

## 1950s Athens as Palimpsest: A BBC Radio Play by Louis MacNeice

Konstantina Georganta

The problem of Athens: ‘The most famous and one of the oldest cities in Europe, but it’s hard to think of it as alive.’<sup>1</sup> For the most part, Athens was presented as a city whose past was superimposed upon the present making the present – along with all its varied layers – non visible. That was the case in the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century when poet and radio practitioner Louis MacNeice wrote a 60-minute radio play for the BBC Home Service on Athens. At the time, the city was in the process of becoming the stage where a new war would take place as it is not an exaggeration to suggest that the Cold War started in the Greek capital.<sup>2</sup> In a letter he wrote whilst in Athens, MacNeice noted that since the war he had been ‘a staunch upholder ... of the principle that Europeans must try (however desperate the attempt!) to escape both the Russian brand of communism and Americanisation’:

Western Europe & certain other countries ... should try hard to retain their right to independent opinions, e.g. should not let American big business impose its will on them regardless. The *raison d’être* of such an independent group would not be to stay out of war if it came ... but would be to prevent it coming.<sup>3</sup>

*Portrait of Athens* was aired by the BBC Home Service on 18 November 1951 and this article explores how in this, previously undocumented, play MacNeice placed Athens in the map of cities that had witnessed severe traumas, which the play unveils in a representation of the city in the form of a palimpsest. In the *Portrait*, we find William Gladstone’s marble statue in the centre of the city, right in front of the National Library and right across from the centre of the ECA (Economic Cooperation Administration), half way between Constitution Square and Concord Square – ‘Constitution square ... where the troubles started ... in 1944 after the liberation’ and Concord Square, ‘the front line between the Reds and the British’ – while the people have to walk through the ghosts of SS officers to get to their jobs for a pound a day attending to the ‘bobbins in the spinning mill, factories of whirling bobbins stilted like kk guns’ (PA). The blend of history with the people’s everyday realities made 1950s Athens not only a symbol of the past but a new idiom speaking of the necessity for an increasing awareness of history to complement one’s consciousness of individuality. As John Berger wrote in 1972, ‘every image embodies a way of seeing’ and, even though images were first made ‘to conjure up the appearances of something that was absent,’ later the vision of the image-maker was also recognized as part of the record: ‘An image became a record of how X had seen Y. This was the result of an

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<sup>1</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Portrait of Athens*, BBC Home Service, UK, 18 November 1951. Subsequent references to this work are included in the text as marked PA.

<sup>2</sup> See also Foivos Oikonomides, «Ο Ψυχρός Πόλεμος ξεκίνησε από την Αθήνα» (‘The Cold War started from Athens’), *Eleftherotypia* (1 December 2013) [www.enet.gr/?i=news.el.article&id=401348](http://www.enet.gr/?i=news.el.article&id=401348) [Accessed 23 December 2014]

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Allison, ed. *Letters of Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber and Faber: 2010) 529, 536.

increasing consciousness of individuality, accompanying an increasing awareness of history.’<sup>4</sup> ‘Ladies and Gentlemen, bookworms and globetrotters, this is Athens. Look at her now!’ (PA).

### **Greece in the BBC**

In January 1950, MacNeice went to Greece to take up his post as the Director to the British Council in Athens. During his stay, for an eventual period of eighteen months, he produced three radio plays set in Greece – among them *In Search of Anoyia* (11 December 1951, 45 minutes, BBC Third Programme) and *The Centre of the World: Delphi* (28 January 1952, 60 minutes, BBC Third Programme) – and started writing his poetry collection *Ten Burnt Offerings* (also aired even though not especially written for the BBC), which was eventually published in 1952. These three plays can be placed in a series of other features on Greece written and often produced by MacNeice since the 1940s. Yet, at the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century and just after the Second World War and the Civil War that ensued in Greece, the time was opportune for new appendices to old idioms as a new era was starting in which Europe was rebuilding itself.

Athens in the 1950s was the capital of a country under wide reconstruction much needed after the city had suffered ‘greater destruction by war than any other country in Europe ‘with damages equal to ‘the country’s national income for two years.’<sup>5</sup> The Marshall Plan or European Recovery Program (1947) aided the ‘Greek Constructive Effort’ and led to a rise in industry ‘at about 85 per cent. of the 1939 level’ by August 1949.<sup>6</sup> The Marshall Plan was followed by the Economic Cooperation Administration signed by President Truman in 1948, which was created to establish, as Mogens Pelt notes, ‘an international economic regime of trade and finance dominated by the values of the United States, by the ideology of the mutual benefits of a world market,’ the ideological underpinnings of which were rooted in the belief that 1930s depression and despair had bred ‘totalitarianism and militarism.’<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the end of the Second World War found Greece immersed in a Civil War that lasted at least until 1949. In post-war Greece, Silvio Pons reminds us, ‘the limits of Moscow’s control were made clear;’ ‘The Greek Communist Party [...] took up arms in response to the alliance between London and the monarchy in a country assigned to Great Britain by the agreements between Stalin and Churchill. In December 1944, the partisan movement led by the communists launched a mass mobilization that transformed rapidly into an armed uprising in Athens.’<sup>8</sup> It is telling that, when poet and publisher John Lehmann found himself in Athens in 1946, he noted how his first impression of the city – its orderly streets, kiosks selling papers of every political leaning, eager small boys with their shoe-shine apparatus prodding passers-by, people discussing openly at their café-tables and washing down their meals with *retsina* – was soon overcome by the smell of the ‘police state’ creeping under the door. ‘Greece had simply become,’ he wrote some years later, ‘one of the chief battlegrounds for the new war that had supplanted the old, the war for world power between the Soviets and the west.’<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, Penguin Books, 1972) 10.

<sup>5</sup>‘Reconstruction in Greece: Work on Communications and Harbours,’ *The Times* 6 July 1948, 5.

<sup>6</sup>‘Greek Constructive Effort: Renewed Hope of Military and Economic Success,’ *The Times* 6 August 1949, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Mogens Pelt, *Tying Greece to the West: US-West German-Greek Relations 1949-1974*. (Denmark: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006) 39.

<sup>8</sup> Silvio Pons, ‘Stalin and the European Communists after World War Two (1943–1948),’ *Past and Present*, 2 (2011) 126.

<sup>9</sup> John Lehmann, *The Ample Proposition: Autobiography III*. (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1966) 63-64.

MacNeice was a member of the BBC's Drama and Features Department since 1941 and during the war he wrote wartime features on Greece, such as *The Glory that is Greece* (28 October 1941), *Salutation to Greece* (22 March 1942), *Salute to Greece* (25 October 1942) and *Long Live Greece* (25 March 1943).<sup>10</sup> At that time, Barbara Coulton notes, 'wartime features, presenting civilized values, attacking the threat of tyranny and oppression, celebrating the victories of allies, alternated with plays on historical or literary themes.'<sup>11</sup> *The Glory that is Greece*, for example, made connections between ancient and contemporary Greece depicting the struggle between democracy and totalitarianism as the fight of modern Greek soldiers against the Nazis, or the ancient Greeks opposing the Persians.<sup>12</sup>

April 20th: Our Allies are holding Thermopylae.

April 25th: We have had to withdraw from Thermopylae.

April 25th: The Germans have occupied the island of Lemnos. The small Greek garrison fought for over four hours.

April 26th: The last British troops are evacuating Greece. At the request of our Government. The Greek population is steeled for the worst.<sup>13</sup>

'In their long history, which had been a constant fight for liberty,' a 1940 article in *The Times* read, 'the Greeks had known many enemies, but had been able to survive and 'will survive.'<sup>14</sup> By 1942, Greece was still 'Unconquered' and an 'Example to the World,' with the Greeks having lost 'all but honour' and on 26 March an article reported statements made by various government representatives 'gathered in the midst of the second Greek War of Independence to celebrate the first':

Instead of saying 'The Glory that was Greece' we could sing 'The Glory that is Greece. 'Greece made possible the modern development of our history by the action she took on a September day at the Battle of Marathon. Last year the tide of Nazi burning lava met its first impediments in the old mountains of Macedonia. [...] It was good for us in these dark days to remember Byron's great courage, and to reflect how the Greek people plucked the flower of victory from the ashes of despair. They were suffering today as they suffered in 1827, from a cruel occupation: but once again they had aroused not merely the admiration but also the conscience of the West.'<sup>15</sup>

When the Greeks halted the Italian advance, they became the heroes of the day. By the mid-forties, Avin Sharon notes, the adoration of the Parthenon had given way to a 'new passion for

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<sup>10</sup> See *Louis MacNeice: The Classical Radio Plays*, eds. Amanda Wrigley and S.J. Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Coulton, *Louis MacNeice in the BBC* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980) 52-60.

<sup>12</sup> Brian Arkins, 'Athens no longer dies: Greek and Roman Themes in MacNeice,' *Classics Ireland* 7 (2000) 4.

<sup>13</sup> *The Glory that is Greece*, BBC Home Service, UK, Tuesday 28 October 1941.

<sup>14</sup> 'Guarantors of Liberty,' *The Times* 31 October 1940, 2.

<sup>15</sup> 'Greek Independence Day,' *The Times* 26 March 1942, 7.

an encounter with living Greece'<sup>16</sup> but, we could note here, this passion was still wanting as the country was constructed as too strong a symbol of the past.

In the radio travelogue, *A Journey in Greece*, for example, which was produced by the Head of the Features Department at the BBC, Laurence Gilliam, and aired by the BBC Home Service in the same month as *Portrait of Athens* on 6 November 1951, we find a portrayal of Greece aligned with the BBC representations that far. The aim of Gilliam's feature - as he wrote in 'Greece: A Country with a Living Tradition,' the *Radio Times* article which introduced his six week journey in the country - was to show how the country was facing 'the problems of reconstruction after ten years of invasion, occupation and civil war,' with the writer noting that 'the struggle for Greece is the struggle for Europe in miniature.'<sup>17</sup>

A journey in Greece, Gilliam suggested, is a journey 'in time as well as in space, a journey to the very edge and beginning of Europe, a return to the youth and to the limits of the West 'and, even though he went to Greece 'to look for the life of Greeks today,' he found that one day in Athens was enough to prove to him 'how unreal any such division must be.'<sup>18</sup> He found Athens confusing yet 'gay, luxurious, expensive and well-dressed, a modern capital 'and, drawn by the Parthenon, he only commented on the Athenians as 'vivid, fast-talking, fast-moving individualists' who 'overshadow' but also 'ignore' their past 'except for the purpose of tourism.'<sup>19</sup> Behind the clichéd unreality of division between past and present, one notices that 'the life of Greeks today' is ignored and devalued, them being the only ones described as ignorant of their past despite being the living inhabitants of a city marking the 'very edge and beginning of Europe,' the youth and limits of the West.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, the country is depicted as a precious fossil to be rescued and preserved in an important struggle for Europe. The terms 'West' and 'Europe' are placed amongst talk about the efforts to save the people of Greece from what is implied as an invasion from the East, which the people themselves, engrossed in the lures of profiteering, Gilliam seems to suggest, are either incapable of apprehending or irrelevant to. In Gilliam's narrative the people of Athens 'kept getting in the way' and to understand them he felt he needed to get away from the capital and visit as many parts of Greece outside of Athens as he could.<sup>21</sup> Despite his efforts to find modern Greece, however, his narrative reveals a persistence to discover relics of either the West, as in Corfu which he described as 'closest to the West in spirit,' or of the ancient past, as in Rhodes where he found the 'ancient pattern' reasserting itself in a village *Panygeri*.<sup>22</sup> Gilliam's travelogue and MacNeice's play show two different approaches to the representation of Athens in the beginning of the 1950s. On the one hand, it is a city that needs to be saved by the West, building on the concept of Greece as connected to a western past, and, on the other, an old stage for a new war, which would soon engulf the rest of Europe.

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<sup>16</sup> Avin Sharon, 'Introduction' in *Νάνος Βαλαωρίτης-Γιώργος Σεφέρης Αλληλογραφία (1945-1968) και Τριάντα Τέσσερις Επιστολές του Ν. Βαλαωρίτη στον Γ. Κ. Κατσιμίπαλη (1947-1950) (Nanos Valaoritis-George Seferis: Correspondence (1945-1968) and Thirty-Four Letters From N. Valaoritis to G.K. Katsimbalis (1947-1950))* edited by Lila Theodosi (Athens: Ypsilon, 2004). 21.

<sup>17</sup> *A Journey in Greece*, BBC Home Service, UK, 5-6 November 1951.

<sup>18</sup> Laurence Gilliam, 'Greece: A Country with a Living Tradition,' *Radio Times* 2 November 1951, 5-6.

<sup>19</sup> Gilliam 5-6.

<sup>20</sup> Gilliam 5-6.

<sup>21</sup> Gilliam 5-6.

<sup>22</sup> Gilliam 5-6.

## Portrait of Athens

After the mid-1940s the status of radio drama (a relatively recent phenomenon developed after the establishment of the BBC in 1922) was changing. Even though the key to radio drama was initially considered to be simplicity and an avoidance of too much action so as not to confuse the audience, by 1930, when nine out of ten homes in Britain had a wireless set, a new type of listener capable to create illusions was envisaged.<sup>23</sup> A writer for the radio, MacNeice wrote in 1944, 'must 'envisage' what kinds of voices will be heard together on the air and he must apportion the lines in such a way as to help any necessary contrast.'<sup>24</sup> With the first impression of Athens in the play as that of 'a nagging bell and a glaring sky,' 'a box on the ear, a smack in the eye,' MacNeice created the desired 'necessary contrast' and prepared the audience's senses to view a city which rattled the senses: '[T]his is Athens. Look at her now!' (PA).

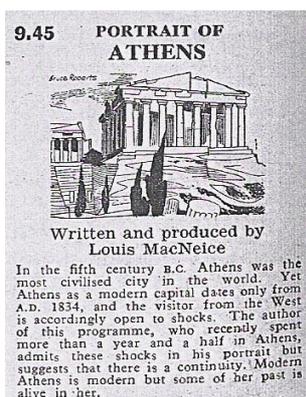
Transposing twenty-four centuries to twenty-four hours and squeezing twenty-four hours into the space of one, *Portrait of Athens* can be considered a piece of radio cinematography aspiring to create a fluidity of images succeeding one another so as to produce the illusion of a single moving scene whilst mimicking a modernist narrative temporality which annihilated space through time.<sup>25</sup> The different layers stay visible throughout.

Extraordinary colour the Parthenon is. Quite golden. But what's coming over the Parthenon? Why that's a roof coming over it. A red roof swarming all round it. And it's growing a spike, a tall thin spike, a minaret. [...]

Now the minarets dwindled away again. Turks must have gone or perhaps they've not come yet. But why all these priests? These can't be orthodox priests, they've on wrong sort of hats, no beards and they're talking Italian. [...]

Silence again. The West undresses and western armour vanish. [...] Priests reappear but everything seems in decay. [...]

No, but look, that decay, that sickness is gone! Or has it not come yet? Quite a small town, provincial town, but alive! The miniature churches multiply, quite modest exteriors still but they are blazing with gold inside. A Greek town again in a more or less Greek empire. [Byzantine Church music fades in]. (PA)



*Portrait of Athens* narrated twenty-four centuries compressed into one day through a visitor's dream sequences. Depicting the peregrinations of a visitor in 1950s Athens, the city appeared 'crude as a poster, hard as nails':

Not what I expected. Schools and museums, poets and dons they harp upon Athens, they lead one up the garden. A garden in a dream drowsy with bees, mellowed with marbles, tasteful, reposeful. But here is no garden and this is no dream. The alphabet hasn't changed since Pericles but what are those words

<sup>23</sup> Coulton 37-41.

<sup>24</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Christopher Columbus: A Radio Play* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944) 17.

<sup>25</sup> See the compression of time and space as discussed by David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989) 260-283.

up there on the wall, ads for sewing machines and radio sets, political slogans, names from Hollywood. The language is Greek but the echoes are modern.

[...]

Morning in Athens. Dazzle and knockabout. Blocks of ice manhandled with pincers. A priest puffing by in his black flannel hat and his back knot and the long grey smoke up his beard. A brush brushing a concrete doorstep. Radio music sipping through shutters. A distant tram, a distant cock and the ruthless lights scarring the pavements. (PA)

The method of a visitor's dream sequences allowed MacNeice to present the city's bones – Athens of Thucydides, Demosthenes, Pericles and Socrates – but also a city with street cries and Asia Minor traditional dance tunes (from recordings made by MacNeice when in Greece). In the play one can indeed find a novel combination of sounds of the *cafeneion* in Omonoia Square ('δεν περιάζει, αμέσως, έφτασε!') and of the kiosks or the market place ('New this morning,' 'fresh tomatoes!') as well as a list of popular Greek songs, such as 'Tampakera,' 'Asta ta Mallakia Sou,' 'Sunnephiasmene Kyriake,' 'Katerina Thessalonikia,' 'To Minore Tou Tsitsane' and 'Thalassaki.' Accompanied by the sound of hawkers and a chorus that knows what goes on 'in prison and parliament,' a visitor to the capital embarks on a journey where he comes across not only the Pnyx and the Acropolis but also William Gladstone's statue in central Athens, the centre of the Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA), Constitution Square and Concord Square, 'where the troubles started...in 1944 after the liberation,' Merlin Street in Kolonaki where the SS had their headquarters, and meets, among others, Socrates who finds the city's people familiar, still talking about politics, and asks: 'in the case of this Athens, which once was my home, dare we say that this Athens has kept her identity? I do not know, I am asking (PA).'<sup>26</sup>

The audience was urged to apply themselves to portrait, to form a mental image of the city represented and then play the part of the characters presented so that the portrait itself could become more vivid. The steady recurrence of several figures functioned as reference points, the glue that linked all the episodes together: first, we find the constancy of the visitor, who finds himself in the 'whirligig of time,' where various historical and mythical figures, such as Pericles and goddess Athena, parade, and, then, the chorus (acted by Hedli Anderson and Dylan Thomas), which links the various episodes for the sake of the audience and the visitor: 'The centuries race past, streets become empty spaces and spaces are filled by crusader and Turk and emptied again... and again built over.'<sup>27</sup> The combination of a modern time visitor with an ancient chorus created a constant dialogue between the two perspectives all the while confusing the dichotomy between present and past and allowing the two to exist in a multi-layered whole.

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<sup>26</sup> The statue of Gladstone by Gregorios Vitalis was put up in front of the University of Athens in 1886, the only foreigner, Michael Llewellyn Smith notes, to have won a place in this 'national ideological space' with statues including those of Plato, Socrates, Korais, the scholar of the Enlightenment, and Capodistria, the first president of the Greek State. See Michael Llewellyn Smith, *Athens: A Cultural and Literary History* (Oxford: Signal Books Limited, 2004) 150.

<sup>27</sup> The list of actors for *Portrait of Athens* included: Charles Leno (Crier, Corporal), Hedli Anderson (Female Chorus, Greek Voice, Guest), Laidman Browne (Sausage-seller, Clergyman, King Ludwig, Pericles), Guy Kingsley Poynter (American), Vrassidas Capernaros (Crier, Greek), Dylan Thomas (Male Chorus), John Turnbull (Plato, Uncle), Roger Delgado (Butcher, Nephew, Italian Priest), Malcolm Hayes (Man Customer, Demosthenes, German Waiter, Nut Seller, King Otto), Grizelda Hervey (Woman Customer, Athena, Greek girl), Allan McClelland (Visitor), Duncan McIntyre (Socrates), John Veinoglou (News Reader).

This becomes more evident in a discussion the visitor holds with Socrates in the middle of the play:

Visitor: The Parthenon? That's it there!

Socrates: Excuse me but it is not. I can see through that object.

Visitor: Yes, but it's ruins you see.

Socrates: A ruin young man is a ruin. It is no longer and should not be described as that building of which it is a ruin. A temple or house of a god is like an ordinary house, it is something built to be used. But that cluster of columns up there it is no more than a skeleton and one at that with a lot of its bones missing. I am right in assuming it is now not used for anything?

Visitor: No, but people look at it.

Socrates: That is not the function of a temple. I trust they still use the agorá.

Visitor: The agorá? Oh the ágora?

Socrates: The market-place. Very handy spot for conversation.

Visitor: Oh, the Americans have excavated that.

Socrates: Excavated?

Visitor: Excavation is digging up ruins and things.

Socrates: So my market-place too was ruined. Including my favourite colonnade?

Visitor: Yes, completely. Ruined and buried.

Socrates: Then why did the...what did you call them? ... dig it up?

Visitor: Because we all want to know what used to be there.

Socrates: Why? Have you nothing better to do?

Visitor: Well, everyone wants to know what ancient Athens was like.

Socrates: Ancient Athens? I never cared about ancient Athens.

Visitor: No, because then it was the Athens of your own day.

Socrates: You misunderstand me. The Athens of my own day I cared about and the Athens of today, if only I were here, the Athens of today I should care about too. I dare say it hasn't changed much.

Visitor: You dare say? ... But can't you see how it's changed?

Socrates: Oh, you mean these buildings? They do not, I confess, appeal to me. Too big, too high, not really suited to the climate. But the buildings are not the city. A city consists of the men in it and the men, in spite of their dress, which does not, I confess, appeal to me, the men seem really quite familiar and sound even more familiar. I heard them just now talking politics, in somewhat barbarous Greek, still it was certainly politics. But I noticed they have some new oaths. What are these gods that they swear by? (PA)

Socrates is here used to oppose the 'cultural mystification' of the past as MacNeice both favours an excavation of it and teases the reification of ruins.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, MacNeice uses Socrates not only as a voice resurfacing in modern Athens but as a medium representing the writer's fears about the outcomes of the post-war reconstructive period. Much like the other two

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<sup>28</sup> See John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*: 'The past is not for living in; it is a well of conclusions from which we draw in order to act. Cultural mystification of the past entails a double loss. Works of art are made unnecessarily remote', 11.

radio plays MacNeice produced in the same period, the message, in the words of the main character from *In Search of Anoyia*, is that

nothing we've had or we've been should ever seem long ago – and nothing we've known or we've seen should ever seem far away. We should cling to the ball of thread that connects the strange and the usual, the past and the present, ourselves and the others.<sup>29</sup>

Athens is used to question the notion of identity, itself problematic because the minute we start assigning an identity to an entity we render this entity static. Athens is symbolic of this process as a city whose present disappoints because it is forever codified as a ruin. 'I am a foreigner and I want to see Athens,' MacNeice's visitor says in the play, "'Where can I buy some dark glasses?'" "Nice dark glasses? Almost anywhere! Best dark glasses are sold in Paris! But you won't see Athens, you'll see something else. Pinks and mauves, half-tones, half-truths'" (PA).

In the numerous regional clusters comprising the city MacNeice found that the unit remained the individual and in his *Portrait* he denied his visitor the luxury of 'half-tones' and 'half-truths,' favouring an increasing awareness of history to complement a consciousness of individuality (PA). Throughout the play, the 'listeners in words' can become the visitor invited as they are to look at the city, usually taking their directions from the Acropolis, the highest central point of the city together with Hymettus behind where the sun is about to once again 'open fire' at the end of the play, and listen to the perspective of each of the figures appearing (PA). The variety of voices populating the *Portrait* becomes thus an integral part of its central theme since, as MacNeice had previously suggested, the treatment of a theme chosen for a radio play must be dramatic in the Aristotelian sense that a central event or theme will be central and all else, including characters, subordinate.<sup>30</sup> As regards *Portrait of Athens*, it is Socrates 'words that reverberate throughout the play for this reader – 'dare we say that this Athens has kept her identity?' – a question not approached through a piling up of shards and broken fragments but through constant links and threads leading to the city's present.

Predisposed to expect a depiction of ruins, with the Parthenon as the centerpiece, the audience of *Portrait of Athens* was now presented with the connection between the burnt houses thirty years earlier in Asia Minor and the New Smyrna settlements on the outskirts of 1950s Athens. MacNeice linked the present of the city to its not so distant past so that modern Athens could be seen as a result of both its modern and ancient history.

Male Chorus: On the outskirts of Athens, far from the luxury flats, where the pavements have turned into dust cracks, are pockets of regional life.

Female Chorus: Where poor folks from islands and highlands have made their own outposts [...]

Male Chorus: Refugees from starvation or war.

Female Chorus: From the war with Mussolini and Hitler, from wars with the Turks thirty years ago. (PA)

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<sup>29</sup> Louis MacNeice, *In Search of Anoyia*, BBC Third Programme, UK, 11 December 1951.

<sup>30</sup> MacNeice, Christopher Columbus 14.

‘Water?’, we hear in the *Portrait*, ‘But darling of course! The flat’s in Kolonaki not in New Smyrna, Cherie!’ ‘Νερό, I said love, νερό! Water, wa-ter. Oh, so you’re short. You forgot to queue at the pump today?’, we hear a few lines later as traditional Asia Minor dance tunes fade in.

Water was a telling symbol in 1950s Greece as water shortage was a practical concern. The Athens correspondent of *The Times* reported in 1950 that never had Athens, ‘plagued by a dry climate and an unfavourable terrain,’ had sufficient water ‘since the time of Christ.’<sup>31</sup> The water rationing enforced since 1943 was addressed in 1950 with the construction of a ‘15-mile-long system of tunnels and aqueducts from the Kakosalessi Torrent to the Marathon reservoir lying in a bowl in the mountains to the north of Athens.’<sup>32</sup> Water had a symbolic significance for MacNeice too. Three years prior to his encounter with Greece, he had travelled to India. MacNeice’s India, Jon Stallworthy comments, was ‘richly polyphonic’ and embodied the ‘opposing principles that had long dominated his imagination: water and rock, flux and stasis.’<sup>33</sup> Water was essential in his poetry about Ireland, portrayed as the alternative to a world ‘moving towards universal dryness of spirit,’ an ‘imaginative alternative,’ Terence Brown has suggested, ‘to the increasingly homogeneous culture of a mass society.’<sup>34</sup> ‘[F]or men dying,’ MacNeice writes in the poem ‘Our Sister Water’ from *Ten Burnt Offerings*, which he wrote while in Greece, ‘water is all / To be wished. Is also the wish to live.’<sup>35</sup> Most of the people roaming the streets of Athens in the *Portrait* are lucky to have jobs:

A pound a day for most of you, but even so you’ll stop down there at the kiosk and spend sixpence on a daily paper and a little further on you’ll spend nine pence on a coffee and while you have your coffee you’ll spend nine pence on a shoe shine. [...] And those of you who have no jobs, and you seem to be many, you’ll still need your paper at the kiosk, you can read it all morning at the coffee shop.

Some come ‘from burnt dark villages on the borders of Albania and Bulgaria, and that was perhaps three years back’ and others ‘from burnt out homes in Asia Minor, and that was nearly thirty years back,’ all going out from their ‘hovels’ to live ‘by their wits and their guts’ (PA). Water signifies in the *Portrait* the individual’s persistence to survive which is combined with Socrates’ uncompromising nature, exhibited in his speech to his accusers before they condemned him to death (which we hear in the *Portrait*):

‘This is my teaching Athenians and if this is the doctrine which corrupts the youth, I am a mischievous person to either acquit me or not but, whichever you do, understand that I shall never alter my ways not even if you force me to die many times for it.’

In ‘Athens – City of Contrasts,’ the *Radio Times* article that introduced the play, MacNeice suggested that he wanted to present a ‘panorama’ of the city’s present and past to suggest its

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<sup>31</sup> ‘Athens Water Supplies,’ *The Times* 21 December 1950, 3.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Athens Water Supplies,’ 3.

<sup>33</sup> Jon Stallworthy, *Louis MacNeice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995) 367.

<sup>34</sup> Terence Brown, ‘MacNeice’s Ireland, MacNeice’s Islands,’ *Literature and Nationalism* ed. Vincent Newey and Ann Thompson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1991) 236.

<sup>35</sup> Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, ed. Peter McDonald (London: Faber and Faber, 2007) 328.

continuity.<sup>36</sup> ‘We in England,’ he wrote, ‘having all had the name of Athens rammed into our ears since our childhood, have naturally several preconceptions about it – most of which are misconceptions.’<sup>37</sup> Challenging these misconceptions, MacNeice presented instead a modern capital dating only from A.D. 1834, which saw the removal of Turkish minarets and the rapid urban expansion brought by the new King Otto, which in its turn gave way to blocks of luxury flats while streets beneath still kept ‘something of the village with the braying of donkeys and the haunting quasi-Byzantine street-cries of barefooted hawkers.’<sup>38</sup> The city today, MacNeice reported, has spread towards the mountains with the new refugees ‘from World War II and from the later troubles with the Communists,’ joining the older refugees driven out of Turkey in 1923.<sup>39</sup> The author of *Portrait of Athens* wanted his audience to find an element of the present within the representation of the past and, in David Harvey’s terms, we could say that this was interpreted in the play as a focus on things not as things per se but as things as the products of processes. The forms and structures we see in the city, Harvey tells us, reflect ‘social processes at work in particular times and places. The result is an urban environment constituted as a palimpsest, a series of layers constituted and constructed at different historical moments all superimposed upon each other.’<sup>40</sup> This is why, he continues, ‘if we are going to get to the heart of what the city is about,’ we need to focus on ‘processes rather than things and we should think of things as products of processes.’<sup>41</sup> MacNeice’s ‘panorama’ is, in this sense, not an unbroken portrait of the city but a layering of historical eras under which earlier eras are still visible, albeit often fragmented, part hidden, sometimes ignored.

The city’s identity was presented in MacNeice’s *Portrait* as something imposed by the outside whereas the constant look back and forth to the city’s past and present created a fluidity of images that in turn formed an ever-changing image of an ever-changing city where the past was not solely the past and the present not solely the present. Athens was becoming Athens. When in the play Socrates asks about the city’s identity, he suggests that he ‘never cared about ancient Athens’ (PA). Additionally, the *Portrait*’s timeframe, when new dualities were being imposed (east versus west), made this negation of categorisation even more poignant, raising a question about the politics of identity. Since Athens, as the chorus of the *Portrait* says, ‘leaves no one alone,’ (PA) the politics of identity are expanded to include not only Athens but ‘western Europe & certain other countries’ as well.<sup>42</sup>

Now, men of Athens, if it is possible for our city to remain at peace, assuming that the decision rested with us, then I say we ought to remain at peace, but if a foreign ruler with a sword in his hand and a large army at his back offers you the name of peace while his acts are acts of war, what road remains for us but the road of resistance? [...]

Visitor: That sounds very familiar, I must have read it at school.

Male Chorus: At School or in your London papers?

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<sup>36</sup> Louis MacNeice, ‘Athens – City of Contrasts,’ *Radio Times* 16 November 1951, 5.

<sup>37</sup> MacNeice, Athens 5.

<sup>38</sup> MacNeice, Athens 5.

<sup>39</sup> MacNeice, Athens 5.

<sup>40</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry Into the Origins of Cultural Change: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989) 22.

<sup>41</sup> Harvey, 22.

<sup>42</sup> Allison, *Letters of Louis MacNeice*, 536.

Visitor: It was a speech in the Pnyks when Athens was up against Philip.

Male Chorus: Or was it in the House of Commons when England was up against Hitler?

(PA)

As the play ended just before dawn, marking the 'spiritual curfew' of Socrates' death and the time when the Athenians voted to march to Marathon, a space familiar to a 1940s audience, the city's present pointed once again to the root of 'the modern development of our history,' focusing on the debt owed to those long gone and those who recently perished (PA):

Male Chorus: The dancers thin out and the black turns grey. Soon it will all start again. This is the time before dawn when they voted to march to Marathon, five for and five against but luckily there was a casting vote.

Visitor: Luckily?

Male Chorus: Yes, luckily.

Crier: Come on there, come on! Wake up if you're not going to sleep. The wheel has come round, the whole thing starting again. Yes, look, look over there to the east. Already the sun is hulled down behind Hymettus, soon he will open fire.

[Thalassaki fading in and out]

Socrates: Creto, we owe a cock to Asclepius, pay it, don't forget. (PA)

MacNeice had seen the foundation of the BBC Third Programme in 1946 as the first to assume that its audience was 'going to *work* at its listening.'<sup>43</sup> As a result, in the parable play *The Dark Tower* (1946), Angela Frattarola observes, he refused to 'pacify the readers with any answers' explaining that the play was not meant to teach a lesson but was instead concerned with exploring the psychology of the main protagonist as he debated with himself his meaning and purpose: 'like James Joyce's allusions to the Odyssey in *Ulysses* or Eliot's reliance on the story of the Holy Grail in *The Waste Land*, MacNeice plays with the mythic form of the quest, while insisting, 'do not ask me what *Ism* it illustrates or what Solution it offers.'<sup>44</sup> Similarly, in *Portrait of Athens* MacNeice foregrounded Socrates as the desired portrait of the post-war individual who struggles to safekeep a sense of identity against the ruins of war and, following his example, he does not provide us with a clear cut answer of what 'this Athens' is but rather urges us to ask what we make of it as individuals. The meaning of Athens is deferred down an endless chain of signification and the city becomes in this way in MacNeice's *Portrait* a text that remains new, as it is always ascribed with new meaning, while bearing the traces of old narratives, fuelled by the perception people have of it but also of the historical details the *Portrait* brings to the fore. The *Portrait*'s visitor is a reader and writer at the same time, since it is through his peregrinations, dialogues, and imagination that we get evidence of the history of Athens within the modern city he comes across. At the same time, the story unfolded is itself palimpsestic as the visitor's preconceptions are exposed when they are set against the places he or she visits and the people of the past and present that he or she meets. The individual's responsibility to narrative construction, whether historical or political (which is, more often than not, one and the same thing) is also present here as the visitor's initial reluctance to see Athens

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<sup>43</sup> Louise MacNeice, *The Dark Tower [1947]* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964) 17.

<sup>44</sup> Angela Frattarola, 'The Modernist 'Microphone Play': Listening in the Dark to the BBC,' *Modern Drama* 52. 4 (2009) 465.

(‘I am a foreigner and I want to see Athens. Where can I buy some dark glasses?’) is not for lack of evidence.

Crier: This way, this way your Plato’s Academy, in the buoyant morning of western thought!

Male Chorus: When they believed that thinking could solve things.

Plato: But this is what I must insist on. Until the philosophers are kings or until the kings and rulers of this world require the spirit and drive of philosophy, until political power is combined with wisdom, not before then will our cities be rid of their troubles. No, nor the whole of mankind. Then and then only will our ideal state have a chance to live, a place in the sun.

Female Chorus: A chance to live.

Male Chorus: A place in the sun.

Male Chorus: Hear the echoes then? (PA)

Athens was introduced in the beginning of the play as a city whose history is ‘full of gaps and silences’: ‘To portray such a city needs a certain sleight of hand and the program which follows is a sort of token patchwork’ (PA). The *Portrait* centred around two questions: the one involved the constancy of the city’s identity and the other addressed the audience and the reasons behind their inability to think of the city as alive (indeed the play is rife with questions). Athens was approached as a place usually imagined in the past and so a place which the audience usually viewed from a distance. The audience was in turn presented with a story told not in a linear fashion but with continuous leaps in the past and the present, a technique which echoes Brecht’s method of presenting events as the result of a series of alternative courses of action and characters as ‘alterable beings,’ the products of social forces.<sup>45</sup> It is via the alterable beings that the gaps and silences in the history of the city were rendered meaningful. Athenians were still discussing politics but their terms had changed since Socrates’ time. Their identity could not have remained the same and, with them, or, rather, as the city itself changed, so had they. What MacNeice did was fill the void created by various gaps and silences with a visitor’s peregrinations through a city that bore the traumas of recent wars and was not the product of a seamless continuum between past and present, suggesting perhaps that what the audience listened to was a reflection of their own situation.

Plato: But this is what I must insist on. Until the philosophers are kings or until the kings and rulers of this world require the spirit and drive of philosophy, until political power is combined with wisdom, not before then will our cities be rid of their troubles. No, nor the whole of mankind. Then and then only will our ideal state have a chance to live, a place in the sun.

Female Chorus: A chance to live.

Male Chorus: A place in the sun.

Male Chorus: Hear the echoes then? (PA)

It is interesting to note here that George Seferis, a Greek poet revered by MacNeice, had also used Socrates in his 1946 poem ‘The Thrush’ not only because the *Apology* was one of the books that had influenced him in his life, but also because he felt that his generation had grown

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<sup>45</sup> Michael Patterson, *Strategies of Political Theatre: Post-War British Playwrights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 18.

up and lived in an ‘age of injustice.’<sup>46</sup> In addition, it was in Seferis’ images of voyage, and in particular in his *Mythistorama* (1935), that MacNeice later found something which ‘might make sense of both our past and future and so redeem our present’ when he reviewed Seferis’ *Poems* in 1960: ‘Seferis can create a house from a roating ship or a ruin and in every case can people it. With the people for whom he has compassion. The heroes. The lost. The anonymous.’<sup>47</sup> Similarly, MacNeice presented the city of Athens as a palimpsest upon which new layers of memory and identity were inscribed. These were the products of political events, such as the Second World War, the Civil War and the emerging Cold War, as they were gradually inscribed upon collective memory, itself influenced by the lived and remembered traumas of past and present refugees (the building block of cultural trauma).<sup>48</sup> MacNeice viewed Athens as emblematic of this process of memory construction, which is why his *Portrait* is filled with episodes from the past that echo in the present moment, and he peopled the city with the ones who were creating the city’s collective memory and collective identity while remaining anonymous. In a pre-emptive strike in the first years of the Cold War, MacNeice placed Athens in the map of cities that had confronted and would still have to confront major political traumas imagining the future in the past.<sup>49</sup>

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**Konstantina Georganta** is an alumna of the Universities of Athens and Glasgow and the author of *Conversing Identities: Encounters Between British, Irish and Greek Poetry, 1922-1952* (Rodopi, 2012). She is the administrator of [www.athensinapoem.com](http://www.athensinapoem.com), is currently working on her second book on Three Long Poems in Athens and 2015 saw the publication of her first poetry collection, *Ρακοσυλλέκτης χρόνος* (Panoptikon).

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<sup>46</sup> See ‘Letter on “The Thrush”’ in *On the Greek Style: Selected Essays in Poetry and Hellenism*, trans. Rex Warner and Th.D. Frangopoulos (Athens: Denise Harvey & Company, 1966) 103. In the 1950s, Seferis presented a series of talks for the BBC while his own poetry was read by actress Elsa Verghis, and in December 1959 Louis MacNeice and Cecil Day Lewis read his poetry in English in BBC’s Third Programme.

<sup>47</sup> Alan Heuser, ed. *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) 222-223.

<sup>48</sup> On ‘cultural trauma’, see J.C. Alexander, R. Eyerman, B.Giesen, N.J. Smelser, and P. Sztompka *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) and on the term applied to the Greek Civil War see *Εμφύλιος: Πολιτισμικό Τραύμα* (*Civil War: Cultural Trauma*), ed. Nikos Demertzis, Eleni Paschaloudi, and George Antoniou (Athens: Alexandria, 2013).

<sup>49</sup> See Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).