IN BYRON'S SHADOW

MODERN GREECE IN THE ENGLISH & AMERICAN IMAGINATION

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A Hard Place to Write About

"The golden ages of ambrosia and brigandage are past." In 1935, Kenneth Matthews, with some exaggeration, announced the end of both the Greece of Homer and the Greece of Byron (*Greek Salad* 98). The "last klepht" became a common theme in the years after the war. For example, on a road in Arcadia in 1939, Dorothy Ratcliffe met a grandly dressed Greek. "Are you the last of the Klephts?" she asked. "No, Kyria," he answered, "it is you motorists who are the Klephts today, but unlike the Klephts of yore who robbed the rich so that they might give to the poor, your passing by does not benefit the poor" (99).[1] Ratcliffe learned, to her disappointment, that the last klepht had died about twenty years earlier, just as the Great War ended.

A new conception of Greece, one not based on classical or Romantic texts, required some contact with the country and its people. Between the wars, at the time that Paul Fussell in *Abroad* declared that the Mediterranean was in vogue, Greece, to use E. M. Forster's comment about Cavafy, was "at a slight angle to the universe." For Americans, Greece was the lost country for both the Lost Generation and the generation after that. Eliot, cummings, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Moore, and Robert Lowell never saw the Acropolis. Faulkner spent two weeks in Greece in 1957; Pound and Langston Hughes visited briefly in 1965; and Elizabeth Bishop took a cruise in Greek waters in 1979. Edith Wharton sailed the eastern Mediterranean in 1926, yet the only work inspired by that trip was the story set in Crusader Cyprus, "Dieu d'Amour" (1928).

Greece had only slightly more literary travelers from Britain in the 1920s and 1930s. Of Corfu, now one of Greece's most popular destinations, William Plomer wrote in 1933: "Visitors to the island are not numerous, although it lies on the direct route between Brindisi and Athens, and this is perhaps because nothing is done to attract them" (*Child of Queen Victoria* 151). In *Illyrian Spring* (1935) by Ann Bridge (Mary O'Malley), the heroine plans to go to Greece but leaves the boat on the Dalmatian coast. "Greece for me is like the end of the rainbow," she says, "It's become a sort of bogey, a mirage" (336).

Greece became a bit of a bogey for those who went as well. Upon his return to England in 1951, Louis MacNeice averred: "Having lived in Athens for a year and a half, I find it a hard place to write about" (Coulton 115). So did H.D., the only noteworthy American poet to stand on Greek soil between the wars and the author of numerous poems with classical Greek settings and themes. Barbara Guest, in her biography of H.D., suggested that there is a feeling of "estrangement" in the poet's letters and notes about a trip to Greece in 1920: "There is no spontaneous reaction to the setting of her poetic inspiration" (124). The visits of Arnold Bennett and Norman Douglas led to two rather forgettable works (*Mediterranean Scenes* [1928] and *One Day* [1929]), while neither Osbert Sitwell, Sacheverell Sitwell, nor Evelyn Waugh offered any fresh perspectives.[2] With the "Auden generation"—Christopher Isherwood, Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender, John Lehmann, and William Plomer—the situation improved, but only Plomer published works about modern Greece before the Second World War.

One reason that "the cult of heliotropy," to use Fussell's phrase, missed modern Greece in the 1920s may have been that the country seemed permeated by a sense of loss and tragedy, the knowledge that, as a popular song later announced, the Golden City was "Istanbul not Constantinople."[3] The heroine of French Strother's novel *Maid of Athens* (1932) tells how refugees from the Pontus were relocated in Macedonia, an area where walnuts did not grow wild: "These poor people looked and looked, and not a nut could they find. They could not understand it. Who ever heard of woods that had no walnuts in them? There were always walnuts in Pontus! How could one get on in a country that had no walnuts? They were almost in despair. Gathering walnuts in the fall was something they had always done, and they felt lost when they could not find them" (188). In the decade after Smyrna, English and American writers in search of the Mediterranean experience, like the Pontic refugees, could not find what they were looking for in Greece. They turned to the French Riviera, Italy, Spain, and even Dalmatia.

Several authors tried to recuperate the events of 1922–1923 as a boon for Greece and to extend the nineteenth-century narrative of modern Greek regeneration. Francis Yeats-Brown declared, "Greece had received a revivifying blood transfusion [from the refugees] after her defeat in Asia Minor, and today Athens is a city of 800,000 people, with a great future" (305). Henry Morgenthau asserted, "The flight of the Greeks from Asia Minor was the birth pangs of the Greek republic. Out of their bitter tribulations has arisen a new nation, welded by suffering into a closer bond of union, and destined, I believe, to revive in great measure the ancient glories of that rocky land where Western civilization was born" (*I Was Sent to Athens* [1929] 5).

Not everyone agreed with Morgenthau that the Asia Minor Disaster would lead to the regeneration of Hellas. But most concurred that, in their

modern tragedy, the Greeks had approached the *pathei mathos*, "learning by suffering," prominent in Attic tragic drama. For the Greek, Morgenthau went on to observe, "Tragedy has been another familiar fact of life down through all the ages of his history. He has been acutely conscious of it but has never yielded to despair" (300). Up until 1922, the unfortunate events of modern Greek history, such as the suicide of the Suliot women, the massacre at Scio in 1822, and the explosion of the Arkadi monastery on Crete in 1866, had been placed in a narrative of national rebirth, as Thermopylaes on the way to a final victory. With the end of the idea of progress and the hope to expand Greek territory, the defeat of 1922 was perceived through the prism of ancient tragic drama, as a modern version of, for example, Euripides' *The Trojan Women* with an entire nation as the cast. Modern Greece had always been what Lawrence Durrell said of Epidaurus in his poem "At Epidaurus": "a theatre where redemption was enacted." But the nature of that redemption changed drastically after 1922; it became personal rather than public or political.

The idea of modern Greece as the orchestra of a tragic theater would recur often in discussions of modern Greece, especially concerning the Greek Civil War in the late 1940s and the military junta from 1967 to 1974.[4] Rex Warner's novel *Men of Stones* (1950) used a performance of *King Lear* by leftists in a detention camp in the time of the civil war as a metaphor for the state of the country, and Edmund Keeley's *The Libation* (1958) updated Aeschylus's *Oresteia* with the recent history of modern Greece as a background. This motif could, of course, also be employed when other nations were forced to turn inward and examine moments of national failure. Vaclav Havel recently said of the state of the Czech republic: "However unpleasant and stressful and even dangerous what we are going through may be, it can also be a force for good, because it can call for a catharsis, the intended outcome of a Greek tragedy" (46). Yet the notion that tragedy was a "familiar fact of [Greek] life through all the ages of history" has been especially prevalent in twentieth-century constructions of Greece. And tragedy became a familiar element in writing about Greece only after Smyrna.

Greek stories of loss and exile after the Asia Minor Disaster could provide an example, and at times a catharsis, to an audience of foreign observers.[5] Glaspell remembered the refugees: "To see the Greek peasants come ashore that night in Salonica was to respect the fortitude of human nature. These were people who had for ten days been massed on the waterfront at Smyrna. They had seen their homes burn, and their husbands taken by the Turks. Children had seen their mother[s] killed, and mothers had lost their children" ("Dwellers on Parnassus" 199). She left with a "respect for the fortitude of human nature," despite the fact that "this exodus was their destruction." French Strother wrote in his novel *Maid of Athens*: "They've all experienced tragedy, individually and as a nation. . . . But you never see a

Greek who despairs. Look at old Theodora, here, that keeps house for me. Saw her husband and five children murdered before her eyes in Smyrna six years ago, and God knows what they did to her. She is as relentless as the furies in her hate, but she isn't broken, and she isn't afraid of life" (13–14). In 1981, the Australian novelist Patrick White, in a description of a toilet that refused to be flushed, employed the tragic paradigm for all close encounters with modern Greece by foreigners: "Any true Grecophile will understand when I say that the unsinkable condom and the smell of shit which precede the moment of illumination make it more rewarding when it happens" (*Flaws in the Glass* 157).

White also said, "Most Greek eyes wear an expression of fatality, as though brooding over disaster, personal, historic, and those still in store for them" (*Flaws in the Glass* 101). But, he added, "Greek fatality is also my own, and why I was drawn to Greece from a distance, and one Greek in particular" (118). Greece was no longer, as it had been for a century, "the last shred of happy hunting-ground for the adventurous" (Munro 528). In the endurance of and catharsis after defeat, it became a land where a foreigner could go to overcome personal loss or to confront one's own fatalism. To quote Durrell's "At Epidaurus" again: "Here we can carry our own small death / With the resignation of place and identity" (97). In 1836, celebrating a "Birthday in Scio" in verse, John Pierpont had remembered the struggles of the War of Independence. But in 1963, May Sarton's "Birthday on the Acropolis" engendered different thoughts and a different Greece. The fifth and last section reads:

> On my fiftieth birthday I met the archaic smile
> It was the right year
> To confront
> The smile beyond suffering,
> As intimate and suffused
> As a wave's curve
> Just before it breaks.
>
> Evanescence held still;
> Change stated in external terms
> Aloof, Absolute:
> The criterion before us.
>
> On my fiftieth birthday
> I suffered from the archaic smile.
>
> (*Collected Poems* 259)

Survival also figured prominently in James Merrill's "After Greece" (1962), which concluded:

> The first glass I down
> To the last time
> I ate and drank in that old world. May I
> Also survive its meanings, and my own.
> (*Selected Poems* 63)

As Conchis put it in Fowles's *Magus*, "Greece is like a mirror. It makes you suffer. Then you learn" (99). Such was the scenario in the most significant American novel with a Greek setting written in the 1920s, Susan Glaspell's *Fugitive's Return* (1929). Where an encounter with the ruins of Greece in E. F. Benson's *Limitations* (1896) had sent the hero home unhappy and impatient with the limitations of the modern world, in Glaspell's novel the antique surroundings allow one to come to "know oneself" and one's place in society. The heroine is an American woman who, after the death of her child and a divorce from her husband, suffers from complete aphasia and memory loss. Speechless, she manages to travel alone to Delphi under an assumed name, that of her sister's friend Myra Freeman (a surname with obvious symbolism). When the season at Delphi ends and the hotel closes, "Myra" stays on in the only house located within the sacred sanctuary, "a setting for the ultimate drama" (248). Communing with the spirit of the place and the local population, particularly a Greek woman, Stamula, who she assists in weaving, she recovers both her speech and her old identity as Irma Lee Schraeder.

Glaspell's heroine, like Glaspell herself, found a seamless web between the ancient and modern Greeks. Irma muses that "those years in Delphi had been as if taken into something else" (90). Glaspell described her first encounter with the slopes of Parnassus: "It was as if we had come upon another world—their world, a hidden place where has been maintained a way of life through centuries of change. And Greece herself is not unlike that" ("Dwellers on Parnassus" 199). Glaspell worried that the incursion of Western materialism would ruin the world of the Greek village: "What our lives have become is now destroying this way of life that was in Greece before Homer was in Greece" (199). In *Fugitive's Return*, however, the American heroine, who has recovered her sense of self at Delphi, steps in to ensure that the ancient ways of the Greeks, which demand the death of a young Greek rape victim, are subverted.

Andreas, an attractive young man, had some years earlier raped Constantina, a dwarflike shepherd girl. Rather than marry Constantina as custom demanded, Andreas served time in prison, which only increased the shame of Constantina in the village. When Andreas asks a pretty refugee from Constantinople, Theodora, to marry him, Constantina kills the young man by dropping a rock from the ancient stadium on his head. The village turns on Constantina, except for Irma and her friend Stamula. The two devise a plan in which Irma will take the young Greek girl to America. Irma becomes in

Delphi not simply a new woman, but a "New Woman" of the kind that had been familiar in fiction from the 1890s.[6] She may well be the first fictional foreign New Woman to experience Greece, and her defiance of the village's tradition ensures that she can never return. Greece, to quote Durrell once again, offered "the discovery of yourself" (*Prospero's Cell* 11), but the realization of that discovery often entailed a departure from the Hellenic world. Irma is one of the first characters in literature to undergo this cycle.

Glaspell had gone to Greece in 1922 at the urging of her companion and collaborator in the Provincetown Players, George Cram Cook. Cook had from boyhood a dream of an Apollonian Greece similar to that offered by Winckelmann, according to Glaspell in her book about him, *The Road to the Temple* (1927). The two lived mainly at Delphi and the Parnassian village of Agoryianni until Cook's death in 1924, an experience that made Glaspell the first major writer since Byron and Lear to have an extensive, firsthand experience of Greek village life. Glaspell buried Cook in the Greek cemetery at Delphi in 1924 and then returned to the United States. Veronica Makowsky suggested, plausibly, that Glaspell had reservations about her life in Greece, reservations that Cook did not care to hear (99–100). Further, even in her admiring memoir of her life with Cook in Greece in *The Road to the Temple*, Glaspell presented examples of Cook's increasingly erratic behavior. The most prominent manifestation was, of course, the desire to live on the slopes of Parnassus, hardly the touristic site in 1922 that it has become today. Indeed, if Cook had had access to a hospital, he might not have died.

In *Fugitive's Return*, Cook's view of the continuing spiritual power of Delphi and the virtues of village life, sentiments that Glaspell repeatedly puts in the mouth of Cook in *The Road to the Temple*, are combined with Glaspell's own awareness of gender inequities in Greek society, and as Makowsky noted, in her relationship with Cook. Irma finds in the spirit of the place something as "pure and strong as the Castalian [spring] itself" (*Fugitive's Return* 252) and a correlation between the ruined temple of Apollo and the "temple that was her own heart" (316). Yet within that temple of her own heart, Glaspell and her heroine both learn that women need to be able to "know themselves" and not simply be constructed by societal roles. It is this tension that makes *Fugitive's Return* one of the most interesting novels set in Greece before World War II.

In Glaspell's story "The Faithless Shepherd" (1926), the hero begins and ends the action by attempting to trace out the letters of the name Dionysus.[7] It is a presence absent from *Fugitive's Return*, although the name Dionysus appears several times in the text. Irma's awakening is decidedly Apollonian in nature; even her love for the archaeologist John Knight has an ethereal character to it. Irma certainly did not leave colder climes to find a sexual awakening in the sun nor to escape the strictures of "civilized society" in the manner of the heroine of D. H. Lawrence's story "Sun" (1925). Rather, like

the trip that the heroine of May Sarton's *Joanna and Ulysses* (1963) makes to the Greek island of Santorini, Irma's journey prepares her to reenter civilized society after a personal crisis. In the 1920s, Italy was still the site to search for Pan. And Irma, unlike Lawrence's heroine, has no romantic nor erotic connection to a Mediterranean man. When Irma needs a love interest, one appears from over the sea.

French Strother's *Maid of Athens* (1932) in subject matter if not in style presents the reverse journey from *Fugitive's Return*. A Greek woman leaves Greece to marry an American and have a career on the world stage, learns more about her true self, and then returns to her homeland. Strother's title signals that he is rewriting the romance of liberation in the post-Smyrna age, and his book holds some interest as the first treatment of the fate of the Greek woman after she marries the Western hero and departs for life abroad.

Thea Milo, Strother's heroine, is a refugee from Smyrna and an actress who has gained renown playing the lead in ancient tragedies; she escaped the destruction of her city by portraying Cassandra. Her dreams of a career on the stage are threatened when her family arranges a match with a rich, but physically unappealing, merchant named Akopoulos. In this version of the Maid of Athens, the liberation becomes personal rather than national. Hearing of her family's plans, Thea declares: "I must be free! I must live! I must be happy!" (49). All heroines of the romance had made such pronouncements, but Thea's fate is no longer tied to that of her nation.

Thea escapes on her wedding night with the help of a young American diplomat, Tim Johnson. The two later marry and live in Paris, where Thea continues to act. She scores a success in a production of *Antigone*, but it soon becomes clear that the Smyrna refugee can only successfully perform in Greek tragedies, as if there is some intrinsic connection between her own life and the plots of Attic drama. The couple move to America, where Thea discovers that "Greece alone had been understanding; Greece alone she had understood; and now Greece, her spiritual home, was locked against her" (269). Eventually she returns to Greece to see her dying father and to be killed by her brother, who had vowed to take her life for not staying with the man her family had chosen for her.

Strother's ideological perspective also reverses that of Glaspell. Where *Fugitive's Return* depicts a woman coming into consciousness and becoming a New Woman, *Maid of Athens* is a diatribe against sexual equality and careers for women. An American woman, asked whether her sex should have careers, responds, "Of course I do, when a career is all they can get. But careers for their own sake, no! They don't bring what women really want" (176). Strother's book, at the basic level, is an attack on the New Woman, and it is intriguing that he uses a Greek heroine to make his point.

In *Maid of Athens*, liberation turns out to be a false illusion, a viewpoint never voiced before the defeat of 1922, the end of the dream of Greater

Greece, and the recovery of Constantinople. But the world had changed after Smyrna, and a Greek girl who had exclaimed, "I must be free!" could now find that she did not really want freedom at all. The failure of Thea's marriage, as well as Strother's often-repeated axiom that like must marry like, raises the question whether Strother wants to reposition, or even remove, the Greeks from the European family.

Since the Second World War, the writer who has most consistently linked modern Greece with the tragic experience of Smyrna is Patrick White, winner of the Nobel Prize in 1973. For example, his stories "A Glass of Tea" and "An Evening at Sissy Kamara's" are both variations of the Meleager story in which the existence of household objects carried from Smyrna are interconnected with the emotional and physical well-being of the characters.[8] White "married" into a refugee family, since his companion of forty years, Manoli Lascaris, was from a family from Asia Minor (see *Flaws in the Glass* 100–102), and this may explain why White returned to it so often in his work.

Although the Greek characters in White's fiction are survivors, they rarely if ever gain the kind of illumination or peace of Glaspell's Irma Lee Schraeder. In White's novel *The Aunt's Story* (1948), a Greek tells a new acquaintance, "Greeks are happiest dying. . . . Their memorials do not reflect this fatality. All Greek monuments suggest a continuity of life. The theatre at Epidaurus, you have seen it, and Sounion? Pure life. But the Greeks are born to die" (102). In *The Vivisector* (1970), Hero Pavlousis, a Smyrna refugee who married her husband for money, tells an Australian artist: "I was not completely healed, not completely, until Cosmas took me to Perialos. That is an island off the coast of Asia Minor. It is an island of saints and miracles" (297). But in a typical White twist, when Hero takes the artist, now her lover, to this sacred island, her healing is called into question: "Do we come all this way for—nothing? Yes of course we do; it is not so extraordinary. Cosmas would have warned you this hermit—who is dead, or gone—was a filthy old man" (355). She concludes: "It was I who was foolish enough to believe in the idea of regeneration," and the artist himself leaves the holy island with an "unregenerate soul" (353). In the early nineteenth century, the regeneration of the Greeks was interconnected with a new age of freedom and happiness. In White, the failure of the Greek rebirth serves as a fitting metaphor for the fate of the individual in the modern world.

Osbert Lancaster, in his comic characterization of lovers of Greece, remarked that, in addition to a large group of enthusiastic admirers of the classical past, there are also "a few angry and aggressive little figures, quarreling violently among themselves and on the worst possible terms with the classical party below, following the dynamic form of Robert Byron bearing a banner with a strange device on which is inscribed the single word 'Byzantium'" (7). In the late 1920s, Robert Byron began an ambitious project to build an

entirely new conception of modern Greece, which eschewed the Greeces of both Homer and the earlier Byron; in the words of Robert Byron, the one of "hexameters and lifeless stones" and the other of "abstract freedom, or the hatred of infidel misgovernment," which he termed, respectively, cultural and political philhellenism. "What then is real Philhellenism?" he asked. A "higher form than the Philhellenism of reconstruction; a Philhellenism not of the mind, but of the soul" (*Byzantine Achievement* 21–22) or, simply put, a Greece of Byzantium. Of the Byzantine Empire he asserted: "Spiritually, it is doubtful whether there has ever existed, over so long a period of time, so large a proportion of men and women, under one government, deeply and sincerely anxious to maintain communion with God at all moments of their lives" (37). Echoing earlier nineteenth-century rhetoric, he suggested that the example of Byzantium might open up potentialities "in which may lie the future of Europe, and the future of the earth" (22–23).

Byron's starting point in *The Byzantine Achievement* (1929) is, once again, Smyrna: "The intention of this book was originally to present a history of the Eastern Mediterranean between 1919 and 1923. But it became immediately apparent, upon a second and protracted exploration of the Greek seaboard in 1926, that to portray events of those years without previous investigation of their historical foundations, was equivalent to offering the public the last act of a play without the first. The fault now committed, the offer of the first without the last, is, I hope, the lesser" (ix). Notice again the dramatic reference; if the last act ended at 1923, the play was undoubtedly a tragedy.

Byzantium, according to Byron, has a special importance for understanding the postwar world in search of order and structure: "In the whole of European history, no moment offers more relevant comparison to our own than that in which Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire. A new civilisation was then born, the nature and achievement of which have remained unintelligible in the centuries of Triumphant Reason that have followed its extinction" (6). Byron's move here is not unlike that of other modernist writers, who attempted to go back before the rise of secular liberalism and triumphant reason to find an older, more secure, ideological anchor. Around the same time that Byron confessed an attachment to the Greek Orthodox empire of the East, T. S. Eliot was proclaiming that he was a Royalist in politics and an Anglo-Catholic in faith. Where Robert Byron differed was that he alone among English and American writers turned to the medieval Greek world as the road to salvation. Eliot could point to the company of such Catholic converts as Evelyn Waugh. In fact, Byron created his own schism between the churches of East and West. Paul Fussell noted, "Byron's quarrel with Waugh dates from Autumn, 1930, when Waugh chose to be received into the Roman Catholic Church, an act of hostility, as Byron conceived it, to his own Byzantinism" (*Abroad* 82).

Although after 1922 "political philhellenism was finally discredited," Lord Byron maintained his position as first philhellene. The spiritual essence of Greece, according to Robert Byron, is contained in the word *Romiosyne*, a word often translated as "Greekness" but which has a Byzantine (literally "Roman") rather than a classical derivation. He says that the meaning of this word "eludes the comprehension of man" but then goes on to add, "[Lord] Byron knew it" (*Byzantine Achievement* 21).[9] Near the end of *The Byzantine Achievement*, Robert Byron declared that the Byzantine tradition was still alive in Greece because it had been kindled, among other places, in "the craggy fastnesses of honorable brigands" (311), those same honorable brigands who, others claimed, had kept the ancient Greek tradition of freedom alive. Despite his rejection of political philhellenism as an idea, he seems to have been too drawn to the magic force of legend to place it in the same trash heap where he put Edward Gibbon and the degenerate view of Byzantium, and he attempted to appropriate Lord Byron for his Greece of Byzantium.

If partisans of the Greece of Homer had the Acropolis and those of the Greece of Byron had Missolonghi, Robert Byron's sacred ground was the peninsula of Mount Athos, which contained twenty monasteries and various lesser religious establishments of the Orthodox church. Byron claims the holy mountain as "one fragment, one living, articulate community of my chosen past" (*Station* 39) and a "station of a faith where all the years have stopped" (256). Byron wrote about this holy spot in his book *The Station: Athos, Treasures and Men* (1931), the first noteworthy travel book about Greece since Edward Lear's *Journal of a Landscape Painter* (1851). Like Lear, Byron dealt with a region on the margins of Greece proper; Mount Athos is an autonomous area that is not part of the Greek state. Neither the "haunted, holy ground" of Athens, the sunny Cycladic isles, nor the Peloponnesus had called forth a travel book in English of real literary merit since Childe Harold left Aegean shores.

As Paul Fussell remarked, part of the great charm of *The Station* lies in "the disparity between the monks' proclaimed spirituality and their readiness to cheat their visitors" (*Abroad* 85).[10] In spite of Byron's assertion that he had been "translated" to another dimension wholly different from other places on earth, "back into that mysterious, immaterial *regnum* from which the mind cast loose with the Renaissance" (*Station* 54), he seemed to be surrounded by figures quite familiar to readers—those nasty Greek degenerates called "Levantines." The venality of the monks is balanced, however, by Byron's own boorishness and his apparent lack of interest in the spiritual life of the monasteries. When an elderly monk refused to let Byron and his friend use a telephone, "we gradually forced the gesticulating old man up a flight of stairs till we stood upon a landing. 'Now,' we said like a trio of Chicago gangsters, 'where is it?'" (230). Later, Byron and one of his companions were in-

vited to a feast at the monastery of Xeropotamou. After the food, "coffee, accompanied by a light sweet wine in lieu of port, was handed in the other room, till it was time for the momentous service, which was to last all night, to begin. Did we wish to come to the church, or to sleep? Sleep, we thought" (236). Byron attempted to sleep until two in the morning, but sleep would not come. So he got up and went to the church and was "transfixed" by the "rhythm of chant and paces. . . . Once and again, a hundred and a thousand times, the *Kyrie eleison*, in limitless plurality, beginning deep and hushed, mounted the scale with presage of impending triumph—to die off and begin again" (238). Why did this rabid Byzantinist not plan to go to the momentous service from the start? Why, in the text, is the only description of a service on the Holy Mountain dependent on the fact that Byron could not sleep? It is the collision of Byron's vision of Byzantium with both the reality of life on Mount Athos and his own crass behavior that makes *The Station* so refreshingly unique. Sacheverell Sitwell clearly had his friend Byron and his book in mind when he referred to the enthusiastic partisans of Byzantium, "most of whom, it can be said, had they been alive in it would have grumbled and complained incessantly at the conditions prevailing in their ideal world" (*Roumanian Journey* 91).

Byron sparked a Byzantine renaissance in England; Sitwell noted that in the 1930s "all serious minded undergraduates from Oxford and Cambridge" wanted to repair to Mount Athos "with that enthusiasm which carried their grandfathers to go to Rome and Florence. To that extent have the canons of taste changed the directions in which they face" (*Roumanian Journey* 93). But for some reason it hardly touched writing about modern Greece. His influence is most keenly felt in writing about the Byzantine heritage outside of Greece. In recent years, the poet John Ash has published *A Byzantine Journey* (1995), an account of his travels in Anatolia, and William Dalrymple has offered *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey in the Shadow of Byzantium* (1997), in which, after a brief beginning at Mount Athos, he goes down the eastern shore of the Mediterranean from Constantinople to Egypt. Neither Byzantine journey, significantly, takes the author to the modern Greek state. Rebecca West's massive book about Yugoslavia, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941), which Robert Kaplan called "the century's greatest travel book" (3), owes a direct debt to Byron's revision of the Byzantine era. West acknowledged this in the following note in the bibliography about *The Byzantine Achievement*: "The author, whose death by enemy action all his friends and readers must deplore, wrote this when he was under twenty-five, and it is a remarkable effort. It forms a wholesome corrective to the nonsense that used to be talked about the decadence of Byzantium" (1155).

Yet West attempted to undercut Byron's central premise that the modern Greeks are a living link to the medieval past. Rather, she asserted that her own pet Balkan people, the Serbs, who had been "among the last to achieve

order and gentleness are the last legatees of the Byzantine Empire in its law and magnificence" (1149). To add insult to injury, she employed the concept of Byzantine decadence, Byron's own *bête noir*, to justify her disinheriting the Greeks from the Byzantine legacy. Of emperor John Cantacuzenos, who in West's eyes forfeited the mantle of Byzantium, she wrote: "That detestable man was one of those men who are the price a civilisation pays in its decay for the achievements of its prime" (881). During his reign, "the Byzantine Empire was a masterless land, where weeds that grew spread to all neighboring fields and smothered all profitable crops" (881). The hope for civilization at that moment passed from the decadent Cantacuzenos and his Byzantines to the younger, more vibrant Serbs under the energetic Stephen Dushan. This was a twist that Byron could not have foreseen.

Byron's Byzantinism influenced other works, such as Sitwell's *Roumanian Journey* (1938) and Rose Macaulay's novel *The Towers of Trebizond* (1956). There is no reference to Byron or *The Byzantine Achievement* in Macaulay's published letters, but her use of Byzantine Trebizond as a sacred spot and a positive symbol surely owe something to Byron's revisonist history. Near the end of the book, she wrote: "Still, the towers of Trebizond, the fabled city, shimmer on a far horizon, gated and walled and held in a luminous enchantment" (288).[11] Both *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* and *The Towers of Trebizond* are major books by major writers. There is no work of similar stature in fiction or nonfiction that employs Byron's revised Byzantium in a Greek setting. In *Labels* (1930), Evelyn Waugh declined to describe the Byzantine mosaics at Dafni because he would be treading "on Robert Byron's ground" (150). Perhaps that explains it. But one cannot help thinking that the idea of "Greece" in the minds of the West was not Byzantine. It was easier to carry Robert Byron's banner in other lands.

In 1974, the poet James Merrill told a story of how he had once met a young Belgian on the Brindisi-Patras ferry who requested a ride to Athens. On the way, "he asked if I knew the Greek poet Cavafy. When I said yes, he lit up: 'Well, it's with *him* that I shall be staying the next few days in Athens'" ("Marvelous Poet" 17). Merrill had to tell his companion that Constantine Cavafy had been dead for decades and besides had never lived in Athens. Yet Merrill certainly realized that, the counterfeit Cavafy aside, there was a deep truth in what the Belgian had said. Through a misinterpretation that because Cavafy wrote in Greek, then Athens must be "Alexandria," many have carried copies of the Alexandrian poet in their pockets to find the "Greece of Cavafy." Merrill himself was one of those who had spent more than a few days "staying with Cavafy" in Athens. For example, Merrill's poem "Days of 1964," which is about passion in an Athenian setting, directly evokes a series of poems by Cavafy, including "Days of 1896," "Days of 1902," and "Days of 1903."[12]

W. H. Auden, who first encountered Cavafy in the late 1920s through E. M. Forster and his Oxford professor, R. M. Dawkins, declared that the Greek poet's themes were "love, art, and politics in the original Greek sense" (ix).[13] For those who "stayed with Cavafy" in Athens, the chief attraction was verse on the first theme. Auden went on to say, "Cavafy was a homosexual, and his erotic poems make no attempt to conceal that fact," and the "erotic world he depicts is one of casual pickups and short-lived affairs. Love, there, is rarely more than physical passion, and when tenderer emotions do exist, they are almost always one-sided. At the same time, he refuses to pretend that his memories of sensual pleasure are unhappy or spoiled by feelings of guilt" (ix). Cavafy's "Days of 1908" is an example of such a poem:

> He was out of work that year,
> so he lived off card games,
> backgammon, and borrowed money.
>
> He was offered a job at three pounds a month
> in a small stationery store,
> but he turned it down without the slightest hesitation.
> It wasn't suitable. It wasn't the right pay for him,
> a reasonably educated young man, twenty-five years old. . . .
>
> His clothes were a terrible mess.
> He always wore the same suit,
> a very faded cinnamon-brown suit.
>
> O summer days of nineteen hundred and eight,
> from your perspective
> the cinnamon-brown suit was tastefully excluded.
>
> Your perspective has preserved him
> as he was when he took off, threw off,
> those unworthy clothes, that mended underwear,
> and stood stark naked, impeccably handsome, a miracle—
> his hair uncombed, swept back,
> his limbs a little tanned
> from his morning nakedness at the baths and at the beach.
> (tr. Keeley and Sherrard 177–78)

In his autobiography, Merrill remarked that his yearly trips to Greece were driven by a desire for such casual pickups and short-lived assignations with social inferiors such as those about which Cavafy had written:

> The soldier on the dance floor, like nine out of ten of his class and culture, would count himself lucky to catch a permissive male lover,

> one who wouldn't appear in the yitoniá [neighborhood] making a scene. No reflection on the dancer's masculinity. Girls weren't easy to come by in 1959, outside of marriage or the brothel; and who on a military wage of thirty shoeshines a month could afford either one? . . . That the dancing soldier hoped one day to marry and raise a family struck me as the best news yet. More than the barriers of language and background, it seemed to ensure our never going overboard in Greece. David and I could follow with no harm to him the faun incarnate in this or that young man, and without losing ourselves. (*Different Person* 191–92)

Cavafy offered not simply a series of casual erotic affairs but also a decadent city in which to pursue them. In "The Tomb of Iasis," he ended an epigraph for a young hedonist in Hellenistic times as follows:[14]

> But from being considered so often a Narcissus and Hermes,
> excess wore me out, killed me. Traveler,
> if you're an Alexandrian, you won't blame me.
> You know the pace of our life—its fever, its unsurpassable sensuality.
> (tr. Keeley and Sherrard 76)

Athens, as a literary, urban Greek setting began as an "Alexandrian" world. In John Fowles's *The Magus*, Nicholas recounts an encounter with his old girlfriend in a hotel room in Piraeus:

> I felt no attraction and no tenderness for her; no real interest in the breakup of her long relationship with the boor of an Australian pilot; simply the complex, ambiguous sadness of the darkening room. The light had drained out of the sky, it became rapid dusk. All the treacheries of modern love seemed beautiful, and I had my great secret, safe, locked away. It was Greece again, the Alexandrian Greece of Cavafy; there were only degrees of aesthetic pleasure; of beauty in decadence. Morality was a North European lie. (249)

In a rundown bar in Thessaloniki, the narrator of Francis King's story "The Vultures" experienced "little sense of vice or squalor. Perhaps it is only guilt in search of pleasure that produces that sense; and guilt, though so terrible a reality to the ancient Greeks, is fortunately almost unknown to their descendants" (*So Hurt and Humiliated* 158).[15] Under the banner of Cavafy, the fleshly Greeks of Pater and the aesthetics of the 1890s first appeared in literary constructions of modern Athens. The modern movement, as far as writers were concerned, came to Greece from the East not the West. And the Levantines of Athens became, if not real Greeks, true Alexandrians.

The first person to follow the faun incarnate in Athens with Cavafy in his pocket also wrote the first poem in English dedicated to the Greek poet. William Plomer, like Auden, had learned about Cavafy from Forster. In "To the Greek Poet C. P. Cavafy on His Ποιηματα (1908–1914)" from his volume *The Five-fold Screen* (1932), Plomer situated the poems of Cavafy in a Greek rather than an Egyptian setting:

> Your temple is built, without the least pretense,
> On that antique foundation-stone, good sense,
> A curious music fills its colonnades,
> And Attic sunbeams stripe the lofty shades
> (57)

Since in Plomer's poem Attic sunbeams stripe the shades of Cavafy's temple, it makes sense that Plomer headed to Athens to worship in it.

Plomer's biographer, Peter Alexander, noted, "Greece had long had an attraction for English homosexuals" before Plomer arrived in 1931 (367), but that attraction had not surfaced in any significant way in published descriptions of modern Greece. Evelyn Waugh wrote in a letter to a friend in 1927 from Athens, where he was staying with Alastair Graham, a prototype for Sebastian in *Brideshead Revisited*, that "the flat is usually full of Dago youths called by such heroic names as Miltiades or Agamemnon with blue chins and greasy clothes who sleep with the English colony for 25 drachmas a night" (Hastings 147–48). But, despite the comic potential of such youths, Waugh did not mention them in his first novel, *Decline and Fall* (1928), in which the only reminiscence of his trip to Greece is the description of a villa on Corfu. Nor did he mention them in *Labels* (1930), his account of a Mediterranean tour in 1929, during which he spent two days in Athens with his gay friends Graham and Mark Ogilvie-Grant. In that book, he said only that Graham had "a house filled with mechanical singing birds and eikons," as if it were a setting for Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" (149). Only much later, in *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), does Waugh suggest that Athens was a haven for European homosexuals in the interwar period (174–75, 349–50). Gay modern Greece first appeared on the page in the early 1930s with the poems and stories of Plomer and a Kenneth Matthews novel, *Aleko* (1934).[16]

Plomer's debt to Cavafy can be seen in two poems and most of the stories he wrote about Greece. In the poems, a first person narrator records a passing moment of sensual and tender pleasure, which, according to Auden, was a trademark of the Alexandrian. "Three Pinks" depicts two lovers who awaken after a night of passion to greet the dawn that will separate them. The first published version of the poem reads:

We'll observe through the dry and timeless air of Attica
In which there is no nostalgia
The pepper-tree garden where last night by the full moon
An old woman disturbed our intimacy
To sell us three pinks with long stems.
(*Five-fold Screen* 51)[17]

"Another Country" begins with a direct evocation of Cavafy's poem "The City": "Let us go to another country, / Not yours or mine, / And start again." But the speaker then asserts:

This is that other country
We two populate,
Land of a brief and brilliant
Aurora, noon and night,
The stratosphere of love
From which we must descend,

And leaving this rare country
Must each to his own
Return alone.
(*Collected Poems* 67)

In both of these poems, since English does not have gender terminations as does Greek, the gender of the lover is left uncertain. This is not the case in the stories "Local Colour," "The Island," and "Nausicaa" (*Child of Queen Victoria and Other Stories* 1933), where two males are clearly paired together. Curiously, however, in all of these stories the pairs consist of two Greeks; even in "Nausicaa," in which a young Corfiote boatman is seduced by a visitor from abroad, the "foreigner" is a Greek from Alexandria (perhaps another nod to Cavafy). Alexander plausibly suggested that in this story Plomer critiqued his own behavior toward the Greeks with whom he became involved (174), which makes the change in nationality of the predatory tourist even more unsettling. Did Plomer think that homosexuality would be more palatable to an English audience if the participants were exclusively Greek? Or did he simply want a cover to write about his own experiences? If Plomer took advantage of Greeks during his stay in Athens, he also took advantage of them in his fiction, by removing the Western tourists who created the market for Greek youths.

Plomer's Greece is filled with decadent men, as if the fleshly ancient Greeks of Pater had to wait until the disaster to appear in modern Athens. In a letter to Stephen Spender, Plomer asserted: "England is a land of male women, Greece is a land of female men" (Alexander 168).[18] That is certainly

the way he presented them in fiction. In "Local Colour," Madame Strouthokámelos discovers that her husband was "a little too Greek in his nature for her taste," but she publicly asserts that members of the younger generation "are manly and patriotic. I think there is great hope for the future" (*Child of Queen Victoria* 222, 225). When she takes the two young English visitors to a local restaurant so that "they can see a bit of the *real* Greece" (229), the country boys act a bit too effeminate for her liking. After one of the boys, referred to as Lilac Shirt because of his attire, has danced "a little too intimately" with his partner, then "embraced him and kissed him on the mouth," his fellows respond with a rousing cheer (233). Madame Strouthokámelos becomes appalled. "'They have forgotten themselves,' she said in a tone of disgust," (234), although, as with her husband, the boys could simply be remembering their Greek nature. "I think while you are in Greece you ought to do as the Greeks do" (223), their matronly hostess had advised her guests when they left for lunch, and we as readers are certain that the two Englishmen, particularly the one who has a copy of Proust's *Sodome et Gomorrhe* in his pocket, intend to do just that. Plomer's Greek companions, like Cavafy's erotic partners, were social inferiors who were often bought, and this certainly had some effect on his view of Greek men. Still, it is significant that in Plomer's gay construction of Greece, it was still a decidedly effeminate space.[19]

Cavafy wrote little about the great classical past, and those in search of the Greece of Cavafy followed suit. "There are other things in Athens besides the Parthenon," Plomer wrote in his *Autobiography* (275), and with that comment he summarily dispensed with the classical past. In Christopher Isherwood's *Down There on a Visit* (1962), Ambrose expresses the same attitude toward the classical past when he asks Christopher: "You've never been in Athens before, have you? Then I suppose you *ought* to see the Acropolis. I always think it's a good thing to get *that* over, as soon as possible" (72). Political philhellenism also held no interest for Plomer: "Greece was for the time being a republic. I forget why if I knew" (*Autobiography* 280). Greece, it seems, was simply a decadent, sensual Disneyland where, to use the words of James Merrill, one could "follow the faun incarnate" as one pleased.

Still, Plomer, like Robert Byron, was caught by the magic force of Byronic Greece. He wrote a poem about the Greek War of Independence entitled "The Young Klepht" at a time when the age of brigands had passed. In his autobiography, he related how on Corfu he read "a great deal about the War of Independence" and saw a "painting of the Suliot women about to throw themselves over a precipice rather than fall into the clutches of Ali Pacha," which inspired him to write a biography of Ali Pasha called *Ali the Lion*. Yet this endeavor itself suggests that, for Plomer, Byronic Greece had become history rather than a living legacy in which a young phihellene could still take part.

The "Athens of Cavafy" has had an enduring literary importance, as its appearance in Merrill and Fowles attests.[20] But it has not had the wide influence

or circulation of the Greece of Byron. Part of the reason was undoubtedly that the heterosexual world was not going to embrace a conception of Greece, the birthplace of Western civilization, as the site of transient assignations, often homosexual. But the problem probably went a bit deeper. Athens was simply not Alexandria. Plomer's construction of Athens was no worse than any other Western construction that had appeared in the previous hundred or so years, but it depended, as did his ability to go to bed with boors, on bad lighting (see Alexander 168). In good lighting, and Athens has remarkable natural light, the landscape was simply wrong for a Cavafian setting. One can just as easily create a Cavafian London, New York, or Berlin, and many writers have.[21] There was nothing recognizably Greek in Plomer's Athens of Cavafy except that the available boys spoke Greek. Of all modern Greek poets, Cavafy has, I believe, the largest following among readers of poetry outside of Greece. But for English and American poets who write about modern Greece, the shadow of George Seferis looms larger. Rex Warner spoke for the generation that encountered Greece from 1946 to 1955 when he said that George Seferis, "more than any other writer, has been able to express . . . the detail and clarity of the Greek scene" ("Where Shall John Go?" 300).

A different spirit invests the homoerotic utopia that Ambrose attempts to build on the island of St. Gregory in the "Ambrose" section of Christopher Isherwood's *Down There on a Visit* (1962), a fictionalized version of the author's actual stay on the island of St. Nicholas in the summer of 1933.[22] At one point, Ambrose remembers how, right before his abrupt departure from Cambridge, he had "discovered Ronald Firbank, and I couldn't put it down" (111). This suggests an alternative comic, or perhaps more precisely "camp," gay tradition. Ambrose's island seems to intentionally suggest a male version of Miss O'Brookomore's lesbian garden of delights in Firbank's *Inclinations*. Both of these prospective Edens never flower, and they begin to fail when they are "invaded" by the other sex. In Isherwood, Maria plays the role of the Italian count in Firbank, seducing Ambrose's young charges from his noble vision. The books of Firbank and Isherwood are also linked by the fact that, before 1970, they are two of only a handful of books that conceive of Greece as a predominantly comic space.

Ambrose's island is hardly an Arcadian paradise. It is full of strange, prickly grass, brackish water that sours the stomach, hordes of flies, and enormous rats. Isherwood is undoubtedly suggesting that the only place where one might conceivably build a gay utopia must be a space so uninhabitable and unappealing that heterosexuals would not want to live there. The foreign contingent drinks to excess. This might explain why, in a world created for homosexuals, the two sexual acts clearly related are the heterosexual union of Maria and Waldemar and Theo's rape of a chicken later served for lunch.

The Greek boys are Dionysiac fauns taken to extreme. They are "swinishly dirty, inhumanly destructive and altogether on the side of the forces of disorder" (*Down There on a Visit* 106). When they are late with the boat, Geoffrey acidly comments, "They were *screwing*. They were screwing somebody or something. Each other, most likely" (90). The older Greek workmen on the island are scarcely better. They routinely dynamite the house that they are building for Ambrose. "Ambrose tells this with pride—possessive pride. He feels that he owns these people—their charm, their unreliability, their madness; everything about them. And, in a sense, he does, since it is he who is interpreting them to us. In a sense, this place is merely the projection of his will" (92). "The forces of disorder" are, then, not entirely natural to the island but part of the creation of a rich Englishman who, for whatever reason, wanted the Greeks on his island to act like the satyrs in the depiction of a Bacchic revel on a Greek vase.

William Plomer began his story "Local Colour" by remarking: "Upon certain kinds of Nordics the effect of living in Mediterranean countries is the reverse of bracing. The freedom, warmth, and glamour of their surroundings begin to sap their intellectual and artistic activity and ambition. While constantly talking about what they are going to accomplish, they do or make nothing, and at last discover that in gaining liberty and sunshine they have lost purpose and vigor" (*Child of Queen Victoria* 219). Fowles called this condition the "Aegean Blues" (foreword to *The Magus* 8). In gaining complete liberty and sunshine, Christopher loses his ability to structure his life, as the group as a whole loses its ability to decide anything. Anarchy and the forces of disorder eventually take over the pen and paper. While in Berlin, Isherwood noted, "I wrote a novel about England. Here, I want to get on with my novel about Berlin; but already I know that I shan't. All I can possibly write nowadays is this diary, because, here, one can only write about this place" (*Down There on a Visit* 97). But later, looking back at the diary, Isherwood found that the "handwriting of all these last short entries is big and straggly and, at the end of the lines, it tends to collapse, like playing cards fallen on top of each other. Obviously, it was done when I was very drunk" (129). He found in the end that the island was a hard place about which to write, especially while he was on it.

In Isherwood's geography, St. Gregory and Greece were not the Berlin he left and the London to which he will return; they offered a non-urban and, from a literary perspective, nonmodernist interlude between the political oppression of Hitler and the social oppression of London. "I couldn't care less, here, about classical Greece; I feel far more remote from it than I ever do in Northern Europe. But Northern Europe is becoming remote, too; quite shockingly so. . . . There may easily be war with Hitler this year, or next. I say this and believe it, but somehow I no longer quite care" (96–97). Still, many of the social tensions in the larger world emerged on this small island away

from everything. For example, after one altercation, Christopher asked Waldemar, "Since when did you join the Brownshirts?" (128).

Down There on a Visit was not published until 1962. Although Isherwood used the journal he kept during his stay in Greece in 1933, he wrote much of the Greek section of the book later. If it had appeared in the 1930s, the "Ambrose" section of *Down There on a Visit* would have been one of the most innovative constructions of Greece between the wars. One suspects that the strong Dionysiac strain in Isherwood's Greece owes something to the influence of Henry Miller and Nikos Kazantzakis. In fact, Isherwood might be playing with the image of Kazantzakis's Zorba and creating a kind of "camp" Zorba with Aleko, who "wore a gaudy striped shirt, mechanic's overalls, and long, elegantly pointed shoes. A flower was stuck in behind his left ear. The fingernail on the little finger of his left hand had been allowed to grow nearly a half an inch long. 'That's the fashion in Athens just now,' Ambrose told me" (75). He held a fascination for the new arrivals to Greece: "He must have been aware of this, for he behaved with a self-conscious swagger, though he pretended to take little notice of us" (75). Whether such influence affected the composition of Isherwood's book might be debated, but that it affected the reception of the book is beyond doubt. By 1962, his satyrs were familiar figures on Greek soil, and Isherwood appeared to be riding a wave.

As the 1930s came to an end, a new modern Greece had still not emerged in English writing. From 1929 to 1934, authors had experimented with tragic Greece, the Byzantine legacy, and Cavafian Athens, and these ideas have all to some degree been subsumed into what we now think of as "Greece." But none of them gained a wide following, especially in the years that followed. The drought in writing about Greece from 1935 to 1939 was just as bad as the one that had lasted from 1924 to 1929. [23]

In August 1940, Lawrence Durrell wrote Henry Miller a letter that included the "story of the Cocks of Attica." One summer night on the Acropolis, George Katsimbalis

> threw back his head, clapped the crook of his stock into his wounded arm, and sent out the most blood-curdling clarion I have ever heard. Cock-a-doodle-doo. It echoed all over the city. . . . We were so shocked that we were struck dumb. And while we were still looking at each other in the darkness, lo, from the distance silvery clear in the darkness a cock drowsily answered—then another, then another. This drove K. wild. Squaring himself, like a bird ready to fly into space, and flapping his coat tails, he set up a terrific scream—and the echoes multiplied. . . . The whole night was alive with cockcrows—all Athens, all Attica, all Greece, it seemed, until I almost imagined you being woken at your desk late in New York to hear these terrific

> silvery peals: Katsimbaline cockcrow in Athens. (*Colossus of Maroussi* 243–44)

Miller added Durrell's letter as an epigraph to his book on Greece, published in 1941. From then on, the Katsimbaline cockcrow continued to resound, first in America and then on the other side of the Atlantic. It was muted a bit by the Second World War, but after 1945 nearly everyone had heard it before he or she went to Greece. Those cocks, the world would discover, announced the reappearance of Dionysus in Greece.