Thomas’ (1994: 21) approach to colonial history where he has argued that in the analysis of colonial discourses, differentiation between older and newer, more subtle forms, is imperative if we are to subvert and expose the notion of ‘historical progress’ which excises racist colonialism from the ‘liberal present’ into an insulated realm of the past. So too in diasporic discourses it is those elements and positions, those continuities from the past that

silently underpin contemporary discourses, that need to be subjected to closer historical analysis.

The exploration of the biographical subject and the field in which he is located, is guided by Thomas' caution that 'only localised theories and historically specific accounts can provide much insight into the varied articulations of colonising and counter-colonial representations and practices' (Thomas 1994: ix). The study of a 'located' historicised subject in Greek-Australian history can help illuminate the specific nature of Greek diasporic discourses and their largely unexplored relationship with the dominant colonialist society. My study takes up Thomas' (1994: 3, 32) argument that 'unitary' and 'essentialist' representations of historical discourses are counter-productive, whereas more historicised, differentiated and complex representations can help identify the continuities and ruptures in contemporary discourses, particularly those that relate to minority ethnic communities and their location in the broader society.

This chapter analyses primary sources in the field of Greek-Australian history (letters, unpublished manuscripts, immigrant guides and contemporary newspaper reports) with the aim of exploring 'discursive affiliations and underlying epistemologies' which have till now been largely passed over (Thomas 1994: 22). My investigations lead me to a consideration of the extent to which Greek migrant discourses in the past, and as continuities today, are implicated in colonialism. Until recently Greek migration to Australia has been studied largely in terms of settlement patterns, focusing on social and economic disadvantage as the primary aspect of the relationship between the migrant and the dominant structures of society.

Connections to broader colonial history have been largely ignored.<sup>1</sup> This chapter locates itself within an undertaking ‘for a decolonised migrant historiography’ which in the context of this study involves three research strategies (Pugliese 2002a). The first is the need to examine non-British migrant histories and discourses of settlement to understand their nature and terrain: the second is to ascertain the extent to which they incorporate or share space with dominant colonial discourses: and the third is to examine the extent to which ethnic communities generate their own counter-discourses and histories, in opposition or resistance to dominant narratives of settlement. I write with the awareness that the issues of whiteness and the continuing non-recognition of Indigenous sovereignty lay at the heart of national self-knowledge in Australia (Moreton-Robinson 2005, Watson 2007). Non-British migrant histories need to be examined and located within this central problem and not as separate spaces in one-dimensional relationships to dominant white power.

### **Greek irredenta and diaspora**

The background to the cultural complexities of the Greek world in the interwar period is briefly surveyed in the following thumbnail sketch of Greek communities and social formations in the Eastern Mediterranean region over a period stretching back to at least the eighteenth century.<sup>2</sup> The Greek diaspora, made up primarily of merchants and intellectuals, grew significantly within the Ottoman Empire and beyond from the seventeenth century, playing a decisive role in the ideological and material preparation for the founding of a Greek nation state in 1832. A new period began from the 1840s in which Greek irredentist nationalism, encapsulated in the words ‘the Great Idea,’ aimed to liberate adjoining Greek

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<sup>1</sup> An exception to this is recent work by Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos (2004a, 2005a).

<sup>2</sup> The summary here is primarily based on Kitroeff (1991).

populations. It fostered a messianic dream of enlarging Greece's territories in a revitalised Byzantine Empire. In this phase, Greeks living in territories associated with the Great Idea (almost entirely within the Ottoman Empire) were considered 'the irredenta,' the unredeemed Greeks, whereas the Greeks beyond these territories were referred to as 'the diaspora.' The similarities between the two populations, which communicated freely through business, family and constant inter-migration, were considerable. They shared similar social and cultural organisations. Communities in both areas were mostly self-governed by notables (wealthy merchants and landowners) and the Church under the various Patriarchates in the Eastern Mediterranean. As the national centre, the Greek state constantly worked within these populations to spread the cause of irredentist nationalism through a 'transterritorial concept of the nation' (Kitroeff 1991: 238). While it appealed to a strong nationalist consciousness, the Great Idea was not always enthusiastically embraced by Greeks in the Ottoman Empire or the diaspora, for reasons of self-interest and long-term survival. Political encroachment by the Greek state in community affairs was similarly not always welcomed by the Church or unanimously supported by local notables. However, by the beginning of the twentieth century the Greek state had imposed its nationalist ideological hegemony on the diaspora and irredenta. The defeat in the Asia Minor Campaign of 1919-22 not only resulted in the collapse of the Great Idea and irredentist nationalism it also changed the dynamics of Greek homeland-diaspora relations. This landmark event would also have repercussions for Greek communities in Australia.

### **Changing diasporas**

In discussing the Greek diaspora I have drawn on an historical distinction provided by Armstrong (1976) between 'mobilised' and 'proletarian' diasporas. The former are the traditional diasporas (the Jews, Armenians, Greeks, Chinese and the Germans in Eastern

Europe) who provided communication networks and specialised roles (merchants and diplomats) in a reciprocal exchange relationship with the ethnic elites of multi-ethnic empires, while the latter have been part of a labour migration to large urban centres in the modern period. Without this crucial distinction the use of the term ‘diaspora’ becomes ahistorical and nebulous. The key to an understanding of the Greek diaspora experience and the discourses with which it was associated hinges on the location of the historical period of transition between the traditional diaspora settlements and the modern labour migrations. This period roughly corresponds to the years 1890-1924 when a large wave of immigrants (almost seven percent of Greece’s population) migrated across the Atlantic to the U.S. (Laliotou 2004: 53, Kitroeff 2002: 362-363). This occurred in the same period as the expansion of Greece’s national borders after the Balkan Wars (1912-13), the influx of over a million refugees from Turkey, and the collapse of three multi-ethnic empires (Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman) where Greek trading communities had existed for centuries (Kitroeff 2002). The result of these changes was that the interwar years were characterised by considerable indeterminacy and overlapping of discourses related to new migration and older diaspora communities. In the U.S., intense assimilationist pressures on Greek immigrants led to an ethnicised migrant identity in a movement of overt ‘Americanisation.’ In diaspora centres like Egypt, more traditional patterns continued. Australia, for various reasons that will be explored, followed the older diaspora model in the interwar years, although there were assimilationist pressures and also some political, cultural and commercial influence from the Greek immigrant experience in the U.S.

Traditional diasporas require sustaining ethnic myths to maintain cohesion and continuity. Crucial to such myths are those of the ‘homeland,’ although in the so-called ‘archetypal’ diasporas the myth may be entirely supra-territorial and based exclusively on religious

identity.<sup>3</sup> Such myths are sustained through a variety of mechanisms and institutions: churches, schools, clubs, publishing houses and so on, all of which produce discourses that in the case of mobilised diasporas sustained identity and cohesion over long periods of time. The Greeks of Egypt, for example, enjoyed a high degree of cultural and social autonomy for over one hundred years. In the case of proletarian diasporas in the twentieth century such discourses of identity could not compete with the dominant capitalist elite that monopolised the mechanisms and institutions responsible for society's foundational and national myths. In this sense, the proletarian diasporas were drawn into profoundly changed social and economic conditions that transformed the very conditions of their subjectivity as distinct groups.

The Greeks of Australia in the interwar period can be seen as a diaspora in a transitional phase between a mobilised diaspora with a marked profile of self-employment in small and medium catering trades and a proletarian diaspora of immigrants with only their labour to offer. One of the hypotheses of this study is that in the interwar years the Greek communities in Australia were still dominated by a traditional diaspora ideology that did, however, experience certain disruptions and challenges, particularly during and after the Great Depression of the late 1920s. Historically, the relatively small Greek communities that emerged in Australia from the 1890s were similar in their organisational structures to traditional Greek diaspora centres such as existed in Egypt through which the migration route passed. Until after WWII, unlike the U.S. experience, there was little participation in working class occupations outside of the catering trades that Greeks were primarily engaged in. Given this relative social and economic autonomy, community organisation through the establishment of churches, schools and the central body of the *koinotita* (the Community)

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<sup>3</sup> The concept of an 'archetypal' diaspora, used loosely by Armstrong (1976) and postulated by Safran (1991) has been critiqued as an 'exclusivist paradigm' that as a prescriptive definition is unworkable (Clifford 1997: 247). The comparative approach is nevertheless valuable as a way 'to specify a complex discursive and historical field' (Clifford 1997: 249).

followed traditional diaspora patterns (Tsounis 1971: 25, Holbraad 1977: 33, 51). These broad historical features explain to a certain extent the fact that the Greeks of Australia followed a different pattern of settlement and cultural and political experience from the larger and historically earlier Greek transatlantic migration.

The analysis of Greek communities in Australia within a transnational perspective of prior social formations and discourses challenges the model of migrant history as simply an assimilationist process within a self-contained national narrative. In the interwar years the host society deployed concepts of nation, empire, race and assimilation to subjugate Southern European migrants. The Greek communities had their own narratives of nation, race and diaspora identity that existed in parallel but also in concurrence with mainstream views and institutions. These discourses have their own histories and conditions of formation. One particularly persistent view that dominated in the period was that of the migrant as guest or outsider, a view that conformed to the traditional diaspora condition of non-permanence (Holbraad 1977: 203-205). Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos (2004a & b) have postulated the self-representational view of the Greek migrant (and Southern European in general) as 'perpetual foreigner' as a means by which the illegitimate sovereignty of white Australia over the dispossessed Indigenous peoples has been ideologically legitimated. Using a Hegelian philosophical and political model, they name the persistent denial of Indigenous sovereignty as the 'onto-pathology of white Australian subjectivity.' While the model is powerful in its analysis of the ambivalent position ('white-but-not white enough') of national belonging that Southern Europeans have inhabited in the racialised discourse of nation and empire, the argument lacks historicity (Nicolacopoulos 2004b: 32). By assuming that this view has been hegemonically imposed on Greek communities by Australian colonialist nationalism it ignores a long history of diaspora tradition that adapted to the ideological conditions of

Australia. In fact, an argument can be made that traditional Greek diaspora communities adapted and cooperated with a variety of colonial regimes in North Africa and elsewhere. This points to elements within diaspora ideology that historically has sought a mutually-benefiting relationship with empire and colonial powers. The above model of analysis constructs a rather abstract, homogenised and overly-rational migrant subject that does not allow for historical agency. Pugliese (2007: 1) has made a similar critique of the position that assumes that Southern Europeans arrived in Australia as 'diasporic subjects.... positioned in terms of ahistorical *tabula rasa*' taking for granted their whiteness.<sup>4</sup> By interrogating the complex history and experience of Calabrians in terms of nation-state racial discourses of the 'South,' Pugliese (2007: 3) demonstrates that 'other diasporic histories' continue 'to inflect the embodied practices of everyday life' beyond the migrant point of entry into the space of the Australian nation.

In an important essay, the historian Ann Curthoys (1999: 4) deals with the subject of 'foundational white narrative and mythology' in Australian settler society. She argues for the existence of deeply ingrained 'victimological narratives' in Australian nationalist discourse in which colonialist violence and dispossession of Indigenous people is effaced by a narrative of the white settler as victim (Curthoys (1999: 3)).<sup>5</sup> This overriding national narrative of victimhood is broken down into a cluster of related narratives. Of interest here are the narratives of exodus and expulsion, pioneers, and the struggle with an alien and threatening nature that hides within it, through the elision of the Indigenous people, their dispossession. She claims validity for her study only in respect to the settler narratives of the Anglo-Celtic population who were the clear majority before WWII. Curthoys suggests that other groups,

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<sup>4</sup> The argument takes up the statement by Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos (2004b: 45) that as Southern Europeans 'we take our whiteness for granted.'

<sup>5</sup> Such narratives have been deployed in the last decade in a politically resurgent discourse of 'loss and recuperation' in relation to white British Australian heritage (Moreton-Robinson 2005).

which remain to be studied, ‘may be quite easily incorporated into.... the Anglo-Celtic narrative’ but that they may also ‘...especially if from Southern Europe or from Asia, have their own quite separate stories of struggle and hardships that have less to do with the land and Indigenous peoples and more to do with the ethnocentric and racist Anglo-Celtic majority’ (Curthoys 1999: 4). It is important to note that if this ‘exception’ implies that non-British migrant narratives are not inherently implicated in colonialist reality it would in effect excise such groups from the colonial project, denying them a presence and agency in the hierarchically-racialised settler society of Australia. Whether there is a degree of correspondence in these narratives of settlement and those of Greek communities before WWII, or whether there are differences and dynamics of contradiction related to ‘ethnocentrism’ and ‘racism,’ are questions explored in this chapter.

Gunew (1992b: 44) pursues a similar line of enquiry when she suggests that the meaning of Australia as a nation is mediated through narratives or allegories that have been transported from the ‘motherland’ of England or Ireland. The question she poses is: ‘What does “Australia” look like when these other motherlands and languages [i.e. non-Anglo-Celtic] are acknowledged as constitutive repositories for these allegories?’ Gunew (1992b: 43) is interested in the ‘naming process’ in the discourse of settlement, ‘the imaginative possession of the place’ and the unequal power of different languages to legitimise alternative social realities and practices. My scrutiny of Alekos Doukas’ writings in Australia is an attempt to further pursue this question.

In the interwar years Southern Europeans as a group were constituted through a racialised discourse that positioned them on the periphery of white Australia. According to the racialised Social Darwinian typology of this period, it was imperative that the white British race remain

homogeneous and pure. The forcible removal of Indigenous children by the state was a systematic practice of such an imperative.<sup>6</sup> So-called inferior races had to be excluded or, if admitted, be absorbed in such a way that foreign traits would be totally erased.

Assimilationism, the dominant discourse of immigration (and of the 'native problem'), based as it was on an essentialised view of racial and cultural difference, resulted in social practices in which groups like the Greeks tried to make certain aspects of their cultural life less visible. Examples are the tendency to Anglicise names, to avoid speaking Greek in public and generally to conduct 'ethnic' cultural life behind closed doors. However, assimilationism's desire for the same, the effacement of essentialised difference stumbles on a structural contradiction because 'the desire for the same remains that which can never be achieved or fulfilled precisely because one's ethnicity, by definition, precludes the possibility of ever becoming the same' (Pugliese 1995b: 243). It is this contradiction that I want to pursue by examining the inherent discordance between certain elements of the Greek diaspora discourse and the dominant Australian discourse of race and nation, the contradiction between the 'insider' view of Greek community discourse and the 'outsider' view held by the dominant society (Hirschon 1999: 162-165). What is important to keep in mind is that the traditional Greek diaspora discourse of identity, with its ethnic myths and narratives, has a long history and, although silent (and silenced) in the Australian national narrative, remains an obstinate historical reality disrupting any smooth assimilationist reading of the past.

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<sup>6</sup>See Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) (2005).

## II

### **The Voyage**

I resume the biographical narrative with Alekos Doukas' voyage by steamship to Australia in 1927. He sailed from Piraeus via Crete to Alexandria and from there travelled by train to Port Said where he boarded the French mail steamer *Ville de Strasbourg* bound for Fremantle, Adelaide and Melbourne. His letters describe the voyage in detail, and taken as a continuous text, belong more properly to the genre of travel writing. What is striking about the letters is the degree to which they can be read within the context of the Western exploration and discovery narrative, as examples of Orientalist writing and imagination. They reflect in the broad sense the sensibility of a European 'culture of empire' in whose literature, as Said (1993: 253, 254) writes, the 'quest or voyage motif' has a long history: 'In all the great explorers' narratives of the late Renaissance.... and those of the late nineteenth-century explorers and ethnographers.... there is the *topos* of the voyage south.' For Alekos the 'voyage south' was more than just a practical movement through space to fulfil a migration goal, it represented an imaginative, personal and intellectual adventure.

The first extract from Alekos' letters again contains those detailed images that evoke 'crystalline moments' in a life, those haunting moments that Barthes has described as 'biographemes' (Burke 1992: 38).

My loved ones, We sailed from Piraeus half an hour ago. I'm sitting at the stern writing to you under an electric light. The shore, lost in the darkness, has now become a row of lights from Piraeus to Glifada. Everything is just fine. I've withdrawn from

the soft strains of shipboard singing to be close to you. I am deliriously happy. The sea makes you forget your worries and prepares you for new adventures and cares. I'm finally leaving behind the lights of Greece, the lights of Piraeus and Athens, and I cast my insatiable eyes toward the South.<sup>7</sup>

The passage provides a concise chronotopic vantage point of Alekos' migratory movement: the letter writing, the modernity of the electric light, the voyage as an antidote to the stress and anxiety of the times, and the literary trope of the 'Voyage South.' Alekos' image of the ship brings to mind the 'heterotopic' signification of its space, its connection to colonies and the new world as heterotopias of 'compensation' (Foucault 1986: 27).

Travelling on the train in Egypt, Alekos recounts how two Egyptian ladies offer him food. He describes them as having 'a friendly generosity, a *romaic*<sup>8</sup> manner' and he finishes the incident with the words: 'Poor humble people! You're the ones who deserve to rule over the swine who govern you.'<sup>9</sup> The contemptuous reference is presumably to the Egyptian royal family, although Alekos is silent on the reality of British control of the country. There are two contrasting elements here: on the one hand, an openness and warm response to a subjugated people, and on the other, a subtle note of condescension, an assumption of superiority. The Greek in Egypt, while a Mediterranean, nevertheless identifies primarily with the European coloniser.

Alekos' letters also testify to the existence at the time of an extensive Greek diasporic network. Before he boarded the ship in Piraeus he had received a letter from a family friend

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<sup>7</sup> Letter to family 24.9.1927. Stratis Doukas Archive, Department of Medieval and Modern Greek Studies, Aristotle University, Thessaloniki.

<sup>8</sup> A word used by Greeks in modern times to describe themselves and which indicates a quintessential 'Greekness' associated with the historical experiences of the Byzantine and Ottoman periods.

<sup>9</sup> Letter to family. 27.9.1927. Op. cit.

who was working in Havana and whose brother-in-law, a Mr Vitalis, was ‘well-established’ in Melbourne. On the ship to Crete he recognised Evangelos Kaïafas, a compatriot Asia Minor Greek on his way to Tanganyika to join his uncles on their plantations. In Port Said, he farewelled Kaïafas and a Greek businessman from Aivali on board a ship bound for South Africa. In the 1920s the Greek diaspora, both ‘mobilised’ and ‘proletarian,’ was on the move and the Suez Canal was one of its important routes.

The planned canal town of Port Said, where Doukas was forced to wait for ten days for the *Ville de Strasbourg*, made a favourable impression on him with its wide roads, parks, cinema and thriving shipping commerce. It engendered an optimistic mood, an enthusiastic regard for the Western colonial project which is clearly expressed when he visited the statue of Ferdinand de Lesseps, the famous French canal engineer: ‘Out at sea, in the distance toward the north, the smoke from the steamers sailing from Europe can be seen. The splashing waves fill you with joy and optimism. At the canal’s entrance, Lesseps stands tall on his pedestal pointing in a manly way to the world, the road to the south.’<sup>10</sup> As an example of Orientalist discourse at work, a year earlier a Greek teacher from Port Said had written about ‘the huge bronze statue of de Lessep which grandly points to the seafarers, the strait that separates two continents and joins the two seas’ (Papadopoulos 1927: 343), thus illustrating Said’s (1978: 95) point about the symbolic power of Orientalism that can generate a figure who literally cuts through the Orient.

As the *Ville de Strasbourg* sails through the Suez Canal, Alekos is struck by more than just the volume of shipping traffic:

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<sup>10</sup> Letter to family. 28.9.1927. Op. cit.

Each time I woke I kept seeing colossal ships illuminated by lights. This route, the shipping artery between the Far East and Eastern and Southern Africa, is the busiest on earth. The Indians send their spices, the South Africans their multifarious products, Australia its unique resources, to feed their hungry mother, Europe, who opened their eyes to a new and a thousand times more beautiful life.... One feels dizzy just thinking about what European civilisation has given to the world and mankind!<sup>11</sup>

The text is unambiguously connected to a Eurocentric discourse of colonialism and imperialist expansion. In the same letter Alekos describes in heroic vein the tribulations of Magellan, Cook and Tasman, those ‘great’ European seafarers who were ‘struggling to find new lands and asylum for fortune’s outcasts.’ Here we detect a distinct element from the exodus and expulsion myth so central to the foundational narrative of white settlement in Australia. Of interest in Alekos’ case is that the ‘story of the Fall and expulsion from Eden, and the story of Exodus from Egypt for the promised land’ that co-exist in the Australian national narrative, also echo elements from the historical narrative of the forced departure of Greeks from Asia Minor, although in the latter case it is the idea of expulsion from Eden that dominates (Curthoys 1999: 5, Mackridge 2003, Papailias 2005: 248-249). As we shall see, the two myths emerge interlocked in the narrative of settlement in Alekos’ letters home from Australia.

Alekos’ decision to migrate, while affected, as we saw in Chapter Three, by multiple factors such as his wartime injuries, refugee status and limited employment opportunities, also entailed a strong subjective aspect related to his personal dream of freedom and desire to travel. His belief in the rightness of his decision is now conveyed to Stratis in enthusiastic terms:

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<sup>11</sup> Letter to family. 10.10.1927. Op. cit.

You must go abroad as soon as possible, Stratis. You must breath the fresh air of the outside world. You can't imagine how much good it will do you. If you stay there you'll be worn down in the end. Don't listen to Velmos. Our duty is not only to our birthplace; one's duty lies in one's every step, on every bend of the road.<sup>12</sup>

These few lines refer to a wider discussion between them about the prospects and desirability of the Asia Minor Greek settling in Greece or moving on into the wider world. Touched by the kindness and concern of Mr Mavris, the secretary of the Greek Community in Port Said, Alekos felt vindicated in his adventurous undertaking: 'And then, Stratis, Velmos talks about revolution, when with each step you meet human kindness.'<sup>13</sup> This suggests that for Alekos the politics of revolution were more an emotional and personal identification than any broader theoretical understanding or program. The contention between Christian kindness and revolutionary anger, political passivity and action, remained an undercurrent in his writing for most of the interwar period. What did surface in terms of his politics was a strong sense of republicanism and justice. The latter emerged as an issue during the voyage which became an ordeal due to repeated food poisoning and arrogant treatment by the French officers with the result that Alekos agreed to represent his fellow passengers with a list of complaints to the captain.<sup>14</sup>

There are moments on Alekos' voyage when the strangeness of the physical world around him becomes a threatening presence. Like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the fear of the unknown, of something that appears to be beyond the signifying system of European language and thought, threatens the very identity of the travelling subject:

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<sup>12</sup> Letter to family. 1.10.1927. Op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Letter to family. 22.10.1927. Op. cit. Also interview P. Alexiou 1986 with Vassilis Stefanou who was a fellow passenger and delegate to the captain.

The sea has become empty and harsh. You are drawn towards your companions as if from instinct, as you feel the melancholy and unbearable weight of the sea's desolation bearing down on you. Here things are beyond words and thoughts. Everything around you is silent and large, impregnable to human emotion.<sup>15</sup>

The symbolist imagery of the 1920s and the 'imperial narrative' converge in the letters of the voyage in a feedback loop of perception and predisposition. Alekos' travel narrative, like the white settlers' reading of the Australian landscape and its Indigenous people, is not primarily governed by the actual contingencies of contact but has deep and prior roots in the European discourses of colonialist expansion and voyaging.<sup>16</sup> The diasporic subject is travelling on routes marked by imaginative texts already internalised through readings and education. Alekos' letters reveal the sense of the discovery of a world until then only imaginatively possessed.

The *Ville de Strasbourg* finally sailed into Fremantle on 4 November 1927. It had taken forty days from Piraeus and a long and rough voyage across the Indian Ocean. Alekos' first impressions are revealing as he is processed by the immigration authorities:

Then the passport *control* begins. British order. The customs officials take over the smoking-room. We enter two at a time. The attendant shows you where to proceed (in French and Greek). When the *contrôleur* sees in the reference section of my statutory declaration the words 'Macedonian colonisation' he turns with a smile and says, 'Do you speak English, sir?' 'Yes, sir.' 'Have you been to America?' 'No, sir. But I have been in the English service at Salonica.' 'Very well, sir.' The *conversation* ended there and I ran off with my companions into smiling Fremantle.... What can I say, boys?

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<sup>15</sup> Letter to family. 10.10.1927. Op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> See examples of similar themes in Australian writing in Curthoys (1999).

The omens indicate that the best thing I ever did was to come to this beautiful country. I'll battle superhumanly for a year or two. But I'll live the life I've dreamt about since I was eighteen.

Entry into 'white' Australia in 1927 was no mere formality. The health examination, ostensibly to check physical health, was an examination of racial presentation. Persons considered not to be white or of borderline racial acceptance were excluded through the administering of the 'dictation test' in 'a language likely to be effective under the Immigration Act' (Gilchrist 1997: 237).<sup>17</sup> In Perth, a multi-lingual Greek from Egypt, Peter Michaelides, was for years employed to 'meet immigrant ships arriving at Fremantle port and, whenever necessary, to administer the language dictation test' (Kanarakis 1997: 41).<sup>18</sup> Alekos, in both his letters and *To Struggle, To Youth* is strangely silent on the racial processing of immigrants. The doctor in the novel is a smiling and friendly man and the examination speedy: 'From the ship's papers it is clear that all the passengers are healthy' (Doukas 1953: 335). Alekos' description of the Custom's processing is also similarly characterised by an assumption of his own natural participation in a colonial project. His youthful optimism and idealised expectations of the society he is about to enter are manifest, as is his association of Australian migration with the Greek settlement of Asia Minor refugees in Northern Greece after 1922. There is an obvious identification in Alekos' mind between the two types of 'colonisation' and the role of new settlers in their development. In the case of the homeless refugees from Turkey, 'Macedonian colonisation' was a way to bolster the Greek ethnic component of the region. The Greek Exodus from Turkey (in reality an expulsion) was a recent trauma that Alekos had experienced. He knew also from experience that the refugee settlement program

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<sup>17</sup> Gilchrist (1999: 235-238) reports cases of Greek refugees from Kastellorizo between 1917-1918 whom the government wanted to refuse entry by applying the 'dictation test.'

<sup>18</sup> Michaelides worked part time in this capacity from 1903-1924 (Kanarakis 1997: 41). Kanarakis includes Michaelides in his nine portraits of outstanding Greek migrants in Australia and the dictation test is mentioned without comment on its significance in the policing of 'white Australia.'

in Northern Greece was certainly no paradise. But carrying his own trauma of exile and war, Alekos was keen to join this new Australian colonisation and settlement, charting his own journey of 'Exodus from Egypt for the promised land' (Curthoys 1999: 5).

### III

#### **Melbourne – city of colonial wonders**

Alekos' arrival in Melbourne in mid-November 1927 is recorded in one long letter in November 1927 that conveys his initial impressions.<sup>19</sup> Surprisingly there are no descriptions of coffee houses or clubs where Greeks congregated. His only Greek contact is Mr Vitalis who, as it turns out, *was* 'well-established' and well-connected; his circle included a bank manager and the Greek Consulate representative in Queensland. Through these contacts Alekos secured a fruit-picking job in the Victorian countryside.

The city of Melbourne struck a similar chord as did Port Said. Both are nineteenth century colonial cities based on a grid plan that, as Paul Carter (1987: 212) notes, 'represented a dream of utilitarian settlement,' a symbol of progress and advancement. Alekos' letter is a summary and commentary on his visits to the colonial public institutions of the city: National Museum, Zoo, Botanic Gardens, Royal War Exhibition Museum and Public Library. The letter not only extols the quantity of exhibits in the above institutions but is also deeply impressed by their classificatory organisation and power. Comparisons with Greece are negative; its museum is only a 'drop in the ocean' compared to the riches of the National

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<sup>19</sup> Letter to family. 25.11.1927. Op. cit.

Museum's collection. Alekos' enthusiasm for these sites suggests a certain affinity between the mercantile life and architecture of Aivali and the colonising systems of western expansion in the Eastern Mediterranean. Anderson (1991: 184) writes that institutions such as the museum, the map and the census 'illuminate the late colonial state's style of thinking about its domain' which was the 'totalizing classificatory grid' that was used to control people and resources. Foucault (1986: 23) argues that from the seventeenth century onwards the concept of space in the West changed to one of 'extension' as opposed to a more localised medieval notion of 'emplacement' and in the modern era the 'site is defined by relations of proximity between points or elements; formally, we can describe these relations as series, trees or grids.' Alekos' earlier negative attitude to cities changes when it comes to the modern colonial city, a project that seems to be in tune with his utopian readings and the enduring dispositions of his intellectual 'habitus.'

Alekos is quick to interpret signs of an egalitarian democracy in Australia. When he reads the signs in the Botanic Gardens which proclaim the gardens as the property of the people, he does so in a literal way. In his letter home he declares that these 'Democracts' respect and treasure their public institutions. The city's library, accessible twelve hours a day, with a large collection of ancient Greek texts along with their English translations, captures his enthusiasm from the start. His reading and study in the public libraries will become a regular pattern in his life in Australia.

Of course the long letter from Melbourne is one of first impressions, and for this, all the more vivid and exaggerated, although the first few years did constitute a period of constantly new and exciting impressions. In early December, after two weeks in Melbourne, Alekos was fruit picking in country Victoria. Over the next ten months he alternated between farm labouring

and café work in Shepparton, Bendigo and Mildura before heading for Sydney, from where, after a sixteen-day sojourn, he travelled by train to Baradine in North West NSW to work in a country café. The constant theme in the this first year is his dogged determination to increase his capital of forty pounds landing money and the repeated set-backs he experienced due to short-term employment and attacks of malarial fever which he had picked up in Northern Greece. Despite systematic efforts to break into more permanent 'English' employment, he worked primarily with compatriots in the diaspora network of Greek cafés and did occasional farm work.

#### IV

#### **Diaspora Discourse – the Greek guides**

What then were the Greek diaspora communities that Alekos found in Australia and what were the dominant discourses within them? In 1927, there were approximately 7,000 Greeks in Australia with a forty-year history of community formation that included the main secular community body (the *koinotita*), churches, schools, coffee houses, newspapers and cultural organisations. The numbers in each city were not large but the diasporic network was extensive, meeting the social, cultural, religious and employment needs of most Greeks, the majority of whom were engaged in the catering trades either as employers, self-employed or employees of their compatriots (Tsounis 1975: 18-25, 1987a).

For most of its short history in Australia, the Greek diaspora was aware of a degree of hostility and intolerance in the host society. During WWI, Greek shops had experienced violent mob attacks due to anti-Greek feeling fuelled by British Empire chauvinism (Gilchrist

1997: 19-29). The episodes, ostensibly over the Greek monarchy's pro-German sympathies, were also due to underlying xenophobia and racism. Greeks had learnt to live in this hostile social environment by carefully cultivating a code of conduct that sought to play down perceptions of foreignness and difference. At least up to World War II, Greeks constituted a social and occupational enclave that shielded them to a degree from discrimination. Few Greeks tried or succeeded in breaking out of this enclosed space, which operated in many respects as a self-contained economic and social expatriate colony. Holbraad (1977) identifies the dominant prewar outlook as stressing the 'foreigner' or 'guest' status of Greeks, with its corollary that they were first and foremost members of the Greek diaspora. Holbraad (1977: 140-142) stresses that the relationship between Greeks and Australians in this period is dominated by the existence of a marked inequality of power. In the community discourse the issue of power inequality and foreigner status overrode class differences. This is clearly articulated in the following editorial of the *Hellenic Herald* (12 February 1931): 'None of us can be viewed as a cut above the others.... Just as wealthy or poor, educated or illiterate, we are all one ethnic minority, so also naturalised or not, we are still foreigners never on the same footing with Australians' (Holbraad 1977: 142).<sup>20</sup>

A survey of the three immigrant 'guides' published by Greeks in Australia between 1916 and 1927 provides an insight into the dominant discourse of Greek communities in the first three decades of the twentieth century. The guides, G. Kentavros *Life in Australia* (1916),<sup>21</sup> O. Georgoulas *Brief Guide and Advisor for Greeks in Australia* (1919) and A. Papadopoulos *International Directory of 1927* (1927), abbreviated here as *LiA*, *BG* and *ID*, are genealogically related to a tradition of similar commercial guides, manuals and

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<sup>20</sup> All quotes of Greek newspapers by Holbraad are her translations.

<sup>21</sup> This is the first Greek-language book published in Australia. See Kanarakis (1987: 19).

encyclopaedias published by diaspora Greeks in Europe and the Ottoman Empire from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> Like their predecessors, they are a mixture of practical knowledge and ideological self-affirmation of a commercial class whose existence and development were based on the close nexus between commerce and progress.<sup>23</sup> The Greek guides in Australia all express this core outlook of the traditional Greek diaspora.<sup>24</sup> The words 'prosperity' and 'progress' operate as key terms in the diaspora narrative that emerges in the biographical portraits of 'well-established compatriots.'<sup>25</sup> In these guides, the diaspora biographical narrative typically consists of a young man from a rural village or town being literally 'seized' by a desire to migrate and follow the path of commerce. He finds his way to Australia, where after working for compatriots, he sets himself up in business, which once successful, allows him to support his family in the homeland to where, ideally, he returns a rich man, to die. The idea of return is encapsulated in the following:

The Greek is the one who becomes enthusiastic on hearing this [his country's] name, and his heart beats in expectation of that bright moment when he will be able to return to the family hearth, finally prosperous, embraced by father, mother, wife, brothers and sisters, friends and acquaintances, and finally buried in that sacred ground where he first saw the light of day. (*LiA*: 105)

This narrative cycle expresses the tension and contradiction between the diaspora as a permanent transnational existence and the return to the homeland, a *raison d' être* for diaspora

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<sup>22</sup> See Sklavenitis (1990). For a brief discussion of similar Greek-American guides see Laliotou (2004: 136, 178-179).

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of the life of a Greek diaspora merchant of the nineteenth century see Leontis (1997).

<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that though the Greeks in the pre-WWII period were predominantly shopkeepers and caterers, they shared a traditional outlook that held up the ideal of the 'pure' wholesale merchant as the highest form of mercantile activity. There is recognition of the difference between the Greek diaspora in Australia and the older tradition when Australia is cited as a place where a Greek can realise his dreams more than anywhere else no matter that this is not in 'elegant or aristocratic occupations' (*LiA*: 96).

<sup>25</sup> The stock phrase used in the *LiA* is 'συγκαταλέγεται σήμερον μεταξύ των καλώς αποκαταστημένων ομογενών' (he is counted among the well-established compatriots).

existence, and which, if it were to predominate, would logically put an end to the diaspora (Clifford 1997: 269-273).<sup>26</sup> *LiA* is full of examples of this conflicted narrative. In one instance it bemoans the fact that some compatriots have taken up new ways, abandoning their 'Greek upbringing' and forgetting 'their original purpose and incumbent obligation and duty' (*LiA*: 90). This, warns the writer, will lead to 'a complete distancing from the ancestral land' (*LiA*: 90). Yet the same writer warns that to plan to return too quickly is also a danger:

The greatest and most important reason, the obstacle to the full progress of Greeks, and something which condemns them to stagnancy, is the plan to return to Greece; such Greeks didn't come with the goal of setting up business from which they might live the rest of their life in comfort, but to grab whatever is at hand, and often with whatever means, and to depart; so that justifiably the critics here call us Hawks<sup>27</sup>. (*LiA*: 104-105).

The return to the homeland works mostly as an idealised dream, a sustaining myth rather than a realistic goal. The biographical note for Nikolaos Aronis (N. Aroney), one of the Australian Greek diasporas' wealthy 'fathers,' expresses this aptly: 'Mr N. Aronis is one of those fine offspring of our country, who having emigrated to a distant land, never ceases to live with his dream of the homeland' (*LiA*: 130).

As a dispersion of merchants, the Greek diaspora is historically linked with the Enlightenment ideas of progress, science and democracy, leading historically to modernity. In the Greek guides of Australia this link is visually underlined with the large numbers of photographs proudly displaying compatriots in stylish suits, in front of new motor cars, bicycles, modern

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<sup>26</sup> Such contradictory aspects arise through the "dilemmatic" nature of language' which requires that we pay attention to 'hidden meanings' in discourse (Parker (1992: 15, 23).

<sup>27</sup> The use of the opprobrious term 'hawks' for short-term immigrants by white Australian critics of the time conveniently effaced the massively 'hawkish' nature of English colonial occupation.

restaurants and shops. The spirit of the diaspora enterprise is with modernity, new technology (particularly American catering fads and equipment) and urban commerce.<sup>28</sup> *ID* (81) is filled with American news items praising the latest technological advances like the transatlantic wireless telephone. *LiA*, describing a Greek hotel and café-restaurant in a new five-storey building in Sydney, clearly identifies the Greek diaspora with a modern commercial and urban project:

Whoever looks upon this grand building cannot but admire the business spirit of the Greek who with no means in the foreign land, manages in a short space of time, to establish such a famous enterprise, and to contribute so obviously to the progress of metropolises. (*LiA*: 226)

In a very contemporary expression of diaspora entrepreneurship *BG* (7) advises that ‘Order and precision, economy of time and money, are also essential elements for the progress of man.’ By 1927, *ID* (61) has incorporated a new individualist American capitalist ethos into its diaspora discourse that, in some ways, is at odds with the older more communal ethos of mutual dependency and support: ‘There is no sentiment in business today. Deliver the goods! that is the call. To keep in line it is necessary to grow more proficient each year, or you will be marking time.’

On the issue of assimilationism and the maintenance of a diaspora identity the guides produce a double set of meanings. On one level there is an anxiety among the more successful Greeks, who were the ones funding and promoting the guides, about the need for their compatriots to conform, at least outwardly, to the host society’s dominant behavioural codes. Any cultural habits or behaviour that drew attention to Greeks in public needed to be curtailed:

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<sup>28</sup> For a detailed account of the Americanisation of Australian eateries by Greeks see Janiszewski (2003/2004).

Shouting, banging your hands on the table, gesticulating, walking in groups on the street, insolence, and dirty attire are rare and contemptible to the foreigners [i.e. the English]. Such behaviour is only to be observed in uncivilised peoples. This is in fact the reason that Australians hate foreigners, and not, as mistakenly held, because Australians are xenophobes. (*LiA*: 107-108)

The assimilationist discourse here is internally reproduced through a regime of self-censorship that covers language, gesture, dress and public deportment. However, while it instructs the adoption of a persona acceptable to the host society there is a competing Greek discourse at work which promotes the retention of an ethnic diaspora identity and the adoption of new ways as essentially an outward gesture. *LiA* (107) offers the following advice, suggesting a counter-strategy of camouflage and disguise: ‘Foolish is he who tries to impose his culture and customs on foreigners, whereas the sensible person is he who retains his culture while seeming to take on the foreign.’<sup>29</sup> There are many examples of such a counter-discourse that opposes British-Australian assimilationism, as the defiant, albeit essentialist, use of the racist term ‘dago’ in the editorial of the *National Tribune* of 3 March 1926 demonstrates:

The Greek does not forget the traditions of his fathers. He does not forget his language. He never loses his orthodox faith. Let them call him a dago as they will, the Greek will stay Greek in his soul and mind to his dying day. (Holbraad 1977: 147)

In regards to Australian history, the guides consistently present a colonial version in which Australia begins with European exploration and the founding of the colonies by Captain Cook. In its opening pages, *LiA* characteristically features a photograph of Cook’s statue in

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<sup>29</sup> See Holbraad (1977: 147) and Tsounis (1975: 47).

Sydney's Hyde Park which depicts the 'founding father' pointing majestically into the distance. All three guides provide a perfunctory summary of the past that essentially notes the discovery, economic growth and political organisation of the country. Aborigines are either ignored entirely, as in *ID*, or seen as a doomed and fading race, as in *LiA*, or treated as exotica in *BG*, which includes them in a separate chapter entitled no less 'Natives and Wild Animals.' *BG* (27) reproduces the dominant white view of the time: 'From the point of view of intellectual and, in general, human development and education the Natives of Australia are on the lowest rung whereas, in contrast, the natives of the islands around Australia and especially, New Zealand, are at a more advanced stage.' Interestingly, there is a correspondence between the idea of a white British 'founding father' and the Greek diaspora invocation of similar fathers, founders and benefactors. The idea of paternal protectors permeates the biographical narratives of the good diaspora businessman. The Kordatos brothers, who owned four oyster saloons in Northern NSW, are held up as examples: 'Truly moderate, they apply themselves diligently to their business, always behaving paternally towards their employees, who respect and hold them in high regard' (*LiA*: 140).

The promotion of paternalism in the diaspora discourse is inherently bound up with a tradition that aims to retain a certain social and economic autonomy within host societies. The ideological aim of such a view is to subordinate class and other internal differences in favour of a trans-territorial identity. The guides are essentially an expression of this, on both a moral and patriotic, as well as a practical economic level. *LiA* (105) stresses the idea that the loyalty of the Greek employee will pay off in the long run thus constituting 'moral and material capital.' *BG* (11) repudiates unionism as a threat to the diaspora community: 'If you have any complaints go directly to your boss and if [the problem] can't be overcome, leave the job. The rules of work demand obedience to your superiors, just as the army does.' A closer reading of

the guides reveals the existence of certain class signifiers, for example, the term ‘well-established compatriot’ which is code for shopkeeper or businessman. In the period we are surveying there appears in the discourse a certain latent ambivalence about the tension between class as opposed to diaspora loyalty, with the latter being dominant for ideological and practical reasons. Something of this underlying tension that has not yet fully surfaced in more ideological terms is expressed in the following serialised semi-autobiographical narrative in the *Hellenic Herald* 11 January 1934:

Amongst ourselves where we are divided into the bosses and the workers.... there is something like a secret bond between those who belong to each category.... Say that a boss is not pleased with one of his workers. That man will be branded and all doors will be shut to him.... Even if he moves to another State he might find that his bad name has travelled first. Again, a boss may get a bad reputation and then people will not like to work for him. (Holbraad 1977: 164)

Increasingly in the 1930s, this tension begins to be expressed in more articulate and politically self-conscious views about class differences amongst Greeks.

In *LiA* and *ID* there is some discussion about contemporary culture in Australia that suggests a wider diaspora discourse about the host society. *LiA* (42), while noting the existence of small non-British minorities, concludes that ‘the Australian is nothing if not an Englishman, transplanted paradoxically in a country antipodally different to his own.’ While the view of the British colonial identity of Australia might in one sense be the expression of an outsider’s cultural perception, it is important to note that such ideas were also in common circulation in a broader discussion about Australian identity (Curthoys 2003: 24). *LiA* (42) expresses the view that Australian culture is still in a formative stage, ‘a state of fermentation.’ This

suggests the tentative questioning of a permanent British dominance in the cultural sphere, pointing to the existence of tiny cracks in the dominant discourse around cultural identity.

The Greek guides are characterised by the view of Australian culture as young, robust, innocent, practical and hedonistic, a sort of utopian antithesis to the old world. G. Kentavros, touring northern NSW in 1914, where he meets travelling sales representatives and sees young women on horseback on country roads, is struck by the 'innocence and purity' of Australians (*LiA*: 282). In this discourse, 'Australians' are constituted as essentially physical and athletic people, a sporting and extroverted white race (*LiA*: 304). In *ID*, the writer A. Papadopoulos is so struck by what he perceives as the emancipated position of women in Australia that he includes an essay entitled 'The Freedom of Women in Australia.' Although the essay presents an ambivalent attitude towards this freedom, the general conclusion accords with the view of the culture as a healthy physical antidote to an older European pathology of repression and guilt (*ID*: 279-281).

It is important to note that the Greek diaspora discourse did not remain unchanged in the period under study. For example, after 1924, important changes occurred which affected diaspora institutions. The older traditional diaspora alliance of clergy and community leaders gave way to a new alliance between the Church and the Greek state in opposition to the independence of the Community which led to a political rift in the communities that has endured to our days.<sup>30</sup> The Asia Minor Catastrophe effectively changed Greek homeland-diaspora relations and in Australia two events heralded this change. One was the arrival in 1924 of the Archbishop, C. Knetes, of the newly-created Eastern Orthodox Church of Australia, under the reclaimed jurisdiction of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, and the other

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<sup>30</sup> For an account of this conflict see Tsounis (1971).

was the appointment in 1926 of the first official Greek Consul-General. The bid by the newly-allied Patriarchate and the Greek state to control the Greek diaspora communities in Australia not only led to a bitter conflict and resistance by the Community-minded shopkeepers it also produced a new element in the discourse of the communities with an emphasis on conformity to a conservative nationalist ideology of the Greek state that, no longer promoting irredentism, now stressed conformity to a new state nationalism. The Consul-General's own statement of purpose on arrival was ideologically explicit: 'in general we can say that the Greek Consulates along with the Greek churches constitute the Political and Religious Centres around which the overseas Greeks must revolve, for their true progress and prosperity' (*ID*: 293). The Church in turn used a language that invoked an older Byzantine authority that demanded its recognition by the secular Communities.<sup>31</sup> The reclaiming of the regions of the New World by the Patriarchate of Constantinople was clearly a compensatory political move following its loss of the Greek populations of Asia Minor and was claimed under an ancient religious pre-eminence of Constantinople within the Eastern Roman Empire which granted it the privilege to extend jurisdiction and consecrate bishops 'for the barbarian countries' (Knetes 1927: 403). In brief, the period after 1924 ushered in a new era in which Greek discourse in Australia became dominated by issues of authority, independence, ecclesiastical laws and political ideology.

In summary we can say that the dominant Greek diaspora discourse of the period is characterised by the following: the nexus between progress and commercial prosperity, modernity and technology; the contradictory ideas of return and life-long absence; a preference for the city and town; a veneration for 'founding fathers' and benefactors; an exhortation for diaspora over class loyalty; a deep acquiescence to European colonialism and

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<sup>31</sup> See text of the 1924 Patriarchal decree by Gregorius VII in Knetes (1927: 404-406).

its dispossession of the Indigenous people; a dual response to the pressures of assimilationism which stressed internal resistance and external conformity to public codes of behaviour; a unified support of the secular institution of the Community, at least up to 1924, and a view of Australian culture as liberal, hedonistic, practical and athletic.

## V

### **On the Tracks of Diaspora – country Australia**

In early December Alekos was picking apricots on a farm outside of Shepparton in the Goulbourn Valley near the Murray River. The fruit block was owned by a Jewish immigrant from Palestine. In the town, Doukas was befriended by a Greek café owner, Peter Brown and his Australian wife who offered him hospitality and support in those first months. He writes to his family that he is ‘as strong as an ox and rosy like the apricots I’m picking.’<sup>32</sup>

Alekos persisted with his agriculturalist plans and his letters were optimistic about his prospects. He applied to the Doukie Agricultural School to work as an assistant in the poultry section but was unsuccessful. His interest in farming, driven as it was by a scientific interest and a romantic view of life on the land, shared something of the spirit of the Australian project of land settlement which aimed to foster a yeomanry class of small farmers. Its last phase was the veteran rural settlements of the interwar years (Lake 1987). In the late nineteenth century such schemes were often utopian, ‘anti-urban and anti-capitalist’ in orientation (Walton 2003: 8). Alekos’ letters express the belief that the small farmer is an

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<sup>32</sup> Letter to family. 17.12.1927. Op. cit.

essential element of the new settler society. In writing about Bendigo, the site of the nineteenth-century gold rush, Alekos believed that it had a great future in ‘tomato, poultry and livestock.’<sup>33</sup>

After an attack of malarial fever, Alekos reluctantly turned to café work with another compatriot in Shepparton, a short term employment that proved to be onerous and unhappy. His first experiences with his compatriots were mixed: friendship, kindness and support from some and harsh miserable treatment by others. His reaction however to his first Greek boss reveals a more general and negative attitude towards his countrymen: ‘He’s incredibly penny-pinching, like most of the brutish Greeks in Australia. The worst part of the *romaic* heap<sup>34</sup> is to be found here. The brutes whinge that there are no jobs, while they laze about playing poker and gambling in the coffee houses.’<sup>35</sup> Of course, in the ‘*romaic* heap’ an Asia Minor Greek might well consider himself near the top, his education and cosmopolitan cultural identity setting him apart from his more rural and less educated compatriots. What is clear is Alekos’ continued rejection of ‘Mammon’ or commerce as a goal in life. The ‘penny-pinching’ habits of the shopkeeper and café owner tended to raise his hackles. In this he shared a certain solidarity with the other, mainly young, Greek immigrant employees. They were in a sense hostages of a small and confined ethnic labour market where wages were depressed, and economic reward was often deferred in a diasporic system in which mutual loyalty and obligation were expected to lead to loans or partnerships in a future business. Such dependency and patronage was bound to generate resentment and friction.

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<sup>33</sup> Letter 27.6.1928. Op. cit.

<sup>34</sup> ‘heap’: In the original expression Doukas coins a composite word *himopasta* which literally means mixed pulp or juices combined with the idea of a social or character type. The overall meaning is derogatory and refers to the diverse origins of Greeks at the time.

<sup>35</sup> Letter to family. 31.1.1928. Op. cit.

Alekos' anti-gambling attitude is not surprising given that his brother Dimitros' gambling had helped bankrupt the family in Greece. Gambling often figured in discussions of the social problems Greeks faced at the time and both *LiA* and *BG* regard it as one of the dangers posed to the diaspora goals of progress, prosperity and return to the homeland.

Alekos' negative view of his countrymen is expressed in his pro-assimilationist attitude, expressed surprisingly soon after his arrival: 'The Greeks. Vile, lost to Greece, unorganised, of the lowest order, almost without exception. Fortunately, they will be assimilated quickly, and thus purified in the furnace of a people whose national identity is still being forged.'<sup>36</sup> Again, we detect a sense of superiority, and, it appears, a low estimation of the community and cultural life of his compatriots. The willingness to intellectually embrace cultural assimilation is premised on a belief in the superiority of English culture and the progressive nature of Australia's settler society. It involves a certain Anglophilia which Alekos certainly had from his reading and contact with the English in Thessaloniki. His views of Australian institutions also reflect an admiration for liberal British traditions. His pro-assimilationist outlook stems primarily from the position of an educated Greek who sees his countrymen as deficient in both education and culture. Relevant to this outlook is the fact that as a refugee Alekos had undergone an experience of deracination, contrary to any assumption that resettlement in Greece might have reinforced a more solid Greek national identity.

As we have seen, refugees often reacted to the hostility of the native-born Greeks with a sense of their own separate identity which was at times expressed in superior terms. In Alekos this tension sometimes surfaced as a bitter and angry rejection of Greece as a homeland. In his letters from Australia there is an absence of nationalist sentiment or reaction to the new and

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<sup>36</sup> Letter to family. 24.12.1927. Op .cit.

often hostile cultural environment. The Greeks in Australia, while bonded by a common language and national consciousness, were by no means homogenous in their experience of Greece as a nation-state. Unlike the Greek newspapers and guides, Alekos expresses a desire for assimilation and to become the cultural 'other.' He quickly realised, however, that there were barriers to his entry into the 'English' society due to language, qualifications, unemployment and prejudice. His letters exhibit a degree of self-reflection that suggests an awareness of the contradictory nature of his position:

A fine and bright future for young people. It's not a country to make a little money and leave. There's a good future in the countryside. However, the best age is eighteen to twenty or twenty-two. An age that doesn't resist assimilation. The reaction to unassimilable foreigners is enormous. You can't speak in a foreign language without being abused. They even look on English migrants with disapproval.<sup>37</sup>

There is a clear disparity in Alekos' views between the inevitability and speed of the 'furnace' of assimilation and the obstinate fact of 'unassimilable foreigners.' Strangely, he writes about assimilation as a detached observer, as though he himself is not one of those 'unassimilable foreigners.' The contradictory nature of his position lies in his intellectual consent to a powerful and hostile discourse while he simultaneously notes first-hand observations of racist attacks against people like himself. In addition, his subjective consciousness operates through a Greek discourse and education. There are moments in his letters where he reveals an insight into the cultural processes at work and a differentiated position from the dominant racialised discourse of the time. For example, he writes about the 'fanatical attacks on foreigners' in the daily press and the use of a caricatured black African as a figure of threat to the country.<sup>38</sup> The Australians, he writes, are 'children at heart, and let's not forget that they are a human

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

mass that is going through a dangerous transitional period from the condition of a colony to a nation and an homogenous people.<sup>39</sup> These excerpts, apologetic and condoning of racism, nevertheless reveal a certain power in Alekos' texts which name acts of racism and xenophobia, as well as practices of assimilationism and nation building. In common with the Greek guides and press, his letters suggest the existence in the Greek community of a weak, but as yet undeveloped, counter-discourse around issues of assimilationism and racism.

In Alekos' letters the exodus narrative features strongly and he sees everywhere the Edenic nature of the land. This extends to white society itself which he contrasts with the 'glum and pensive' Europeans.<sup>40</sup> His view of society draws on a model of 'geographical medicine' that equates health and mental state to geography (Anderson 2002: 31-35). 'Free relationships resting on a solid foundation, the air, the sun, sports. This is forging a fantastic people down here.'<sup>41</sup> The passage illustrates Alekos' thinking about Australia as an antidote to the tired and fallen metropolis, a view, as we saw, characteristic of the Greek diaspora discourse. The land itself is invested with an essential Edenic quality that the Indigenous people once enjoyed but now sadly had lost. Writing home soon after his arrival, Alekos comments that he had not yet seen any 'blackfellows' who, 'poor fellows,' have the right to travel free on the trains: 'This is all that remains for them of their lost paradise.'<sup>42</sup> Alekos had absorbed a great deal of the white colonial mythology of an Eden undeserved by the original inhabitants, an Eden that for the white settler society nevertheless remained an alluring chimera, and only approached in so far as its potential to yield mineral and agricultural wealth was realised.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Letter 29.7.1928. Op. cit.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Letter to family. 20.3.1928. Op. cit.

While the pioneering narrative is totally absent in the Greek diaspora discourse, it is a strong presence in Alekos' letters which celebrate the ceaseless, heroic efforts of the pioneer farmer. It certainly has resemblances with the discourse of the economically dominant Greeks in the Ottoman Empire whose sense of 'mission' included a cultural as well as an economic goal of developing a stagnant space (Scopetea 2003: 176). The refugee rural settlements in Northern Greece were also premised on the idea of the development of a stagnant and empty(-ied) land. Alekos' descriptions of the Australian countryside repeatedly focus on the task of land clearing: 'Vast forests of eucalypt and pepper trees await their death from the woodcutter's mattock endlessly clearing so that orchards can be planted.'<sup>43</sup> The two strands of the pioneer narrative that Curthoys (1999: 6-8) notes, the broad inclusive story of the small farmer in the bush battling against flood, drought and fires, and the itinerant unionised outback worker, also appear in Alekos' chronicle of his journeys through country Australia. The itinerant is a picturesque 'vagabond,' a 'regular carefree sparrow' who puts into practice the Sadducees' saying of 'Eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'<sup>44</sup> This romantic view of the Australian rural labourer of the time, the 'swagman,' corresponds to Alekos' image of the literary figure of the vagabond in whom he invests a hedonistic, practical and carefree sensibility. The discursive connection with a broader Greek view appears in Papadopoulos' (1927: 279) essay in which white Australians are seen as Epicurean in nature, seeing 'life naked without excuses and conditions.' He finishes the essay with a verse almost identical to Alekos' rendering of the Sadducees' philosophy:

In the end, fanatic followers of  
eat, drink and be happy for as long as you live,  
For this is your lot on earth. (Papadopoulos 1927: 281)

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<sup>43</sup> Letter to family. 31.1.1928. Op. cit.

<sup>44</sup> Letter to family. 20.3.1928. Op. cit.

This view of the Australian worker, at heart the diametrical opposite of the traditional diaspora code of patience, frugality and capital accumulation, has endured over time in variant forms amongst Greeks in Australia. Its persistence is perhaps related to its role as an idealised image against which migrant hard work and frugality is measured and vindicated.

Alekos' letters are however more in tune with the hardships and triumphs of the small farmers. For example, the campfires of the itinerant workers, although 'picturesque' are 'sometimes paid for dearly by the farmers' with bush fires.<sup>45</sup> His descriptions of the pioneer's struggle abound in mythical interpretation:

Wherever you set foot you see man's struggle against the bush. The dark eucalypt surrounds small cultivated areas as though lying in wait to revenge itself on this human work. Dark, titanic and unrelenting, it awaits the *settler's* (a settled immigrant) axe. It has lost its beloved children the *blackfellows* (the autochthonous blacks), its companions for so many silent centuries. Now it looks in disbelief at the beautiful race of the Pelasgians (*pelas – gis* = those coming) who have destroyed its black children who will be soon lost altogether.<sup>46</sup>

It is worth noting here how the different elements of the narrative slide from one another in mutual interrelationship and justification: the constant threat of the elements faced by the pioneers; the relentless task of land clearing; the identification of Aborigines with the flora; the view of the Indigenous people as a doomed race and finally the triumphant inevitability of European settlement. The pioneer story overlaps with the idea of the bush as a threatening presence, the settler (invariably conceived as a male) projecting his fear of a strange and

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

threatening Other onto the landscape. In a process of colonialist reversal, the bush and not the settler, becomes ‘dark, titanic and unrelenting’ as it awaits the assault of the axe. Similarly, the description of the white settlers as ‘Pelasgian’,<sup>47</sup> the ancient Greek word for the indigenous pre-Hellenic people in the Eastern Mediterranean, reverses the ancient situation, thereby emphasising the inevitability of settlement at the expense of the indigenous.

Commenting on how the British colonial narrative typically ‘displaces’ the oppressive role of coloniser onto the landscape, Moreton-Robinson (2005: 26) concludes that ‘the values and virtues of achieving white possession can be valorised and Indigenous dispossession can be erased; the mythology of peaceful settlement perpetuated and sustained.’ The myth of ‘peaceful settlement’ and the doomed Aboriginal race were largely unquestioned propositions in the 1920s.

Just as land clearing is the necessary process for cultivation, the plough also assumes a symbolic role in the idea of the domestication of the land. The belief in the civilising influence of the plough is ingrained in the European view of the Australian continent, and in a logically circular fashion, is used to justify white occupation. Describing a walk in the bush outside of Bendigo with the café owner Mr Polydorou, Alekos writes about the lack of grass in the forest. His companion turns to him and says ‘innocently’: ‘How can you expect a land to have grass if since time immemorial it hasn’t seen the plough?’<sup>48</sup> This echoes the words of the white explorer Major Mitchell in his 1836 travels through the Goulbourn Valley and north to the Murrumbidgee: ‘In our journey, we had passed through a region larger than Great

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<sup>47</sup> Alekos’ etymological explanation is idiosyncratic. Babinotis (1998) etymological explanation states that the word’s original meaning is unknown and that its connection to *pelags-koi*; with the meaning of ‘inhabitants of the plains’ is also doubtful.

<sup>48</sup> Letter 29.7.1928. Op. cit.

Britain, equally rich in point of soil, and, in many parts, lying ready for the plough, as if prepared by the Creator for the industrious hands of the Englishmen' (Long 1903: 136).<sup>49</sup>

It would be a mistake to overestimate the solidity of the positions suggested by the narratives in Alekos' letters. For example, the view of the land as harsh, threatening and sinister does not preclude the expression of a contrary Edenic view in which the colonial settler's clearing, cultivation and irrigation turn the wilderness into a paradise. This is how Alekos sees the Goulbourn Valley whose dry land had been 'cured by this country's most wonderful irrigation works, transforming formerly dry and barren parts into a paradise.'<sup>50</sup>

Just as these narrative elements slide and merge with each other, they also constitute opposites and negations. The orderly rural society that Alekos observed was capable of bearing a dark underbelly. He was particularly struck and disturbed by an event that occurred in Bendigo in July 1928. The event, the multiple murder by a farmer of his wife, mother and farm workers, puzzled Alekos with its inexplicable nature.<sup>51</sup> His description of it as an 'Aeschylean tragedy' and as an event 'shrouded by a heavy and impervious veil of mystery' suggests that dark uncanny forces were at work which transcended normal logic.<sup>52</sup> His description of the event fits the analytical paradigm suggested by Freud's notion of the 'uncanny' (Freud 1919: 240-247). Here are all the characteristics of *heimlich* (the familiar and intimate) are to be found in the family which had recently cleared out a new pristine farm. However the *heimlich* perversely reveals the existence of its opposite, the *unheimlich* (the 'uncanny,' the mysterious and hidden) which emerges in the sudden inexplicable act of

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<sup>49</sup> C. R. Long's *Stories of Australian Exploration* was one of the few books about Australia that Alekos owned in Greece before he migrated.

<sup>50</sup> Letter 29.7.1928. Op. cit.

<sup>51</sup> The event is reported in detail in the *Bendigo Advertiser* 20 & 21.7.1928.

<sup>52</sup> Letter 28.7.1928. Op. cit.

violence destroying life, family and home. The notion of the 'uncanny' is applicable to colonialist culture as the surfacing of the inherent violence of occupation (on one level 'familiar and old-established') but which has been 'alienated.... through the process of repression' (Freud 1919: 241). It is characteristic of Alekos that such an event drew his interest, its strange and haunting resonance prompting him to see it as 'strong material for study.'<sup>53</sup> In discussion with Stratis, his thinking went beyond journalistic reportage to fictional treatment. Using classical mythological references, he saw the event as divine retribution against the white settlers, although, as elsewhere, the issue of Aboriginal political resistance is elided and it is only nature, a romantic abstraction, that takes revenge for the loss of its 'black children.'<sup>54</sup>

What is interesting in Alekos' case, is the fact that a Greek migrant in this period was so preoccupied with such themes. In this regard, Alekos was somewhat unusual in the Greek diaspora, his primary interests being intellectual: the study of Australian history, geography, literature, literary translations and the documenting of experience in literary form. His letters, which repeatedly refer to a serious interest in writing, were often the first drafts of texts, sometimes published decades later. After his initial months away, most of Alekos' letters were addressed to Stratis and continued their discussions of the previous years. In fact most of his literary output and epistolary chronicles need to be read in a dialogical way as a life-long conversation with his brother, a report back home. For quite a few years, Stratis remains his primary audience, his one intimate reader. It is Stratis who occasionally selects and edits his brother's writing and places them in literary magazines in Greece, thus indirectly reaching a wider readership.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

Alekos' interest in Australian history went beyond the occasional paragraph or short history sections found in the Greek guides. Beginning as letters to Stratis in 1928, he wrote an essay-length history 'Unknown Lands: Australia and Australians' which was later published in serial form in the Greek newspaper *Ditiki Thraki* in 1932.<sup>55</sup> The essay is a potted history, very likely a paraphrasing and translation of his reading of popular histories available in the 1920s. The essay devotes more than half its space to the chronological account of the European 'discovery' and mapping of Australia, which is presented as an heroic story in which 'civilisation approached closer to Australia which was lost in the loneliness of the ocean.'<sup>56</sup> Pride of place is given to Captain Cook 'the pinnacle of world seafaring.'<sup>57</sup> The establishment of the colonies and their subsequent histories are listed in a brief chronology. In regards to the White Australia policy, Alekos explains the prohibition of non-white races as 'preserving it [Australia] as reserve land for the white race.'<sup>58</sup> He believes that this had avoided the 'sudden mixing of races without constraint' which had caused such 'horrific sorrows' in the U.S. and which would bring about 'destruction and retrogression.'<sup>59</sup> He looks to 'uninfluenced Science' to lead the way in dealing with the issue of the 'sudden mixing of races.'<sup>60</sup> The union movement is seen as a triumph of gradual reform and social progress, a social democratic view that significantly goes beyond the diaspora discourse that tended to see unionism and regulated conditions as undesirable constraints.<sup>61</sup> The essay's treatment of Australians as a people (assumed as white) is not dissimilar to that of the Greek guides. There is an emphasis on the physicality of the culture, the innocence and childlike nature of the people and an

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<sup>55</sup> Published in twelve instalments in *Ditiki Thraki* ('Western Thrace') a bi-weekly newspaper in Alexandroupolis between July and August 1932.

<sup>56</sup> Instalment Four. Op. cit.

<sup>57</sup> Instalment Eight. Op. cit.

<sup>58</sup> Instalment Nine. Op. cit.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Instalment Ten. Op. cit.

admiration for what are seen as liberal institutions and social practices.<sup>62</sup> Australia is seen as democratic and liberal society where ‘social discrimination, which wears down other peoples, is unknown’ and where the formal class difference of Europe are absent.<sup>63</sup> The following quote succinctly summarises the essay’s analysis:

Australians as a people are not lagging, they are a long way ahead as pioneers of human progress. An aid in this, is the excellent climate, the riches of the land, the security afforded by the British omnipotence and the homogeneity of its population.<sup>64</sup>

The manuscript for this essay confirms views that Alekos held in this period regarding colonial settler society and which included assumptions of nineteenth century biological racism and Social Darwinism. It reflects the influence of the older dominant British aspect of colonial society rather than the emergent Australian republican nationalism. In the letters, Alekos’ comments about the racial and cultural aspects of British Australians are clearly framed within a Social Darwinian analysis. The ‘Anglo-Saxon race’ has evolved in Australia from blue eyes to ‘light brown hair and eyes’ and a ‘playful character.’<sup>65</sup> His views on race, progress and civilisation are cast in the same mould. After visiting the National Museum in Melbourne, he had written that ‘They [the Aborigines] are the ugliest race of mankind and on the lowest rung of development.’<sup>66</sup> This view is almost identical to the view of *BG* and shares with the latter the view that Pacific Islanders are more ‘advanced’ than Aborigines. Alekos’ Social Darwinism translates at times into the political belief that Europeans, and in particular

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<sup>62</sup> Instalment Eleven. Op. cit.

<sup>63</sup> Instalment Twelve. Op. cit.

<sup>64</sup> Instalment Eleven. Op. cit.

<sup>65</sup> Letter 29.7.1928. Op. cit.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

the British, are the chosen pioneers of progress and civilisation. Describing an ethnological exhibit that contains decorated skulls from New Guinea he writes:

Poor mankind, from where did you begin? How much you had to go through to get to where you are today? And still, a thorny road awaits you! Rest a little and go forward; this is ordained by a higher fate. Harsh and dark necessity howls behind you. Go forward, ill-fated descendants of tragic Io.<sup>67</sup>

Alekos' reference to the mythical figure of Io as a maternal ancestor of mankind derives from his reading of nineteenth-century romantic discussions of Prometheus as a symbol of awakened knowledge and a forerunner of Christian monotheism.<sup>68</sup> As we saw in Chapter Three, this religious interpretation was amalgamated with an evolutionary narrative to justify the 'progress' of Western man's conquering of nature. In Australia, the same logic is applied to the goals of colonial settlement and we see in Alekos' writing the power of the Social Darwinian metaphors of progress, rungs on a ladder, the ever-forward movement of the more powerful, the survivors, driven on by 'harsh and dark necessity.'

On 31 July 1928 Alekos boarded a train from Bendigo to Melbourne and from there continued on a twenty-hour journey to Sydney where his friends, fellow passengers from the *Ville de Strasburg*, were waiting for him. Working in the catering trade, they made enquiries for a vacant position for him. In the meantime, Alekos explored Sydney, spending most of his time in the Natural History Museum. His main interest was in the section on Captain Cook whom he admired as a great historical figure. Opposite the museum, in Hyde Park, Cook's statue stands 'with one hand holding a mariner's telescope, and his right hand raised, as in

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<sup>67</sup> Letter 9.8.1928. Op. cit.

<sup>68</sup> It reflects his reading of Giorgios Kalosgouros (1921a & b), the romantic scholar and Hegelian thinker. See Chapter Five.

ecstasy, prayer or elation, gazing out towards the enchanting Botany Bay.<sup>69</sup> As an example of the colonial discourse at work within the Greek diaspora, Alekos' description here duplicates exactly in words the photograph of Cook's statue that frames, through its strategic placement in the opening pages, the 1916 guide *LiA*.

Following his 'Plutarchian' interest in the parallel lives of Cook and the French explorer La Pérouse, Alekos visited the Sydney suburb named after the latter.<sup>70</sup> In the late winter afternoon his mind was filled with historical imaginings.

In a while the sun will set behind the mountains of the great land of Australia, to come and grant a new day to you [in Greece]. All around the mystery of the 'eventide' covers everything. Shadows begin to wander about the freshly tamed land. They are the shadows of the black people who have been lost; they are the shadows of the Dutchmen who first stepped on these enchanted shores. Or are they perhaps shadows of the convicts on the English galleys, those chained unfortunates, who came, or were brought, to tame this wild land?<sup>71</sup>

The language, jotted down in letter form, abounds in the imagery of colonialist domestication of a wild land and a savage people. In the text the 'black people' become the subject of the intransitive verb 'lost,' and not the object of acts of killing, maiming and dispossession. They are insubstantial, mere shadows. Revealingly, the narratives of exodus and expulsion are here indecisively juxtaposed, the convicts 'came' (to a paradise) or were 'brought' (banished from their home). Alekos continues his letter with revealing colonialist tropes of triumph, domination and permanence.

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<sup>69</sup> Letter 9.8.1928. Op. cit.

<sup>70</sup> La Pérouse led a French naval expedition in the Pacific and anchored in Botany Bay in 1788 only five days after British First Fleet led by Captain Arthur Phillip had arrived to begin settlement of the continent.

<sup>71</sup> Letter 10.8.1928. Op. cit.

Tasman, La Pérouse, Cook, Phillip. Their shadows, with a crown of martyrdom on their pale brow, stand like guardian angels against the primeval, dark and hostile shadows. Do not be afraid, youthful people, whose lot it is to have won this beautiful and rich land. This land of the Murray and the beautiful beaches of New Holland are now yours forever. Your strong paternal and noble British race stands as your protector. Go forward, always...'

After six days, Alekos travelled by train to Baradine, a remote farming town in NSW, to work in a compatriot's café. In his next letter home, after ten months in the country, he remained optimistic about the future, the romantic agriculturalist dream of retreat still very much alive:

If God grants my wish to be healthy for a year of regular work, I intend to return to Bendigo and start a poultry farm with my friend Yiannis,<sup>72</sup> whom I've written to you about. In the first year we'll put all our money into livestock. One of us will work to support the other, then in the second year when the farm is established, we'll settle down in our hut.<sup>73</sup>

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The regime of White Australia is the key to an understanding as to why Greek diaspora discourse is implicated in the colonialist discourse of settlement. My survey of the former shows clearly that these two discourses share a common space, and that acquiescence to colonial possession of the country underpins Greek diaspora discourse. Their differences lie in other areas that are related to their different histories and formations, and the social

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<sup>72</sup> Yiannis Smyrnas, a fellow passenger on the *ss Ville de Strasbourg*.

<sup>73</sup> Letter 30.8.1928. Op. cit.

practices associated with diaspora activities and survival in Australia. In addition to the foundational myths of white colonial settler society, I have included in my discussion the narrative of assimilation, which Curthoys (1999: 1) omits, although she acknowledges that the major national narratives are inextricably linked to persistent ‘racialised discourses.’

Assimilationist discourse and practice are central to a discussion of both Indigenous Australians and other non-white groups, including Southern Europeans who were persistently viewed as an undesirable presence within White Australia due to their perceived racial inferiority and contamination.<sup>74</sup> Mainstream views on immigration and nation at the time are not simply a neutral ‘melting pot’ model of assimilation but are structurally related to a colonialist eugenicist belief that undesirable traits in the nation will eventually be washed out, whitened in effect, through the predominance of the British stock.<sup>75</sup> Assimilationist discourse therefore needs deeper analysis, both for its legitimization of violent practices towards the Indigenous people but also for its effects on other groups, keeping in mind always that the hierarchical functioning of its racial typology offered the promise of some measure of social inclusion to non-British immigrant groups prepared to submit to the racial regime of White Australia.

My survey of Greek diaspora discourse is complicated by the tracking of a subject voice of an immigrant and his narrative of life in Australia. Alekos Doukas’ narrative does not simply reflect the Greek discourse in the communities but in varying degrees draws on elements of this while also drawing on the dominant British Australian discourse. His narrative tangents and links provide a cautionary warning to us to avoid the assumption of unitary representations of discourse in this historical field. A comparison of the narratives of the

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<sup>74</sup> See Pugliese (1995b) for a discussion of Lyng ([1927]1935) whose Oxford University publication expresses a biological racist view of settlement and migration in Australia.

<sup>75</sup> For a discussion of ‘assimilation colonialism’ see Anderson (1993/1994).

white settler society, the Greek diaspora communities and Alekos' own letters and writings lead to an array of discursive interrelationships, discontinuities and paradoxes.

In this study of a 'located' historicised subject we observe within the Greek diaspora of Australia the unusual figure of an uprooted Asia Minor Greek intellectual searching for a new society and identity for himself. His subsequent experiences and intellectual pursuits offer an interesting long-term view of the transitions and fluctuations in the Greek discourse of settlement in Australia in the first half of the twentieth century.