

**Joanna Kruczkowska, *Irish Poets and Modern Greece: Heaney, Mahon, Cavafy, Seferis* (Palgrave, 2017)**

Where all voyages end  
There is no way out.<sup>1</sup>

Poets who travel and poems that travel, and lines upon lines in a magnificent intertextual and comparative journey between Ireland and Greece; this is what *Irish Poets and Modern Greece: Heaney, Mahon, Cavafy, Seferis* offers its readers. Through a panorama of the Greek travel narratives of Derek Mahon in the period 1970 to 1997, and Seamus Heaney from 1995 to 2006, as well as their translations of and allusions to Greek poets, this valuable book unravels the intricate universe of two brilliant poetic voices. In the 1920s and 1930s, it was James Joyce who famously explored linguistic and literary allusions to Greece in *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegan's Wake* (1939) while in post-war Irish writing, 'travels of contemporary Irish poets have engendered some of the most memorable representations of Greece':

From Louis MacNeice's and Richard Murphy's Crete, and MacNeice's Ikaria in the 1950s, through the Irish phenomenon on Paros spanning six decades since the 1960s (Desmond O'Grady, Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, Rory Brennan), Paula Meehan's Crete, Seamus Heaney's Peloponnese and Delphi, Gerald Dawe's Crete and Cyprus, to Meehan's and Theo Dorgan's still-continued visits to Ikaria, Greece has been a destination for cultural and literary pilgrimage, the quest for a spiritual centre, a mediation site for political reflection and analogy, but also a place of chance encounters, fleeting impressions and sensual treat. (xiii)

Now, the poetic voices of Derek Mahon and Seamus Heaney reveal to us a string of varied associations between the land they call their own and the one revealed to them by their literal and metaphorical travels to Greece's present and past. Covering a period from the 1970s to the early years of the 2000s, *Irish Poets and Modern Greece* stages a dialogue between two countries in whose hi/stories many analogies can be drawn due to their extreme geographic positions in Europe and their postcolonial status, among other things.

Mahon travelled mainly to the islands and focuses in his poems on the Cycladic islands of Paros and Delos, while Heaney travelled mainly to the Peloponnese and mainland Greece (Attica and Sterea Ellada) and focuses mostly on Attica and Delphi. The two poets' choices of destinations are telling in themselves, mapping an island perspective versus a mainland one. Mahon's 'The Banished Gods' (1975) offers a political narrative pertinent to a present-day reader.

It is here that the banished gods are in hiding,  
Here they sit out the centuries

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Mahon, C.P. Cavafy's 'The City,' *Echo's Grove: Translations*, 2013.

In stone, water  
And the hearts of trees,  
Lost in a reverie of their own natures —  
  
Of zero-growth economics and seasonal change  
In a world without cars, computers  
Or chemical skies,  
Where thought is a fondling of stones  
And wisdom a five-minute silence at moonrise.

As Kruczkowska notes, the history of Delos in the years of colonialism and decline is of interest here:

The proud centre of the Delian League was turned into a colony, while the periphery of that alliance, that is Athens, became its coloniser. The process of decline was completed by the desacralisation of Delos: 'the traderoutes' and 'the days of sail' in Mahon's poem remind one of the island's 'career' as one of the largest slave markets of antiquity, and of several raids and pirate attacks resulting in the complete desertion of the island. The failure of memory does the rest to eradicate the traces of former civilisation. The house whose window 'turns grey' seems abandoned like the Peruvian mines 'to a slow clock of condensation' in 'A Disused Shed,' being the territory of expropriation, but also of appropriation, where nature takes over, (re)claiming the island 'after history.' (34)

Finally, the book explores the links between Mahon, Heaney, Seferis and Cavafy. The author suggests that Cavafy led Mahon into a Greece different from that which he could experience with his senses and closer to his 'anti-Romantic disposition'. By contrast, Heaney tried to re-experience history and myth via a trajectory through the ancient sites of the Peloponnese and Delphi mapping out a 'philhellenic poetic pilgrimage' brutally shattered by his poetic references to the violence experienced in Northern Ireland in poems like 'The Augean Stables', part of 'Sonnets from Hellas' from the 2001 collection *Electric Light*:

And it was there in Olympia, down among green willows,  
The lustral wash and run of river shallows,  
That we heard of Sean Brown's murder in the grounds  
Of Bellaghy GAA Club. And imagined  
Hose-water smashing hard back off the asphalt  
In the car park where his athlete's blood ran cold.

When it comes to Seferis, Mahon's focus is on the themes of exile and catastrophe, while Heaney's is on the poet's public role. Heaney incorporates the Greek poet into his work with two Oxford lectures, in 1989 and 1993, a 2000 Harvard speech in 'Homage to Seferis' and a 2006 poetic letter titled 'To George Seferis in the Underworld', based on Seferis' last poem 'On Aspalathoi'. Interestingly, Mahon had alluded to Seferis 25 years earlier than Heaney: he used an epigraph from Seferis' *Mythistorama* (1935) in his *Ecclesiastes* (1970) to allude to international conflict, internecine strife and exile, relating this situation to his Ulster home

ground. Three years later, he had also used another fragment of the same work as an epigraph to his most famous poem 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford': 'Let them not forget us, the weak souls among the asphodels.' *Irish Poets and Modern Greece* tells the story of these encounters in every detail. The book tells a significant story of 'spiritual cross-breedings' such as that Seferis had located at the core of influences amongst nations, helping writers to find 'within their own national tradition, the most original and least exhausted sources'.

If you wish to get to the heart of the twentieth-century sense of lost bearings and lost roots, there is no better way to do it than through the eyes and 'snug as a gun' pens of two of the most significant poets and their return to Greece.

**Konstantina Georganta**