Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 14 (2021)

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Synthesis 14. 2021

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Migration as Self-Narration: Stephanos Stephanides's Homeless World

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doi: 10.12681/syn.32626

Migration as Self-Narration: Stephanos Stephanides's Homeless World

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Stephanos Stephanides's *The Wind Under My Lips* [«Ο άνεμος κάτω απ'τα χείλη μου»] features a dialogue of autobiographical narratives and poems that let "migrations speak to us" (Stephanides, "Postcards from Cyprus (Made in India)" 296) through the mixing of theory, autobiography, poetry and non-creative fiction.[1] The text dramatizes the mantra that to inhabit the world as a migrant, is to be oriented towards the world with a consciousness that has accumulated the experiences of dispossession and exile filled with the aromas of temporality and (dis)location. For Stefanides, Cypriot-born poet, comparative literature professor, postcolonial theorist, translator, ethnographer and documentary film maker, migration is a path to the knowledge of the world as it becomes destabilized and transformed by the errant and incalculable transformations and shifts that are occasioned by the encounters, reciprocities and associations among radical strangers. The rituals, languages and habits of others may disturb us not only because of their differences but also, and especially, because of the eclectic affinities that we may share with them. The sudden and unexpected appearance of these others in our lives, or our appearance as others in theirs, reminds us that the world is near at hand despite its remoteness.

In "Litany in my Slumber," Stefanides recounts the past not with melancholic tonality but with his eyes focused on the present. Wrenched from his village in Trikomo and thrust into a life in Manchester in 1957 by his father who takes him away "furtively" from "the island in the Middle Sea without explanation"

(Stephanides 200), Stefanides returns to this early period in his life to remember his dispossession and bilingual dis-belonging as the origin of what has formed him and defined him as an intellectual. His autobiographical narrative that records the history of a Cypriot who is thrown into exile in Manchester in the 50's and conjures the events of 1974, when his village Trikomo becomes part of the occupied land and is renamed into Yeni Iskele, is a poetic meditation on the constant struggle and perseverance of the exiled and the banished to belong even when they have lost their home forever. Taking off from his personal history as a member of a diaspora whose home is partitioned and occupied by the enemy, Stephanides's text conjures a series of questions that resonate with the histories and narratives of other dispossessed peoples whose return to an origin, or a home is deferred or even annulled by its loss:[2] How can one belong to the world without a home or place to return to? And how can one build one's home on the ruins of dispossession and exile, or on the ruins of a land that is partitioned? Especially when its soil remains part of the same ground, expanding beyond and below all the borders and the fences that demarcate the limits between home and homelessness, between here and there, between self as always same and radical stranger? And what is home to the migrant, or to the exiled person who cannot retrieve the lost origin or at least its fiction? Stefanides's autobiographical voice resonates with the histories of those who are haunted by these questions; without losing sight of the details and complexities of his own story and history, he contemplates the impossibility of the return to the home that made homeless loom like a distant dream while mapping the flight into the world that the loss of origin has enabled without however recording his story as an example or celebrating the loss as the beginning of a new life or a new world. Stephanides's account of himself as a dispossessed and exiled self thus shares affinity ties with the contemporary conditions of numerous migrants and exiled peoples stranded on islands and trapped in-between the lost homelands and the desired homes. Between loss and desire, dispossession and return to a world where homelessness is the condition for reinventing existence and belonging, Stephanides's autobiographical persona narrates itself into being fully present not as a self that is always already same but rather as a self that is refracted and reshaped through this condition of homelessness into which it is thrust. Acknowledging the loss of the possibility of a return to the home of his childhood memories, he draws on them to release the self from being accountable to the fiction of the origin and finds a way to be

responsible to the world that expands before this dispossessed self, thrown into errancy. Hence, his litany is not a lament song but rather a chant whose citational practice conjures the fragments of his "memory fictions" (Karayanni 16) that make up his world of homelessness and (dis)belonging as a world unevenly shared by the millions of homeless and dispossessed peoples in the long present. These "memory fictions" move us "into a realm of possibilities where a mystical relationship with place, experience and personal as well as collective history becomes imaginable" (16), as Karayanni eloquently puts it in his introduction to Stephanides's text. His litany song thus attends to the world constantly looming in the horizon afar and, yet, so near, a world that seeps through his body that is "porous and vulnerable to the world's touch" (214), a world that he reinvents through words that trigger a synesthetic perception of its expanse beyond the borders and fences that try to delimit its horizon.

In the "Postcards from Cyprus (Made in India)," the aroma of *tulsi*, known as holy basil, used in Hinduist practices of worship, is tantalized by a series of photographs taken in Cyprus and turned into postcards in India; the scent of basil used in cooking and praying in both Cyprus and India associates these two places and their temporalities recollected and reconstellated together via a series of portraits of the everyday, of the colorful mundane and of the unexpected pleasures of flânerie. Sent back to Cyprus, the postcards--an archive of snapshots that feature familiar and fleeting scenes of being simultaneously homeless and at home—symptomatically reveal the uncanny, the unconditional and the liminal. One of them features a store of lingerie whose sign reads "No Border," somewhere in Nicosia. Some of the mannequins look to the left end of the street, wondering "Quo Vadis?". Where are you going in this world of borders that are crossed, defied and questioned by the migrants, by the exiled and the displaced peoples as well as by the travelers who refuse to stay within their safe zones? Which end of the street leads you to the zero ground in Nicosia? Which one keeps you safe within the border or helps you dare step beyond it? Asking these questions time and again, Stefanides meditates on the act of remembering one's place through a foreign other, which can enable one to return to the memories of a world gone forever while also being thrust into a temporality that reveals other worlds, real, present, seductive and even threatening. Such an act of counter-memory—counter because what is conjured is not only home, one's comfort zone and promise of return, but also the impossibility thereof, the fragments and shards of a world torn apart and,

yet the possibility of another one emerging-- countervails the opiate pleasure of nostalgia and its dangerous lapse into a forgetting of what has changed and of time and of the world as they are right now. Instead, it associates the past and the present in a nonlinear and temperamental way, attending to the details of the everyday unevenly shared between places and temporalities as distant as India and Cyprus or Manchester and Trikomo/Yeni Iskele. To remember the past without letting go of the present, and to live in the present without struggling to sustain the world that is gone alive at the expense of the future that is already here, are not only acts of survival but also political acts of perseverance and hospitality to the future present. Such acts answer the question "Quo Vadis?", "where are you going?", in the following way: Somewhere, where the future cannot be denied, nor refuted simply because it is here, always already. Even if it needs to be built on the ruins of a world that is bygone.

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[1] We warmly thank Stephanos Stephanides and the editors of To Rodakio publishing house for their permission to reprint Stephanides's "Litany in my Slumber" and "Postcards from Cyprus (Made in India)" that feature in the Editors' Choices of the fourteenth special issue of *Synthesis*. The bilingual edition in English and Greek offers the reader the pleasures of Stephanides's poetic meditations in English, the language in which he writes, and of his voice rendered into Greek by Despina Pirketti in her beautiful translation that follows the English text side by side. I am especially grateful to the author for his friendship and for his support of the journal since the very first issue. Please note that the pagination of the reprinted texts that follow is according to the page numbers of the texts in the original publication of Stephanides's *The Wind Under My Lips* [«Ο άνεμος κάτω απ'τα χείλη μου»] (Rodakio 2018).

[2] Stephanides's text shares affinity ties with Edward Said's *After the Last Sky,* a text accompanied by Jean Mohr's photographs that archive the places to which Said was never allowed to return because of Israel's colonization of Palestinian lands. Said also relies on the fragments of his memories and the elliptical stories and minor histories that haunt them. See Adam Spanos's analysis of Said's autobiographical voice and politics in this issue.

Works Cited

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