

CROSSING POSTCOLONIAL BORDERS

During the summer of 2000, the Athens daily *Ta Nea* published 30 original stories by some of the best-known writers, young and old. The series, which was called "We and the Others," testified to the tremendous interest of

of individuals and groups across barriers that were meant to separate and segregate them. During the 1990s and beyond, in much of Greek art (fiction, but also poetry, film, music, and dance), it is not so much the "other" that appears to energize stories and works as the threshold experience of moving from one territory to another and finding them both limiting.

Sometimes this movement is geographical, traversing several cities or even countries. In Theodoros Grigoriadis's *The Waters of the Peninsula* (1998), an English journalist, a Greek interpreter, and an Ottoman student travel to Istanbul through the ethnic mosaic that was Thrace in 1906. Nikos Themelis' *The Reversal* (2000) follows a couple from the Greek diaspora at the turn of the 20th century, as they move across Central and Eastern Europe while the three empires of the region are collapsing. Soti Triantafyllou's *The Pencil Factory* (2000) takes three generations of another Greek diaspora family from Cairo in

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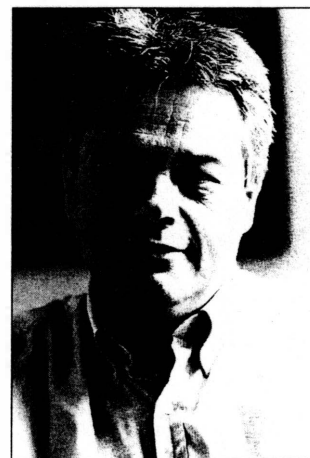
*Theodoros
Grigoriadis*



Greek fiction in questions of collective identity - ethnic, religious, sexual, linguistic, class, and other. This interest has found vivid expression in historiographical metafiction - postmodern novels that self-consciously examine the transmutations of identity through different periods of local and international history.

In addition to history, another growing concern in recent fiction has been geography. This is not the traditional, static view of the Greek landscape, frozen in time, with or without ruins. It is a transnational terrain that absorbs, together with broad vistas, populations and constant movement across territories. Its paramount feature is border crossing - a flow

Nikos Themelis



1866 through much of Europe to Athens before World War II. In these cases, the protagonists mix with people of diverse origin and destination, while searching for their own.

In other cases, it is ethnic and racial divisions more often than territorial borders which are crossed. In Rhea Galanaki's *The Life of Ismail Ferik Pasha* (1989), a Cretan boy, captured and taken to Egypt, goes on to become Minister of War and lead the Egyptian forces against the Cre-

Soti
Triantafyllou



tan revolt of 1866-88, a rebellion financed by his brother, who had grown up a Greek on the island. In Diamandis Axiotis's *The Minimum of His Life* (1999), Muhammad Ali (another historical figure, probably of Albanian ancestry), the famous Viceroy and Pasha of Egypt, grows up with a double heritage, Greek Orthodox and Muslim. Michel Faïs' *Autobiography of a Book* (1994) illustrates experimentally the tensions within a Greek-Ladino voice and history. These works explore the confluence of traditions that can make identities double and loyalties multiple.

Other times, it is the crossing of languages and idioms that narratives highlight. Both *The Silverplant Blooms* (1992) by Vassilis

Rhea Galanaki



Gouroyannis and *May Your Name be Blessed* (1993) by Sotiris Dimitriou, and the long story "Mouhareem" in the collection of the same name (1999) by Markos Meskos incorporate the vocabulary and the cadences of co-existing local dialects, thus showing that people in the very same region encounter all kinds of borders in their daily lives without even having to move.

Finally, there are novels that depict life on the national borders with all the contradictions and dangers this entails. Panos Theodoridis's *The Soundnovel of Captain Agras* (1999) tells the story of the life and death of an officer in Greek Macedonia at the turn of the 20th century. Manthos

Vassilis
Gouroyannis



Skargiotis's *Neutral Zone* (1995) presents a Greek Albanian who, unable to live in either country, settles on their borders. Telemachos Kotsias's *Rain on the Grave* (2000) centers on another Greek Albanian who is looking for the grave of a soldier killed forty-five years earlier while crossing the Greek-Albanian frontier.

Traders and travelers, adventurers and natives, nomads and refugees, artists and shepherds, Africans and Europeans, Balkans and Asians populate the pages of this extensive body of fiction. There are many examples to be found to show how pervasive their hybrid presence has become in Greek fiction since the 1990s. They can be designated as "others," minorities, diasporics, or strangers. However, together with the Greek characters, they are all part of the vast amalgamation of cultures that has become the main horizon of postmodern Greek fiction. Within this horizon, people move across layers of borders, often back and forth. They pass over frontiers of collective identification. They traverse lands of origin and memory. They inhabit several territories simultane-

*Telemachos
Kotsias*



ously. They contest boundaries and negotiate dividing lines.

The multicultural trend represents an exciting development for Greek narrative in many respects. First, it keeps Greek fiction in close dialogue with comparable literary trends in the Balkans, Latin America, South Asia, Eastern Europe and elsewhere. Next, it brings to the surface the often forgotten postcolonial origins of modern Hellenism - namely, its beginnings in the Ottoman, British, Russian, and other empires of the 19th century, the period to which most these novels return obsessively. Finally, it enables a re-reading of several figures of the Greek literary canon (from Grigorios Palaiologos to G. Viziynos and from N. Kazantzakis to D. Hatzis) in a new light, that of global ethnic literatures, and consequently to discover that 'border' writing has very deep roots in this genre, and that indeed it constitutes a continuous tradition within Greek letters, one which is almost two centuries old and still thriving.

VASSILIS LAMBROPOULOS

Markos Meskos

