

In Transit: Migration and Memory in the Writings of Martin Johnston and Dimitris Tsaloumas

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Introduction

While demarcated by epochs—one roughly post-war, one roughly post-modern—the writings of Dimitris Tsaloumas and Martin Johnston share an enduring leitmotif in an implicit sense of dislocation from the authors' mutual homeland of Greece. Or, more particularly, the respective Greek islands of Leros and Hydra.

This essay largely draws from the two late poets' ultimate collected works: *New & Selected Poems* (Tsaloumas) and *Selected Poems & Prose* (Johnston). It is also indebted to the work of John Tranter in collating and contextualising the works of Johnston, with the author's original publications now long out of print and increasingly removed from circulation. All poetic references herewith will be drawn from these two collections, unless otherwise cited.

While their biographies are abstracted by age and heritage—Tsaloumas being Greek born and Johnston the Australian born son of writers George Johnston and Charmian Clift—both recognised Greece as their natural homeland and utilised their poetry to explore themes both of alienation in their 'adopted' homeland of Australia, and an enduring sense of longing (albeit often cryptic) for the Greece of their increasingly-distant past: specifically, their respective islands. Both poets would also recognise themselves—and would also be widely considered, in Australia at least—to be writers of the post-war migrant experience of Australia, albeit through ulterior lenses reflecting their own deeply personal narratives.

Dimitris Tsaloumas

Tsaloumas's writing, while epigrammatic in form and multifarious in subject matter and thereby reflecting the poet's own long and storied biography, routinely examined themes of displacement. These motifs were often presented as a 'ubiquitous' sense of deracination and ancestral longing that seemingly synthesised the broader migrant experience of contemporary Australia, contrasted against the vexing Cold War landscape of the latter twentieth century. Occasionally, however, the poet revealed a wholly more explicit vestige as to the provenance of his own alienation, as with 'Lord of the Galloping North'—a vignette from the song-cycle 'Three Night Pieces':

From fouled spring to poisoned well
In the desolate country.
Thus perched on a pillar of darkness
I rehearse Byzantine devotions
Under the Southern Cross. (143–44)

'Three Night Pieces' proved an existential marker for Tsaloumas—one of his first poems conceived and written in English for the collection *Falcon Drinking*. Published in 1988, it found him adopting the alien tongue of his exiled homeland of Australia, and in vignettes such as

‘Lord of the Galloping North’ contrasting himself with the landscape. Tsaloumas had traded his ‘fouled’ ancient ancestral springs for the ‘poisoned well’ of the Antipodes, his language incompatible with the extraneous physical and cultural environment in which he now found himself.

Tsaloumas was born on the island of Leros in 1912—a homeland hugging the Turkish coastline, whose very geography aligns it with a fractured and imbrued history of infringement and subjugation. Tsaloumas himself would flee the island and later his country in 1951 in the wake of political oppression, bound for a nation he hoped would offer him corporeal and political freedom: that very ‘desolate country’ he would later contemplate in verse. But it was a freedom whose price would be a 20-year silence. Tsaloumas has defined this fallow period as

[a] loosening of the fabric of [my] whole existence, a chasm between the *here* of [my] struggles and the *there* of [my] memory which keeps growing uncontrollably, a blur in the currents of the present to which something like your shadow beckons vaguely, only to elude you. (‘Two Homelands’ 89)

Shadows prove an isochronous pattern in his work, where every gesture, every cognition, every harried word is contrasted by something *other*. A distorted illusion, as he wrote nearly four decades after his arrival in Australia, between his Byzantine substratum and the enigmatic country of the present, formless beneath the Southern Cross.

Vrasidas Karalis described this existential penumbra in Tsaloumas in his essay ‘Translingualism, Home, Ambivalence’ as, ‘the Orthodox sense of light [merging] with the Protestant understanding of shadows, in creating a portrait of an individual sensitivity in constant emotional conflict’ (3). Conflict appears endemic to Tsaloumas’s poetry and he himself would describe it as a life lived in the ‘distant present’ and a permanent state of oppressive absence—both a terrestrial and metaphysical dislocation from any sense of cultural calibration (Karalis 1). It was a form of exile of which, for two decades, his pen was unable to make little sense.

But Tsaloumas would eventually return to his craft, which he had begun as a young man on Leros in the 1940s. Indeed, the two-decade impasse would be shattered by the symbolic letting of blood in the title poem from *The Observatory*—a ritualistic sacrifice to absolve him of his enduring silence:

I leap to my feet
 Flinging to the floor
 The cockerel’s warm knife-wound
 And stomach still empty, rush
 To my brain
 To check again how things stand. (3)

This sacramental act appears to puncture the poetic persona’s liminal state, allowing him to thereafter attempt to interpret the incongruous world to which he had come. To see how ‘things stand,’ or at the least explore its explicit contrasts, and the amorphous contours of what he identifies as the affliction of nostalgia (‘Two Homelands’ 89). This use of the word ‘nostalgia’ is a reminder that it derives from the Greek roots *nostos* (to ‘return home’) and *algia* (‘pain’), and is described by Tamara Wagner as, ‘a form of melancholia caused by prolonged absence from one’s home or country’ (49). Malcom Chase and Christopher Shaw would further infer

that, in its contemporary context, the abstraction of nostalgia embodies metaphorical meaning, in that the concept of ‘home’ is less a geographic conceit and more a metaphysical state of being (3)—what Tsaloumas described as the amorphous nature of memory. Tsaloumas would go on to contemplate whether nostalgia was indeed rooted in territorial demesne, or instead the shared experience of language and culture. He would later define his decision to write in English as a ‘betrayal’ of his own comprehension of himself, and one which left him with lingering ‘remorse, regret . . . and guilt’ (‘The Distant Present’ 62–65).

While the lexeme may bare a Greek etymology, Barbara Cassin posits in her book *Nostalgia: When are We Ever at Home?* that the clinical designation of the affliction known as nostalgia has its origins in seventeenth-century German-speaking Switzerland, and the doctor, Jean-Jacques Harder, who was studying the pathology of acute homesickness in Swiss mercenaries fighting Louis XIV’s wars (6–7). Swiss physician, Johannes Hofer, would further the field of study in 1688 and designate its symptoms in a medical paper, diagnosing nostalgia as ‘the sad mood originating from the desire for the return to one’s native land’ (380–81).

A more contemporary scholar on nostalgia, Barbara Stern, presents her subject in two ways—‘personal’ and ‘historic’—with the latter being a desire to return to one’s own past and previous sense of self (whether real or imagined), and the former an escape to a romanticised epoch or place in history to which the subject did not belong (11–22). Both forms of nostalgia—with their multifarious causes—have long manifested in poetry and literature, as explored in detail in Regina Rudaitytė’s 2018 edited collection *History, Memory and Nostalgia in Literature and Culture*. In Svetlana Boym’s psychoanalytical study into nostalgia, *The Future of Nostalgia*, she further demarcates personal nostalgia into ‘restorative’ and ‘reflective’ categories, restorative nostalgia being the desire to return to a former time or place and reflective nostalgia being a more cursory acknowledgement of the past. Restorative and reflective nostalgia can each apply to a range of independent situations, amongst them love, family, objects, friendships, time and place. And Melinda Milligan suggests that the affliction is most often activated by stress or hardship (physically and/or emotionally), with displacement being a common instigator. Milligan goes on to suggest that nostalgia is a self-defence mechanism in reaction to temporal disruption in order to elicit an incorporeal sense of identity continuity (281–382).

Accordingly, Tsaloumas’s (and indeed Johnston’s experience) would likely be understood as a personal nostalgia for their own lived experience that oscillates between the hemispheres of restorative and reflective, with reflective nostalgia often distinguished by the use of humour and/or irony (see ‘Hung-Over’ from Tsaloumas’s final collection *Helen of Troy and Other Poems*). As with so many emigrants from Southern Europe who arrived in Australia after the Second World War, Tsaloumas would find the Antipodean landscape frustratingly familiar. As a man from Leros he was familiar with a land circled by a cerulean sea, its calloused and iron-stained hinterlands dappled with scrubby but fragrant flora, and of course that achromatising light. Yet culturally the land was wholly incongruous. He found himself in a remote British colony that appeared stubbornly determined to invoke the most verdurous English garden in a land of saltbush and fire-annealed eucalypt, while ignoring the country’s very own endemic culture, more ancient than his own. As the poet wrote of ‘white’ Australia:

. . . I rejected their way of life, their customs, and their cuisine of course! That wasn’t difficult. Everybody could live their life as they wanted. So it was possible for me to hold on to the habits of the old country and to base them upon the more just and efficient social structures of the new country. But what was missing, alas, was the old country . . . (‘Two Homelands’ 89)

Whether it was land, language or culture, the old country would need to be imagined and its fading margins retouched with tinctures of the present. The resulting temporal disorientation manifested in ‘An Overseer’s Letter,’ from Tsaloumas’s first translated collection, *The Observatory* (1983):

Now the surging fury of the sea
Has swept away the foundations of your summer

Harsh days have come from parts unknown
And the night reveals the constellations
Askew in the sky. (47)

Helen Nickas writes that Australia’s diasporic writers inherently ‘look forward by going backwards. In order to do that, they employ *mneme*, or memory, the opposite of *lethe*, which is to forget’ (1). This amorphous sense of recall in the face of life’s persevering continuity is ever-pervading throughout Tsaloumas’s poetry. In grasping for ‘home’ in ‘Entreaty,’ from his translated collection *The Book of Epigrams* (1985), he is all too aware that the existence of such a place may well be an illusion and he wards himself from the trappings of gilded evocation: a self-awareness that seemingly undermines the nostalgically restorative nature of the poem and demonstrates Tsaloumas’s awareness of his nostalgic ‘condition’:

Figs honey-figs and royal figs
Layer upon layer crammed
Laurel and almond into the fragrant crocks
The oven still hot
And the must fermenting in the cellars
Filling the steep-stepped neighbourhoods
Threshold of dusk geranium at the window
Sea-jewels and jasmine adorns
the early lattice-work of vespers
Old drunken sparrow
Alighting the crazy balcony leans
High above the courtyard wall
Pomegranate bursts swallowing the wasps
In the intervals of buzzing.
Poet of my soul, do me this favour,
Don’t try to clothe this in beauty. (77)

From the same collection, in the poem ‘To the Reader,’ Tsaloumas finds himself in a liminal state between unreliable memory and the hyper-reality of the present. This stark contrast seems to lead him to despondency at his perceived inability to bear ‘emotional fruit’ from his adopted homeland: ‘I ploughed the mountains of your desert and watered/The salt-pans of your exile’ (75).

Falcon Drinking, published in 1988, the year of the bicentenary of his new nation, was Tsaloumas’s first published collection of works conceived and written in English. It is a collection that attempts to harvest the spatial terrain between his two discarnate hemispheres of deracination and nostalgia. The poetry sings of ouzo and mandolins. Of whitewashing at Easter and the meltemi wind—the very wind that forces the vines to prostrate low in shelter. Of pomegranates and wild thyme, and the spectre of Hesperides and Alexander the Great. But from

the very same inkwell he also contemplates Aboriginal Australia, sapling gums, the Brisbane River, a house on Mooloolaba Beach and his neighbour's rowdy cockatoo. Yet as always, reefs threaten destruction for those that attempt escape and memories still haunt, as in 'The Arrival':

. . . Tell me,
Where in Geography is this land? Why am I here?
But words are lonely in this place, too vague
to understand . . . (183)

Geography is the central tenet of this nostalgic paean: his words of little use in a land to which he feels implicitly alien. His poetry has become detached from its terrestrial body only to become vague and incomprehensible, or lost in transit. While Tsaloumas would never retreat from this purview he nonetheless sought to better understand his new country through the poetic mode. Of the collection *Falcon Drinking*, Tsaloumas wrote that it 'drinks at the font of language in an insatiable attempt to transubstantiate into poetry whatever exercises the mind and the senses, and whatever the soul hoards' ('Two Homelands' 89). He added:

Amongst these treasures is also, most importantly, the language of the other homeland, your companion over the years; you have made it your own, and with time it has taken root inside you, learnt your rhythms, matured and started making demands you never imagined. And here it is now vying for your attention and laying claim to rights over territory hitherto untrodden, sacred, dedicated to observance of another creed. Such a voice can't be ignored. (89)

Nevertheless, *Falcon Drinking* continues to stalk Dante's threshing-floor with the impossible question—if our form changes, does our essence? Despite its momentary lamentations—as well as the occasional acerbic and outright funny observation—Tsaloumas's two worlds surrealistically coalesce in the reflective poem 'Apocrypha Homeric,' a sardonic tale of Odysseus voyaging to the Antipodes, only to suffer shipwreck in the Tasman Sea. En route, however, the wayfarer manages a sightseeing detour to Bondi Beach, where he finds himself 'greatly alarmed at the appearance of the superhumanly endowed Aryan youths' and 'prays for the safety of the disporting Nymphs.' The poem concludes with a disoriented, post-modern Odysseus, 'thinking himself a goner / he suffered deconstruction / and lost his loving Homer,' and reaches its finale on the rousing crescendo: 'They pulled and held up each / Two cans of Foster's Lager' (225). Whereas once the world ended at the Pillars of Hercules—with its ominous inscription 'ne plus ultra,' 'nothing further beyond'—Tsaloumas had now transplanted the wayward hero of Homer's epic to the very Terra Australis Incognita once speculated by Pythagoras and Aristotle, now no longer so incognita.

Tsaloumas and Johnston were both intimately, and culturally, familiar with Homer's epic: the proto-European work chronicling the tribulations of nostalgia. While Odysseus finds himself mourning his separation from his homeland of Ithaca and 'in tears and lamentation and sorrow as he looked out over the barren water' (92), his wayfaring reveals its implicit complexities and contradictions, and the lure of discovery and the transitory state of travel. Is Homer's ultimate inquiry one which examines the quintessence of one's 'homeland' or, instead, posits the futility of questing for a past that is now irretrievable? Is Odysseus's ebbing sense of existential displacement one of home or of the heart, an 'otherness' that now unleashed can never again be bridled? It is an otherness that sees him fail to recognise Ithaca on his return, as though either it or he is irreconcilably altered, and his wife Penelope is unable to distinguish him after the years of estrangement.

Emmanuel Kant recognised this inherent contradiction of nostalgia in his study *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. As Cassin later noted, ‘Kant claimed that those suffering from nostalgia, the Swiss included, are always disappointed because it is not the place of their youth that they seek but their youth itself’ (12). Tsaloumas seems to come to this very realisation in the opening work from his final collection *Helen of Troy and Other Poems*, entitled ‘Nostalgia: A Diptych’:

Nostalgia’s for the living,
he says, drinks from the thirst
of the dead. (2)

In yielding his sacred mythological foundations to his adopted homeland in works such as ‘Apocrypha Homeric’—and its proto tale of the complexities of separation and return—Tsaloumas was inhabiting a space where hemispheres often blur into a sort of jetlag haze: what he would describe retrospectively in ‘Old Man’s Last Pilgrimage’ from *Helen of Troy and Other Poems* as the wings of the mind (96). This distortion is expressed in ‘A Prime Development Site,’ where the poet’s perception seems to flicker between two channels and into static: ‘Oils ain’t Oils/the message faint on the wall/dead branches, cans, newspapers/blown hard against the wire-mesh fence/spread eagled like partisans/by brutal guards’ (185). Tsaloumas would ultimately define this existential static as being in ‘transit,’ an analogy he retreats to in the poem ‘Transit Hotel’:

During such vigils in transit hotels
Winds rise as in a poem to crawl about
And change the context of deserts, jumble
The routes to the land of treacherous hope. (205)

Martin Johnston

The Australian born, Greek-raised poet Martin Johnston would inherently recognise this existential state of being ‘in transit.’ Indeed, he too would pen a major poetic cycle to the experiential and metaphorical sense of the transitory state. Johnston was born in Australia in 1947, a child of the then scandalous relationship between Australian writers George Johnston and Charmian Clift. The Johnston family would depart Australia in 1951 and, after a spell in both London and the Greek island of Kalymnos, would eventually settle on the island of Hydra in the Saronic Gulf in 1954. The home they purchased on Hydra would come to be known colloquially as ‘Australia House.’

Despite his Australian birthright, Martin Johnston would adopt the language of his new homeland and assimilate with its cultures and customs. He was a prodigiously gifted student, blessed with what John Tranter has called a ‘ruthless intellect’ (278). His father described his son’s ‘endless intellectual searchings’ in his semi-fictionalised novel *A Cartload of Clay* (1971), as well as his sensitive and gentle nature (72). And as his mother would opine in her 1956 memoir *Mermaid Singing*, young Martin traded in his Richard the Lionheart for an Achilles (99–100). He would, however, eventually be forced to trade his Achilles for something frustratingly enigmatic, the Australia to which he was born. Following the success of his father’s novel, *My Brother Jack*, the family returned to Australia in 1964 as migrants aboard the *Ellinis*, destined for a country Johnston had not set foot in since he was three years of age.

Clift would later manifest the pending anguish of the family's return in a magazine article, specifically considering the experience of her teenage son, 'I am invariably led to wonder how my own three [children] would have turned out with an Australian upbringing. And how will Australia strike them? As a foreign land? As home?' ('Home from the Aegean' 7–9). In Australia Johnston would turn to poetry, disregarding the appeals of his novelist parents who had suffered the hazards of the profession. His published poetry—totalling just three collections: *Shadowmass* (1971), *The Sea-Cucumber* (1978) and *The Typewriter Considered as a Bee-Trap* (1984)—was often hard to penetrate, as cryptic as the Phaistos Disc which he explored in the poem 'To the Innate Island' (84). But while Johnston initially claimed his poetry was little more than sophisticated wordplay—like chess, he suggested, a beautiful but useless game—it would become a sanctuary for him in which to seek asylum while trying to render some fleeting sense of his existential yet paradoxical state of transience between the country and language of his birth, and the country and language of his heart. As he would reveal to the poet John Tranter, 'I do believe that one writes most about what one was brought up with, and I was brought up on a rather curious mixture of things Greek and things international expatriate' (254). He would later add:

My Australia, unlike that, of, say Les Murray, or even Laurie Duggan, has very little to do with place, and a great deal to do with people . . . I lack—and I greatly regret this—much of a sense of the Australian landscape. My landscapes are I'd say very definitely Greek ones when they aren't just constructed or noumenal. The 'real' landscapes in my poetry are Greek. I lack any true feel for Australian culture one way or the other. I simply don't have the basis from which to operate as an Australian poet. I lack the equipment. It would probably be a nice set of equipment to have, but I imagine it's far too late to acquire it now. (254)

His equipment, instead, included Homer—which he taught himself to read in Greek as a boy—and the Greek bandits of folklore. A country where history had poets drink from the Castalian Springs in search of their muse and produced writers of the calibre of Nikos Kazantzakis who, according to Johnston, 'Never forgot being forced by his father to kiss the feet of hanged Greek partisans during the 1889 Cretan revolution against the Turks, when he was six' (204). Unlike what Johnston referred to sarcastically as the anachronistic 'old masters' of Australia, being in his mind the likes of A.D. Hope, James McAuley, David Campbell (236), the poetry of the Greeks, Johnston opined, was born of the same springs as violence and resistance. To Johnston, poetry was the gritty exhaust fumes of living, not a recreational garnish.

Still, the paradox was not lost on Johnston, that while he did not identify as Australian, neither was he of Greek extraction, a country which he knew from close experience had its own intimate, complex and often contradictory layers of identity. This state of uncertainty would haunt Johnston's writing, and much like Tsaloumas he would find each word stalked by shadows and an ever-present sense of existential transience. And with that came a sometimes-tortured sense of nostalgia—and sometimes what would now be called solastalgia—that is hyper-aware of its far-reaching contradictions.

This anxiety manifests most poignantly in the poem 'In Transit,' which captures a confessional Johnston flailing between countries of the body and mind in desperate search of a place that can never quite be reached, let alone comprehended:

If out of our quarrels with ourselves we make poetry, what
do we make of our quarrels with Canberra.

. . . All the same, the streets are ajitter with larrikins
And outside the boarded-up brothel a tart and her hoon . . . (59)

The poem considers the Pillars of Hercules, coalescing Johnston's ancient and contemporary worlds in spite of their perceived incompatibilities. As an aside, the poem goes on to profess the virtues of pursuing the *Sydney Morning Herald* crosswords while sniffing amyl nitrate which 'does give the nostrils a bloom / and the head a rush of fake Pythagorean claritas' (60). He may have been an Australian-Grecian, but Johnston was an acolyte also of John Berryman, Frank O'Hara and Bob Dylan, and hence attracted to the surrealistic potential of the poetic form and applying it to his own counter-cultural experience of the late 1960s and '70s. The trauma of Johnston's state of impermanence, of eternal transience, however, is never fully shaken as the poem endures:

. . . the story begins
'In a suburb in Melbourne, Australia,' O to think
'This isn't "my" Greece; it never was. With years to run
The phony lease has been scrapped and the demolishers come.' (62)

The 'phony lease' is revealing of Johnston's perception of his own existential state of limbo, a state that would seemingly encourage his sense of deracination and nostalgia for the island of his childhood. The Greek military coup of 1967 appeared to embolden Johnston with a renewed sense of conviction, as though his country had joined him in his state of exile. The stories of burned books, imprisoned poets and banned songs rallied a profound new determination within him, and gave his exile a fleeting sense of tangibility, and his nostalgia a manifest purpose in that he was called upon to remember the Greece that he had known as a child. In 'To Greece Under the Junta' he would lament on behalf of all maligned Greeks:

No bird sang that year
Save the bitter partridge,
Nor on dark slopes
Thyme nor basil grew.
Sheepbells then were waterfalls
Of liquid brass, clouds
Dropping from glass dawns.
The prickly pear's grip
Enfolded ancient stones of fading patterns. (10)

There is little doubt that Johnston's poignant reflections on Greece—with Hydra representing the vast majority of his time in the country—were afforded a greater lucidity by the fact that he was reared on a small island. Hydra, much like the Leros of Tsaloumas's memory, is of a scale that renders it wholly tangible and neatly packaged. A modest landmass framed by the sea, with its most intimate details mapped, its history congenital and its identity tightly bound. The Greeks of Patras and Thessaloniki would presumably be hard pressed to recognise the chimerical idyll of Johnston's memory. In this sense it would appear that the nostalgia of both Tsaloumas and Johnston is less for a country or political territory, but a clearly defined landmass.

In her essay 'Between Nostalgia and Exile: Picturing the Island in Cristina García's Fiction,' Florence Ramond Jurney suggests that islands are by definition circumscribed entities: beyond which the ocean promises uncertainty and discontinuity, the key instigator of nostalgic

reflection. Exploring this proposition further, in literature as in history islands have often been perceived from the outside as prisons or places of exile, clearly delineating the perception of sovereignty and creating a perceived demarcation between insiders and outsiders. The antithetical is also true, where islands are imagined as exotic idylls far removed from the greater landmass (a sentiment capable of encouraging historical nostalgia for a simpler time and place). For those born of islands, however, the physical experience of departing an explicitly defined landmass bound by sea would appear to be an obvious criterion for the onset of nostalgia. In the work of both poets the sea would be represented as a frontier marker, one Johnston likens in the poem 'Uncertain Sonnets' to a warrior's chainmail (37).

During his fecund period of the late 1960s, Johnston also took to translating the poetry of the Greek resistance, including works by Vassilis Vassilikos. Johnston's translation of the Vassilikos poem 'Drinking "Sans Rival" Ouzo' seems to infer Johnston's own enigmatic state of being, in perceiving his life as a translated piece of poetry:

And I remember it all
 Like a Cavafy poem in translation
 When the original has been lost.
 Unable at last to cope with the graze of memory
 You add ice and water, and drink a liquid
 White, nostalgic and serene. (125)

Johnston, it appears, was no longer living a life of transposition but one of binary translation, what Javier Marías defines as an author writing as he translates and translating as he writes (Pegenaute 73–119). After the fall of the Junta in 1974, Johnston would return to Greece to travel and live for spells, only to find the simple and rustic island of his childhood altered. That idyllic realm of his memories, like the Ithaka of Odysseus, had disappeared: a place he later depicts as '... all / tentative, and these days the island supports / a "Jungian sandlot therapist"' (264).

Despite this apparent disappointment at the island's gentrification, Greek themes, memories and recycled imagery continued to inform his writings. Johnston would describe these as 'vignetty Greek bits' that were inserted into his Australianness 'like the fat in the salami' (250). This cerebral architecture is revealed in his notes, not intended for publication, where he wrestles with the paradigmatic templates of *Moby-Dick* and *Brothers Karamazov*, asking the question are they Aristotelian or Platonic (103)? This became his intellectual default—the manner in which his mind synthesised ideas, cluttered as it was with cultural waymarkers, reference points and mental maps. 'The Greek landscape is absolutely clotted with specificity,' he would say in interview, adding:

Yes, it's stark and clear, and so on, but it is all very precise . . . objects that are very much inescapably there . . . the 'thereness' of which constitutes a good deal of their meaning. I think it's much harder to read things into a Greek or a European landscape, than it is into an Australian one, because there's just so much there already. (255)

Like Sidney Nolan's now iconic Gallipoli paintings, first imagined by Nolan while residing on Hydra and blending Trojan and ANZAC mythologies, Johnston would eventually find a way to coalesce his two worlds, plying the two hemispheres together in unlikely ways in the hope of finding resonance. Revealingly, in the epigraph to the poem 'The Blood Aquarium,' he

quotes Herakleitos: ‘They do not apprehend how being at variance it agrees with itself; there is a back-stretched connection, as in the bow and the lyre’ (20). Greece and Australia would become that very sonorous dichotomy—one the bow, and one the lyre. The result was sometimes discordant, but more-often hauntingly nostalgic, as in ‘The Monemvasia Causeway’:

Castles hammered into the rock
 Slid away with the rock,
 Windows filled with broken glass,
 The gate’s sheath rusted before our eyes;
 Horned helmets over the causeway.
 The sea made sounds of sleep
 And we spilled from our posts at the high wall
 Past thistle pastures where goats played. (70–71)

Johnston’s metaphor of the ‘bow and lyre’ suggests a permanent state of tension, analogous to that experienced by Odysseus as he wrestles with both himself and the elements (both real and imagined) so he can return ‘home.’ In another of Johnston’s epigraphs—to his 1973 collection of contemporary Greek translations, named for Odysseus’s homeland, *Ithaka*—he would turn to Giorgis Seferis and his poem ‘Mythistorema’ to map out the Delphian sphere in which he found himself: ‘We knew that the islands were beautiful, somewhere round / about here where we were searching / A little nearer or a little further: the slightest distance’ (115). Although a translation, the islands of this poem reflect the Greek island of Johnston’s past: beautiful yet enigmatic and shrouded behind the mist of an obfuscating nostalgia that renders it impossible to locate in reality. This elusive nature, however, does not detract from the island’s significance to Johnston’s perceived sense of identity.

Conclusion

As with Tsaloumas, Johnston’s sense of self seemed so frustratingly close, yet ever elusive. Places are at once near and far. Whether or not due to his inherent sense of displacement—as manifested in works such as ‘Microclimatology,’ with its references to Dante, Qantas kangaroos, retsina and that illustrious Hydra thoroughfare known as Donkeyshit Lane—Johnston’s life ultimately proved a troubled one, reportedly haunted by a gnawing melancholia. Johnston also shared with his parents a passion for alcohol, confessed in the oft quoted lines: ‘The way my parents lived has perhaps been disastrous for me in the long term, in that what they did was, they wrote very hard . . . and then . . . went down to the waterfront and got pissed. And I suppose that’s a pattern of life that I’ve followed ever since’ (269).

Johnston would die in 1990, aged 42. Tsaloumas would live to the age of 94, and finally depart this world on the island of his birth, Leros, in 2016. While separated by age and of disparate generations, both poets co-inhabited a shared ‘in-between’ realm that was riddled with an often-distorting sense of nostalgia for the Greek islands they knew so intimately. Their lives were lived, both spatially and spiritually, ‘in transit,’ between a homeland of the memory and an Australia of the ‘distant present.’ It was an affliction Tsaloumas described as, ‘The old forsaken world, haunting an ever-deepening perspective, forcing comparisons, providing standards, offering wisdom’ (‘The Distant Present’ 62–65). This wisdom, of course, was eternally shadowed by a sense of loss and a sometimes-disorienting sense of restorative and occasionally reflective nostalgia tugging at the future. It was a tension that would both torment and nourish

the work of two of Australia's most astute poetic minds of the twentieth century, as Tsaloumas would resolve in 'Consolation,' from *The Observatory*:

. . . do you think, seeing that I'm used to it, that loss
and deprivation cannot hurt the poor?
Maybe. Yet to have held something in your hands
is worth the bitterness of losing it. (161)

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