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# Never to Return: Migration and Old Age in Venezis's "The State of Virginia"

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This paper discusses Ilias Venezis's short story "The State of Virginia" with special emphasis on the themes of migration and old age. Published in 1954, in the aftermath of WWII and the Greek Civil War, "The State of Virginia" captures the drama of an elderly woman victim of the Asia Minor Catastrophe, as she is migrating to Virginia, U.S.A. after thirty years of temporary residence in a refugee village in rural Attica. My analysis focuses on the protagonist's reluctant migration as it emerges from the farewell scene between her and her life-long friend; their conversation on the irreversibility of their separation, the challenges facing elderly migrants, and the significance of native soil voices an insightful discourse on belonging and rootedness that transcends many socio-temporal limits.

In 1954 Ilias Venezis, internationally acclaimed author of *Number 31328* (*Tò Nouúmero 31328*, 1931), *Tranquillity* (*Γαλήνη*, 1939), and *Aeolian Land* (*Αιολική γῆ*, 1943) published a collection of short stories under the title *The Defeated* (*Οι Νικημένοι*); among them the five page-long "The State of Virginia", a close reading of which I offer in this paper. As critics have observed, all of the short stories in *The Defeated* "show characters who, in one way or another, have been trapped or defeated by life".<sup>1</sup> The theme running through the book is that of human vulnerability and helplessness before fate. Like Stamatoula, the protagonist of "The State of Virginia", most characters in *The Defeated* appear not only to have given up any hope to control their destiny ("A Finn in Algiers", "The Poplar Tree") but also to have embraced their submission to forces beyond their control, savouring the relief and peace generated by this act of surrender ("Night at the Temple of Asclepius", "The Two Women and the Tower"). The author allows for occasional glimmers of optimism ("Days of Crete", "The White Eagle"), without interrupting the reign of sadness. This sadness, dominant in the predicament of the weak and defenceless, permeates the narrative, leaving little space for joy or even humanity. Nevertheless, there is humanity in *The Defeated*, even though it is sacrificed to the altar of Necessity ("The Rugs"), a dark force that teaches children to feel hatred

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<sup>1</sup> Karanikas, 1969:98.

and adults to suffer silently ("Rikki", "Broken Branch"). Poetry is also subject to necessity despite its dignified resistance to ugliness and cruelty ("The Knife from Bataan and the Verses", "Initiation", "Wonder tale from Arsin Valley"). Death constitutes the ultimate necessity, and this fact becomes the lens through which human experience is viewed; inevitably, death engulfs love, as in the account of the deaths of Edgar Allan Poe and his wife Virginia ("The Defeated Man and the Raven: Chronicle") or the tale of "Theonichos and Mnesarete", the Athenian youths who don't find peace until a modern-day anonymous couple consummates its love near their ancient graves.

In this context of unending human powerlessness, the plight of characters like Stamatoula exemplifies the yearning for a place (in life and in the world) that remains decidedly out of reach. Yet Stamatoula, like the women in "The White Eagle" and "The Rugs", continues to yearn for it to the point that this unfulfilled longing absorbs her identity. Thus, in many ways the characters in *The Defeated*, including Stamatoula, are rough sketches rather than expressive portrayals,<sup>2</sup> notwithstanding the genre's narrative restrictions. This typology of representation emphasises limitations of age and locality: a grief-stricken elderly woman looking desperately for her misplaced rugs in Eleusis ("The Rugs"); a boy in Attica seeking solace at the tree where he lost his fingers playing with a landmine ("The Poplar Tree"); an alcoholic sailor from Finland begging at the port of Algiers for passage to America ("A Finn in Algiers"); a Greek girl with severe Down syndrome committed to a home in Zurich ("The House of Lost Angels"). Like most of the characters in *The Defeated*, they find little strength to fight back: they go with the flow, burying inside them a treasury of emotions in which the omniscient narrator dwells tenaciously, sometimes at the expense of characterisation.

Migration is a theme that appears in both parts of the collection,<sup>3</sup> with the stories of reluctant ("The State of Virginia"), insecure ("The Bandit Pancho Villa"), or successful Greek migrants ("The Migrant of Grand Canyon") to the United States. Echoing Venezis's impressions from his trip across the U.S. in 1949,<sup>4</sup> the discourse on migration in *The Defeated* highlights the trials and triumphs that constitute the Greek-American experience. Venezis views with amazement the (literally) diasporic presence

<sup>2</sup> Karanikas, 1969:104: "The old woman in 'The State of Virginia' is not a living being but a type". Although this is true, we should also keep in mind that her individuality is expressed through the peculiar predicament of her ill-timed journey to America and its attendant pressing need for (yet another) inescapable departure.

<sup>3</sup> All the short stories whose action takes place outside of Greece are grouped together in the second part of the book entitled "Of a Faraway World". This part is concluded by the account of Venezis's visit to the Edgar Allan Poe cottage in the Bronx ("The Defeated Man with the Raven: Chronicle").

<sup>4</sup> Venezis visited the U.S. in 1949 following an award he received from the United States government and in 1954, the same year as "The State of Virginia", published his impressions in a travelogue entitled *Αμερικανική γῆ* (*American Land*). His impressions from his U.S. travels are dominated by admiration and wonder, while his discourse on American history is respectful and detailed. I would also like to point out the analogy (not recurring in other works of his) between the title of his book on his beloved Anatolia (*Aeolian Land*) and the one on the U.S. (*American Land*). Interestingly, in *American Land* Venezis speaks with great admiration about Washington, D.C. (261–74), but does not mention Virginia. See also Karanikas, 1969:107–8.

of Greeks in unexpected places like the kitchen of the *Bright Angel Lodge* in the Grand Canyon or the former Hawkins farm in Long Island. He does not hide his pity for his fellow compatriots who found themselves so far away from Greece, deprived of the opportunity to speak their native language (“The Migrant of Grand Canyon” [131–34], “The Bandit Pancho Villa” [146]). On more than one occasion, *The Defeated* illustrate Venezis’s blurring the line between refugee and migrant (“The State of Virginia”, “The White Eagle”, “The Rugs”). This merging of identities also informs the portrayal of Stamatoula and Yianoula, the two central characters in “The State of Virginia”; their laconic dialogue during their last few hours together, reflecting in many ways the author’s personal experience, articulates a compelling reappraisal of expatriation as an emotional journey. As scholars have noted,<sup>5</sup> “The State of Virginia” epitomises the pain of *xenitia* (ξενιτιά, a foreign land and the status of living far from one’s homeland); this separation from the native soil, regardless of what caused it, amounts to misfortune and generates feelings of compassion,<sup>6</sup> which Venezis seems to share.

Ilias Venezis was born in 1904 in Aivali, modern-day Ayvalik, on the north-western Aegean coast of Turkey, but moved to the island of Mitilini, in Greece, at the age of ten; he was in Asia Minor in 1922 with his family,<sup>7</sup> when they were forced to leave following the Asia Minor Catastrophe.<sup>8</sup> Venezis himself, however, was arrested by the Turkish army and sent to a labour camp, where he spent fourteen months under the prisoner number 31328.<sup>9</sup> In 1923 he was liberated and returned to Mitilini. In 1924, encouraged by Stratis Mirivilis, the editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Καμπάνα* (*Bell*), he published in this paper, in instalments, the memoir *Number 31328* (*Τὸ Νούμερο 31328*), which also appeared as a book in 1931. Venezis was shaped as a writer by his experience as prisoner and refugee; a considerable part of his work revolves around the nostalgia for the happy days in the Aeolian motherland and the pain of its irrevocable loss.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> As Karanikas (1969:102) notes, “Venezis tells again, in ‘The State of Virginia’, of the sadness of upheaval, of living in the alien land, of *xeniteia*”.

<sup>6</sup> For similar sorrowful perceptions of leaving one’s native soil in Irish culture see Miller, 1980:102.

<sup>7</sup> Beaton, 1999:138–39; Karanikas, 1969:14–15. As Lawrence Durrell put it in his preface to the English translation of *Aeolian Land* (*Aeolia* 1949 v), “[t]he tragedy of his expulsion from Anatolia still weighs heavily upon the heart of the modern Greek, whether he is a metropolitan or an exile from the bountiful plains and wooded mountains of Asia Minor. He cannot forget it. If he is an exile he returns again and again to Anatolia in his dreams: he broods upon it as Adam and Eve must have brooded upon the Garden of Eden after the Fall”.

<sup>8</sup> Clogg, 1992:94–99; Koliopoulos and Veremis, 2002:204. It seems that Stamatoula comes to Greece in 1922, after the Greek defeat in Asia Minor, or as part of the population exchange between Greece and Turkey under the Lausanne Treaty of 1923.

<sup>9</sup> Venezis, 1931:186; his survival appears to have been an extraordinary occurrence, as Venezis himself attests throughout the 1924 chronicle (reworked in 1931 and 1945) of his captivity *Number 31328* and in his historical narrative of the Asia Minor Catastrophe *Farewell, Asia Minor* (*Μικρασία Χαίρε*, Venezis, 1974:48–49): “Out of the 3,000 men, the cream of the crop, whom the Turks arrested in Aivali, he survived and returned to Greece, after much hardship, only twenty three (23) souls”.

<sup>10</sup> *Τετράδια Ευθύνης* 6:106; Angelos Terzakis notes that Venezis, from his early years as a writer, showed “an ability to endow with mythical dimensions things that appeared at first glance common and despised”.

In "The State of Virginia," the topic of expatriation is given two additional dimensions: migration and old age. The protagonist is faced with the emotional challenges of her traumatic past, the burden of physical debilitation brought forth by ageing, and the anxieties of migration to a new land.<sup>11</sup> But first, let us hear the story.

The action takes place at a village in rural Attica in the early fifties. The village population consists entirely of refugees from Asia Minor and especially Phokes, the area around the ancient Greek city of Phokaea in Asia Minor, on the western coast of Anatolia. They are all part of the population exchange that caused 1,100,000 Greek-speaking subjects of the Ottoman Empire to relocate to areas of Greece in 1922.<sup>12</sup> An elderly woman, Stamatoula, herself a refugee from Phokes, is leaving her village in rural Attica after thirty years of temporary residence to join her daughter in Virginia, U.S.A.

Published in the aftermath of WWII and the Greek Civil War, a markedly painful period of Greek history, "The State of Virginia" masterfully encapsulates the drama of a counterintuitive migration experience; I purposely use the term counterintuitive because it gives us the opportunity to revisit the very concept of migration and its customary definition as a deliberate act of coming into a foreign land to live. What about a case of migration where a person moves to a foreign land to die? How can the story of a new life in a new place be reduced to the question of how "light" and suitable for burial the new soil is? This would not be, of course, the standard reaction of an elderly migrant to the opportunity of joining her child in a prosperous new country. On the contrary, even Venezis's heroine displays, at least initially, a fair amount of excitement over the prospect of relocating to Virginia (18–19). In the end, however, the separation from Attica, her provisional homeland, appears to be overwhelmingly painful, especially in light of her advanced age and life-long bonds with the near-and-dear she leaves behind (21–22).

Moreover, the village in Attica, in its capacity as shelter, serves as an extension of the lost hearth by nurturing the refugees' national and religious identity. Having safeguarded their Greek heritage in the midst of great adversity, Stamatoula and her fellow villagers are not at risk of losing their Hellenicity; having endured the calamity of forced expatriation, having lived through atrocities and massacres, and having experienced devastating material damages, they finally reached a safe destination within the Hellenic world. However, the subdued, mournful tone of the short story makes it clear that the lost Anatolia cannot possibly be replaced with the impoverished settlement in rural Attica, where ill fortune transferred them one day after the massive defeat of the Greek Army in Asia Minor.<sup>13</sup> It is also made clear that the loss of Phokes dealt a nearly fatal blow to this community and its culture — they simply cannot be the same away from their native soil.

<sup>11</sup> On migration and old age see Roberman, 2007:1038.

<sup>12</sup> Clogg, 1992:99, 101.

<sup>13</sup> It is no coincidence that the refugee settlement in rural Attica where Stamatoula lived for the past thirty years is not referred to by its own toponym. We may assume that it is also called Phokes, or Nees Phokes ("New Phokes"), but this lack of specification attributes a lesser significance to the new place. On Venezis's narrative preference for limited naming see also note 15 below.

Stamatoula, a middle-aged mother of a young daughter at the time of the Asia Minor Catastrophe, is among those most seriously affected by the tragic events of 1922. Left with no alternative, she goes where international treaties and government programmes send her, settles in her new village, and resigns herself in poverty and despair. The only elements of individuality that Venezis allows his heroine, in all her passivity, are her love for her daughter and her attachment to her native land. Thirty years later, on the eve of her departure for America, Stamatoula seems concerned about the preservation of her heritage in Virginia and overwhelmed by her separation from the soil of Attica. Yet we are given to understand that she will be moving among Greek-speaking relatives; further, we may well assume that in Virginia Stamatoula will be received by the Greek-American community into which her daughter married thirty years before.<sup>14</sup> From this point of view, the protagonist's ignorance regarding Virginia as well as her anxiety over the endangerment of her religious and ethnic identity there seems to contradict the facts of the case, so to speak: on the one hand, her daughter's enthusiastic letters must have supplied her with more than basic information about Virginia (17); on the other, we have no reason to doubt that her son-in-law is a Greek-American who had come to Greece in search of a bride, as indicated by his visit to the refugee settlement, his conspicuous display of wealth (golden teeth, golden chain) and his marriage proposal to Stamatoula's daughter (16).<sup>15</sup>

The symbolism of Virginia in the short story is twofold: while it commands the exotism of an emblematic migrant destination from early American history, Virginia also appears as a synecdoche for America. This is clearly the case in Venezis's 1956 novel *Ocean* (*Ωκεανός*), where the narrative follows the trip of the liberty ship *Manto* from Livorno, Italy to Baltimore, U.S.A. via North Africa. As the vessel approaches the American continent, her captain and crew gather on the deck to savour the experience of sailing past Chesapeake Light. In the captain's words, Chesapeake is synonymous to America ("Chesapeake, said the captain without looking at those around him. America." [257]).<sup>16</sup> They are welcomed to America by *Manto's* maritime pilot and guided slowly into the bay (260); along the way the narrative points at Cape Henry on the left and Cape Charles on the right. Further, the captain draws his crew's attention to Virginia Beach (259):

—Virginia, said the captain.

In the distance, a multitude of lights shone in the dark. A city [Μία πολιτεία].<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> We have no reason to believe that Venezis was not aware of the existence of a Greek-American community in Virginia; cf. Hitchings, 2011; Valos, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Stamatoula's daughter, like many other characters in *The Defeated* and throughout Venezis's work, remains unnamed and is identified only by her affiliation with the protagonist. The author often avoids naming his characters in order to place emphasis on their role in the narrative, choosing to identify them by their defining characteristic, e.g. "the woman from Parnassos" or "the woman from Antitauros" in "The White Eagle", *The Defeated*, 59.

<sup>16</sup> All translations are my own.

<sup>17</sup> Here the term πολιτεία "city" that describes the city lights visible from Chesapeake Light evokes another meaning of the word, that of "state" (of the U.S.A.) as it appears in the title of "The State of Virginia", "Πολιτεία Βιρτζίνια".

—Virginia Beach [Τὸ Βιρτζίνια Μπήτς], the captain spoke again, looking with his well-trained eyes at the mainland in the distance.

Here I would like to point out the use of the neuter article in the Greek version of the toponym “Virginia Beach”, “[τ]ὸ Βιρτζίνια Μπήτς”, similar to the use of the neuter article in the Greek translation of “Virginia” by Stamatoula in “The State of Virginia”.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, Virginia in *Ocean* (259) is turned into a feminine noun ([ἡ] Βιρτζίνια), in agreement with standard transliteration practice, according to which all U.S.A. states ending in -a become feminine nouns in -α in Greek. We may attribute the captain’s grammatical choice to his geographical literacy and world experience, or we may see behind it the inner workings of intertextuality between “The State of Virginia” and *Ocean*, Venezis’s works in which the crossing of the Atlantic plays an important role.<sup>19</sup> Venezis highlights the power of oceans to function as barriers, bridges and boundaries: they keep people apart or bring them together, as in “The State of Virginia” (17, 21), while defining the vastness of territories, as the full title of Venezis’s *American Land* indicates: *American Land: Chronicle of a Trip From the Shores of the Atlantic to the Pacific and the Gulf of Mexico* (Ἀμερικανική Γῆ: Χρονικὸ ἐνὸς ταξιδιοῦ ἀπ’ τὶς ἀκτὲς τοῦ Ἀτλαντικοῦ ὡς τὸν Εἰρηνικὸ καὶ τὸν Κόλπο τοῦ Μεξικοῦ).

Stamatoula’s family situation is not elaborated upon in the short story; her daughter in Virginia appears to be her nearest relative, in addition to a distant cousin and village elder, uncle Frantseskos, who attempts to dissuade her from migrating to America (21). He figures as prominently in her deliberations as Yianoula, her life-long friend who accompanies her in her last hours at the village. Their argument is that it is too late for her to leave now, that their village in Attica can provide her with what she needs most, a familiar and welcoming burial site. Frantseskos goes as far as to use the war in Korea as a deterrent: “I tell you, a war began in far away places, Korea, they say. Where are you going to go, how are you going to cross the great ocean now that there is another war going on? Stay with us, to die here, with us” (21). Nevertheless, thanks to her clearly defined ascending scale of affection, Stamatoula loyally embraces her daughter’s plans and adopts a mind-set of imminent departure. During the thirty years between her daughter’s promise to bring her to Virginia and its fulfilment, Stamatoula’s chances of growing roots in either Attica or Virginia diminish every day. By the time she finally leaves, her perspective has become so death-oriented that she visualises Virginia only as her burial place (19).

Stamatoula includes the entire village in her farewell rituals, making special allowances for her nearest neighbours, to whom she distributes her few material possessions.<sup>20</sup> There is no doubt that Stamatoula’s departure from her village is likened to a departure from life. She visits all the cottages in the village, bids farewell to all

<sup>18</sup> See p. 215 below.

<sup>19</sup> It is also noteworthy that *Ocean*, 126–35 and *The Defeated*, 118–26 share the story of “A Finn in Algiers”.

<sup>20</sup> In the short story, Venezis describes a compassionate community with close-knit relations and strong family ties, where the spirit of togetherness (and shared grief in times of hardship) is a given.

her fellow-villagers, and kisses them goodbye (20). They return her gesture with the solemnity of a last kiss. She performs rituals of farewell blessings on the village's children and prepares her humble luggage with care: it contains her small silver-plated icon of St. George, which she had blessed at the village chapel, charcoal made from vine branches, and sufficient amounts of incense to use in worship; "these things, she thought, will not be available in the foreign land, the state of Virginia" (20).

Stamatoula's concern that incense might not be available in Virginia bespeaks her cultural anxieties about the new place. Further, all of the items associated with Greek Orthodox worship that she brings with her to Virginia function also as means of religious self-assertion, aiming at securing the preservation of her identity. It is obvious that her self-identification as Greek Orthodox is the only way she can find to assert her Hellenicity in that foreign, non-Greek speaking destination. Orthodoxy becomes the only stable point of self-reference for this elderly Greek woman refugee and migrant. It is also quite obvious that the short story begins with a metaphorical wake, as Stamatoula and Yianoula are keeping vigil during Stamatoula's last night in Greece. Sitting next to each other in Stamatoula's cottage, they quietly voice the countdown to their unavoidable separation. The narrator conveys Stamatoula's reminiscences in free indirect style, providing us with all the information crucial to the development of the plot:

Thirty years ago, forced out of their fatherland, they had arrived at this shore of Attica. Herself and her daughter. The same year a man came from the lands beyond the Ocean, from Virginia, a state of the other world, and asked for the girl in marriage. He was wearing a golden chain and had golden teeth; he married the girl, took her with him and they both disappeared beyond the Ocean. Then messages started coming, ever so often, from the Ocean, the girl's letters; they were dazzling, and brought the magic of wonder tales to the humble dwelling in Attica. And all the messages finished this way: "Mother, we will bring you too here, to the state of Virginia. (18)

The protagonist arrived in Attica with her daughter, who soon afterwards left for America; they don't share the prolonged stay in the "transitional" location, during which Stamatoula develops a familiarity with, if not affection for, the place. At the same time, our heroine keeps her expectations low from her prospective migration endeavour; uprooted once before, she appreciates the difficulty of starting a new life in light of her age and inability to relinquish the past. This inability (or reluctance) to relinquish the past is at the core of Venezis's discourse on the refugee experience;<sup>21</sup> with decisive brushstrokes he paints the picture of the ideal birthplace, a vision so powerful that it permeates one's aesthetic perceptions of spatial belonging for life. The emotional landscape of this idealised birthplace is defined by yearning, nostalgia and the pain of a homecoming that has become humanly impossible. From this point of view, any other place pales in comparison, and Virginia is no exception.

<sup>21</sup> In his preface to the second edition of *Number 31328* (Venezis, 1945:12), Venezis writes that after the publication of the first (1931) edition, he tried to forget about the trauma recounted in this book: "anyway, when you are young and healthy, life is so powerful that it forces you to want to forget".

No matter how much it puzzles and dazzles Stamatoula, Virginia cannot measure up to Phokes. Stamatoula's reluctance to relinquish the past also prevents her from accepting Virginia as the ideal destination, the promised Eden that will reunite her with her daughter and put an end to her sorrows. It is the lost Eden she pines after:

Virginia. Virginia. What was this strange name? Yet she had another magic name in her heart, another vision: the soil of her lost fatherland. It was called Phokes. That's what she talked about, that's what the old women from the cottages talked about every evening, when they went to sit down at the beach, and they reminisced of the past, and the sea carried over their heartbeats. But what is this Virginia now? (20)

Interestingly, Stamatoula refers to Virginia as a neuter noun, using the neuter article "τὸ", ("But what is this Virginia now?" ["Τὸ ἢ εἶναι αὐτό, τὸ Βιρτζίνια,"]); this confusion as to the toponym's grammatical gender highlights both Virginia's outlandish aura and Stamatoula's inability to relate to it and to integrate it into her own language, as a result, we may infer, of her limited knowledge of the world. Nevertheless, both in theory and in practice, such a lexical integration would not be difficult, especially given the Greek language's ability to grammatically "Hellenise" foreign toponyms.

Moreover, the exoticism of the foreign land with all its promise of prosperity and happiness is suspended on account of legal and international barriers: years of waiting for a migration permit, not to mention the adversity of WWII and the Greek Civil War, can easily disable the mechanisms of anticipation, blocking the integration process into the receiving land before it even begins; it seems as if both nature and culture enter into an unholy alliance to prevent her from reaching Virginia. While Stamatoula's faith in the fulfilment of her Virginia dream is severely debilitated by the thirty-year long delay, her perspective on her life journey is even more severely affected by her refugee status. The resignation that permeates her every thought and action is directly derived from the loss of the Asia Minor homeland, the exile from Phokes, and the realisation that "a person can be uprooted only once" (22). Although Stamatoula's willingness to go to Virginia bespeaks a certain determination to keep going despite everything, the essence of her existence can be summarised in her inability to choose her whereabouts. Equivalent to lack of agency, Stamatoula's transfer to Attica and then to Virginia sets the parameters for the profile of the archetypal refugee.

The immediacy with which Venezis discusses expatriation bears the mark of personal experience;<sup>22</sup> it would not be difficult to argue for the presence of autobiographical elements in "The State of Virginia."<sup>23</sup> Uprooted twice, in 1914 and 1923, Venezis also

<sup>22</sup> From this point of view, Venezis applies to his work the principle he praises in his review of the paintings of Orestis Kanellis (Δρίβας et al., 1981:35): "the need for the immediate creation, free from intellectual interferences, of a familiar and friendly ambiance between the work of art and its recipient".

<sup>23</sup> Πολίτης, 1980:307: "not the kind of writer with abundant creative imagination, Venezis always draws his topics from the area of personal experiences and memories". It is important to remember, I believe, that Venezis reworks his memories into variations on a theme, as is the case with the relationship between Phokes and Attica in *Tranquillity* (Γαλήνη, 1939) and "The State of Virginia" (*The Defeated*, 1954). Τζούλης (1989:164) comments on the dynamics of the relationship between Phokes and Attica in



echoes the experience of his fellow refugees, many of whom lived in villages similar to Stamatoula's or migrated to America. The author is careful to assign to his protagonist only the components of his personal experience that are suitable for a dramatic persona different from him in gender, age, and life history.<sup>24</sup> She stars in a variation of his story as seen through the eyes of a sympathetic viewer. It seems obvious that this sympathetic viewer is no other than Venezis himself, a former refugee now in his middle years, with sufficient chronological distance from his trauma to be able to focus on the acceptance of his predicament. Stamatoula, ready to set sail for America towards the end of a lifetime governed by pain and sorrow, embodies this notion of calm acceptance of one's destiny. Despite her fatalistic outlook, however, the heroine is leaving for Virginia. From this point of view, the author's narrative omniscience deliberately falls short:<sup>25</sup> although he depicts her as defeated by old age and hardship, he grants her one last opportunity to grow roots ever *so late*.<sup>26</sup> She seems to be nurturing a glimmer of hope that motivates her to cross the ocean despite her nostalgia for her native soil, her trepidation for the new one, and her sheer awe at the migration experience. Still, we are led to believe, at least from the author's view point, that migration and old age, inherently incompatible, are timed to coincide in Stamatoula's life through some ironic concatenation of events: "And yet, it came. So late. Now that the poor woman had shrivelled away with old age. Thirty years after she started thinking about this trip. Now the message finally arrived, permission to cross the Ocean. So late" (19).

Stamatoula's perspective appears to be pessimistic, to say the least: a great voyage across the ocean, a long-awaited reunion with her expatriate daughter, and a world of possibilities in Virginia are calmly reduced to concerns about the new burial place. The significance of burial as an act of final bonding with the soil is manifested in Yianoula's words: "—This soil, we know it. It wouldn't fall heavy on us. How do you know what kind of soil is that other one, where you are going?" (20–21). Also, the importance of community in burial emerges as the result of an advantage from staying in one's (original or surrogate) homeland: "—I say, they would bury us next to the other women, our friends. We wouldn't be alone" (20). Venezis's rhetoric of separation articulates both the violent detachment from the native soil and the reluctant

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*Γαλήνη*: "the background of the narrative remains the same (lost homeland), a background that cannot be expunged from memory but becomes engraved even deeper with time".

<sup>24</sup> As Beaton (1999:139) notes, "[l]ike Doukas and Myrivilis, Venezis in his own way seeks literary means to enable the facts to speak for themselves".

<sup>25</sup> Morreall, 1994:430–34 and passim; Morreall's discussion of the inherent discrepancy in the concept of a god-narrator with a point of view applies to Venezis's relationship with his character, who, despite her advanced age and life-long sadness over the loss of Phokes, expresses interest in a new land; I would argue that Venezis's point of view, namely the incurable nostalgia for the lost fatherland, is competing against his heroine's determination to move on. Of course it remains questionable whether or not she really moves on, given that Virginia is depicted as another destination that she did not choose.

<sup>26</sup> "Τόσο αργά" (19).

departure for the sake of reason.<sup>27</sup> In both cases Stamatoula, the victim of a blindly absurd fate, is as authentic a character, as is Venezis's identity as a refugee; she is his creation, old and helpless, subject to repeated displacement as ordained by powers above and beyond her control.

Alongside the anxiety over the actual fulfilment of her migration, Stamatoula undergoes a retrospective self-definition; divided between hope and fear, she engages into a backward synthesis of who she is and how she ended up departing for Virginia. This synthesis also projects forwards the defining characteristics of her image: national origin, religion, and gender. I would like to discuss gender for a moment, especially in view of the protagonist's role as a mother. Although her relationship with her daughter seems flawless, Stamatoula endures their thirty-year long separation so stoically that we may think that she has given up on seeing her only child again. Like the rest of her misfortunes, her separation from her is the combined result of higher power and rational human decision. This double causality, we may infer, also dictated the obvious choice of accepting the wealthy Virginian's offer of marriage (17), a crucial event given surprisingly limited narrative attention.<sup>28</sup> The daughter's departure for Virginia (17), just like her own trip there, is viewed by Stamatoula with tragic non-chalance: "The second great war came, worldwide upheaval, occupation, ruin. And everything got displaced, Virginia, Phokes, the land of Attica — they got displaced into the realm of destiny: 'Whatever will be, will be. Whatever is to come, let it come'" (18–19). Stamatoula acts in compliance with the knowledge that everything happens under the umbrella of human inability to control fate; the wisdom of such compliance, if not complacency, with the status quo conforms with traditional perceptions of womanhood and its associations with weakness and silent suffering. As a mother, she lets go of her daughter; as a refugee, she relinquishes her motherland; and as a migrant, she leaves everything behind. In a world where conflict and disaster render personal choices irrelevant, Stamatoula can only accept her defeat and move on. And she does both, with the dignity of the tragic chorus of women from Phokes:

All the women who used to be her neighbours in Phokes, and had shed tears with her on the deserted shore of Attica, had already departed, one by one, for the other trip: they were resting there, behind the small hill, in the barren cemetery of the little town. They were waiting for her. From that group, only two survived, Yianoula and herself. Well now, it appears, she has to step out of the routine, the order of things. The small hill is a few steps away from her cottage. She had gotten used to the idea that nothing else was left to her: that others would take the few final steps on her behalf, to take her to her friends, so that she could experience the ultimate tranquillity. And now, incredibly enough, so late, her route must change: she has to travel to this distant soil, the state of Virginia, this soil

<sup>27</sup> In his contribution to the volume of *Νέα Έστία* commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Asia Minor Catastrophe, the author credits "the passion for native soil" ("τὸ πάθος γιὰ τὸ χῶμα", Venezis, 1972:34) as well as "the spirit of being in bondage" ("τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ ἀλυτρώτου", 35) with the inspiration to Greeks in Asia Minor to persevere against all odds.

<sup>28</sup> The theme of a groom coming from far away also occurs in two brief variations in Venezis's 1950 novel *Exodus* (*Ἐξοδος*, 254).

must receive her. Because, of course, the little old lady knows it well: the trip she is now going to take it is all about the soil. About where she will be buried. (19)

In the following scene, Stamatoula and Yianoula, the sole survivors from this tragic chorus, are confronted with a final moment of acceptance after they have gone through the stages of denial, anger, isolation, bargaining, and depression in a sequence remarkably parallel to the process described in contemporary thanatology.<sup>29</sup> The tragic element is inextricably intertwined with discreet yet potent lyricism,<sup>30</sup> as the hills of Attica at daybreak awaken in Stamatoula the pathos of her first uprooting:

They fell silent. And then came the dawn. The hills were painted a rosy pink, the colour of angels. Soon the bus would come to take Stamatoula to the big port.

—It's time.

—It's time.

The little old lady gazed at the hills of Attica, her second homeland, now that she was leaving for her third, the final one. Then she realised that a person can be uprooted only once. Twice is too much, unbearable. She saw the hills — they were calm, gentle. And she started crying quietly — because soon the hills would disappear forever. (22)

Venezis concludes the dialectic of separation with an engaging image of emotional and visual landscape. Seated next to each other in silent vigil, the two elderly women wrestle the memories from Phokes to no avail. Their depiction as the live participants in each other's wake, laden with eeriness and despair, serves the additional purpose of liberating the protagonist from her separation anxiety. Not surprisingly, this liberation takes place in the context of memory and recollection: the drama of displacement is played once again, achieving a total recall of the first, more powerful, trauma. Unlike the first homeland, whose loss proves unrecoverable, the second gives its place to the third without much protest: "a person can be uprooted only once" (22).

Despite her helplessness, Stamatoula dominates the scene with her personal connection to the landscape. Her tears for the disappearing hills transfer us to the emotional landscape of migration, where age, gender, ethnicity, and religion become active elements in an emergency of self-definition. And, of course, this emergency is no other than a last look in the mirror before the mirror disappears forever.

<sup>29</sup> For the purposes of my analysis, these five stages (Kübler-Ross, 1969:51ff., where the first stage is called "denial and isolation", changed into "denial" in Kübler-Ross Kessler, 2005:7ff.) represent a medium of contextualising Stamatoula's separation from her refugee community. Far from attempting to force direct analogies between her emotional journey and the five stages experienced by terminally ill persons, I am trying to emphasise the identification of migration with virtual death in the short story.

<sup>30</sup> Τζούλης (1989:185–86) attributes this lyricism to increased nostalgia for the lost homeland, a literary disposition concomitant with the author's later years as opposed to the harsher style of early narratives like *Number 31328*.

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