

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

The Arrival

Martha Mylona

The island wasn't far. You could actually see it from the mainland, a foggy spot on the horizon towards the south east.

It wasn't a long trip, only about two hours on the large ferry, and you were there. Alexi didn't like catching the fast hydrofoil where you felt closed in behind glass windows, trapped like a bird in a cage. He preferred the old ferries, those he knew from his childhood. They were open-decked and you were in touch with the elements, with the world at large and the speed of the journey was more on a human scale. You could hear the waves pounding against the edge of the boat. You could feel the Aegean embracing you, the sun, the slight change of breeze, the other boats sailing by, the dolphins passing, though those sightings were less frequent nowadays. And you could see the storms coming, the clouds gathering fast in a speedy exchange and the resolutions they reached. It was all out there, spread across the immense sky and the sea. He didn't like missing out on this. It had already been too long. Too long away from it all.

His best friend from school days was going to meet him on arrival. After years of silence they had managed to get in touch again through Facebook. They had arranged to meet back in the island where he was going to spend some time. The old house, his family home with the thick white-washed walls and the pergola in front, covered in red bougainvillea, was up on the hill, away from the tourist centre and that kind of buzz. From up there you had a bird's eye view of the town below.

When he was a kid he liked all those tourists and the hippies with their backpacks walking around the island buying hand-woven linen tops, sponges, dried figs and leather sandals. In those days the grandmothers would sit out on the porches doing their crochet work and watching the comings and goings and the blonde nymphs from the north. The old men would meet down by the town's cafenia, sharing their stories over a game of backgammon or the smoking of tobacco. These men were retired seamen, fishermen and sponge divers, some of them maimed by the pressure in the depths of the sea. Many had travelled to the end of the world; they had fallen in love with exotic places and they had seen a lot in their lifetime. They were the lovers of wild seas, returning home to die, after years of hard work, counting the time left through their *koboloi* beads. This was their time to relive everything, to mull over their memories, mellowing the hardships, those never-ending stretches of loneliness in the embrace of the sea. This was a time of telling. Tragedy, love and humour would mix once more, only this time on safer terms and not rocking dangerously in the waves.

Those days, when Grandpa was well and the sea was full of kindness – *kalosyne* as he would call it – they would sail out together and catch the fish of the season. Those were the days before the invasion of television when his mind was full of myths and folk legends with Olympian gods and goddesses roaming about, with sea nymphs and mermaids arising out of the infinite spread of blueness. At that age his mind was impressionable and with any kind of unusual splash or wave slapping against the boat, he'd think 'that's her, the mermaid', and run to the edge of the boat

'The Arrival.' Martha Mylona.

Transnational Literature Vol. 7 no. 2, May 2015.

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and check, to get a glimpse of her. He would often sit for hours waiting and waiting; that long wait for her. Her body surfacing from the waves, glistening with droplets of sea water on her face, down her arms, on her breasts, down to her navel. And from there on? What lay from there on? Alexi would often wonder. But he would imagine her like his school friend Phoebe, with long hair to her waist, with large honey coloured eyes and a good swimmer.

‘These waves are nothing,’ Grandpa would reassure him. ‘You should see the waves on the Atlantic, around the Cape of Good Hope, high like mountains. That’s where the two mighty oceans meet, beating each other endlessly, the winds screaming. And you are out there at their mercy. That’s where we lost your uncle.’ Grandpa had worked on ships since he was a boy. He was a true sailor. He knew so much about the waves, about the winds and about the different moods of the sea – her whims, as Grandpa would call them fondly.

Now he, Alexi was coming back. There was a knot in his stomach. He hadn’t been back since the day he’d left for good, thirty years ago. He was a middle-aged man now. His hair and his beard had streaks of grey. His parents had both passed on some time ago. They had stayed back on the island, waiting for him. They wouldn’t follow him and part from their home. His father, after spending most of his life at sea, yearned for his homeland and the island. Alexi knew how that felt and what it meant. He was their only child. They hadn’t seen him again. He tried not to think about it for he couldn’t bear it. You cannot undo the past, he told himself. We are trapped in the arrow of time. You can forgive the past, that’s all. But the truth is he couldn’t forgive himself.

‘It’s your karma’, Alice used to tell him in Sydney. She saw and felt the world differently to him. She believed in karma and reincarnation and had faith in her universe. He believed in cause and effect and the unpredictability of chance. Chance, that elusive random thing, as relentless as causation, an anarchic whim of the universe violating the order of things. Yet Alice had managed to keep suffering at bay. And she had always managed to transcend the difficult, the problematic. She had that gift. There was no space for suffering in her vocabulary.

‘No! I wouldn’t allow it,’ she’d say nudging him with her endearing smile, feeling happy, almost pious in her achievement. She dwelled on the positive side of things.

‘You really need to liberate yourself from the past. You need to cut that umbilical cord with your country. It’s holding you back,’ she’d tell him with that unshakable confidence of hers as if she had all the wisdom of the world at her fingertips. And there were times when Alexi believed she did, sitting there in her yoga position, looking at the world from a totally different angle. He liked that it somehow lifted his spirit, eased the heaviness he felt around him. It felt great to see someone so carefree. Watching Alice float in that world of hers he often yearned to abandon himself to the moment, to let himself drift, beyond language, beyond homeland.

Change came easily to Alice and she would embark on it without too many questions. She was flexible, unlike him. He was wired differently. He would catch himself questioning everything, even when there were no answers and there was only *aporia* waiting at the end of the tunnel. He moved in an altogether different realm, between amnesia and regret; no matter how diminishing that could be to one’s psyche.

He was in need of firm ground to stand on and in which to put down roots. He needed to be himself in this other language, to relate to others on equal terms. Only his work as an engineer – creating things – brought him gradually a sense of self-worth.

At Athens airport, where he first landed everything looked different around him. He passed the sign of the European Union Citizens and chose the Non-EU Citizens. The fluorescent lights gave the place a sense of dream-like unreality. He was an alien in his own country. His Australian passport was brand new. His old Greek passport had expired, untouched for three decades. And as he stood there in the entry line waiting, his mother tongue rushed in from every possible corner and enveloped him. He was back now in the arms of the language he tried to put aside. He could not only hear but almost see the sounds, this chanting of round vowels, the full breadth of syllables, of words dancing, hopping about, up and down the musical scale, encircling him. The sound was a lullaby to his ears. This was his language, his mother tongue after all. Something in his body started to give, to stir. What exactly he couldn't tell.

He couldn't wait to get out of the airport, to see the world outside, to see the olive trees, the rugged landscape, that stark contrast with the orange trees full of fruit, the exuberant release of brightness and colour against a sparse backdrop that he remembered, as if that sight would settle things inside him. His heartbeat was fast and loud. He took a few deep breaths to reassure his heart that he had arrived, that he was back. He wanted to tell people, to tell someone, but he knew no-one and no-one knew him. There was a great deal of buzz and excitement around him of people meeting their friends, their relatives and families.

Catching a cab to the port of Piraeus the taxi driver prattled on.

'Have you been away for a while, man?' the driver asked turning back and giving him an inquisitive look. He was a young man with a friendly manner. His voice relaxed, confident. 'Your accent gives it away. Interesting how language can betray us.'

'Yes, it's true,' Alexi said. And he thought how the betrayal, this time, was somehow mutual. How it went both ways. He felt guilty for the part he played in it.

As the landscape of Attica sped fast past his window with the sprawl of new suburbs, he read the graffiti along the walls of the highway:

STOP NEPOTISM

TAX THE RICH

And further along:

THE EURO IS THE CEMETERY OF THE SOUTH, followed by a row of black memorial crosses and a sketch of a hanging man.

'You are coming to Greece in bad times,' the taxi driver said. 'The crisis affected us badly. There is a lot of suffering behind the scenes,' he added softly.

'Yes, I believe so,' Alexi said and he stopped at that. He didn't want to follow him down that path. He couldn't get onto that wavelength right now. He wasn't ready for it. He felt, for some reason, transparent, exposed and vulnerable.

At the port of Piraeus the Poseidon ferry was waiting. Finally the

Mediterranean! He suddenly remembered the surviving soldiers from Xenophon's Persian campaign reaching the sea. He felt like one of them, crying out: the sea, the sea! *Θάλαττα, Θάλαττα!*

Ferries to the islands and large boats to Italy were coming and going at the harbour. He bought his ticket. Tourists and locals were waiting around. The sun was beating mercilessly against the concrete waterfront, bleaching it. The shade cover was not wide enough. Groups of illegal migrants, Africans, Pakistanis, Iraqis, Afghans, were standing around, some selling CDs and lighters, others asking for money. The promise of escape to another EU country was so near and yet so far. Two Pakistani men came up to him and asked him to help them to get to England.

'We have relatives in England, but the EU authorities sent us back to Greece, the first country of entry to EU,' one of them explained. 'Please, sir, help us.' Their eyes were filled with despair. He felt for these fellow men in search of a new homeland, stranded between countries. Near him an old man, in tatters, muttering to himself in Greek was digging into a large rubbish bin for food, followed by two children.

'There are no welfare benefits here. People have lost their jobs, pensions,' said an English couple next to him. 'We live in Hydra, part of the time.'

'But what about the bailouts?' Alexi asked.

'The bailouts go directly to the banks, not the people, but the people pay them off. There is already a humanitarian crisis in this country. More than two million children here live below the poverty level,' they explained.

Alexi searched his pocket, trying to find the money he had just exchanged, feeling at the same time guilty for being in a privileged position. Looking at the Euros on his palm he felt even more alien. He saw his homeland ensnared in the claws of the euro currency. He liked the old drachma, that continuity throughout the ages had felt somehow reassuring.

As he boarded his ferry he had mixed feelings and wondered what he would find back on the island? He thought back on his schooldays, trying to focus this time on himself and to call upon memory. Everything felt a long way back. Yet there was Phoebe standing out, bright, against the mist. And he thought of all those letters he had sent her back then, pleading her to join him. Waiting and waiting for her. But not a word. Their world collapsing into silence.

Now gliding over the shimmering waters of the Aegean with the seagulls swooping madly above him, Alexi thought of those early, lonely years in Australia, holding on to Phoebe's image. How hard he tried to preserve her against the passage of time and to keep on hoping. Finally he had to let her go, so that he could go on. The truth was that both of them had tried to challenge the times. That's what he came to realise later when the hurt had somehow subsided.

He had been surprised early one morning in Sydney, when his old school friend from the island called him and brought up Phoebe's name and the past on the phone:

'You should go straight to the island when you come. Things are bad here with the crisis. Anyway, do you remember Phoebe, you two were an item back then, both top of the class and in love..' he said in a teasing tone, letting Alexi back into that world.

Alexi was surprised to notice the casual way his friend talked about things that

mattered so much back then. This was certainly a different world to the one he remembered!

‘You know Phoebe is now a doctor...’ his friend went on. ‘Her surgery is near the bell tower, where we all used to meet. She has done a lot for the island; she extended the hospital and the public library. The old man wasn’t nice. Anyway you’ll get the news when we catch up. We all get together in summer in the island. We are all looking forward to seeing you. Phoebe wants to catch up with you too...’

His friend talked about the past and about Phoebe as if it had all happened yesterday. By staying there, they had this proximity to the past, talking about it, over the years. He didn’t. He had no one to share his past with. His past had remained silent inside him. But as his friend went on Alexi had stopped listening to him. Suddenly this immediacy of the past felt threatening to the world he had constructed for himself. He found himself again in uncharted waters. He felt his walls in danger of tumbling down. He didn’t want to hear anything anymore. Nothing at all. And his mind obeyed him as it had done all those years ‘*down under*’. How easily can minds be controlled he thought. After all they are such placid things! He felt uneasy about making his mind so docile. But he didn’t want anyone to pry into his innermost thoughts either.

As the ferry entered the bay, he felt his town, with its surrounding cliffs and the narrow terraces of olive groves and vines, with the stark mountain peaks at the back, coming up to him, enclosing him, claiming him again. His eyes went moist. A shiver shot through his body. All those years away he had tried hard to put this place, this island out of his mind. He was one of the lotus eaters, depriving himself of his Ithaca.

The harbour was full of small and large yachts most of them with foreign flags, English, German, Dutch. Small fishing boats and old caiques, were moored by the small wharf for the locals. In front of the square and along the promenade groups of tourists were scattered, walking leisurely, looking at shops.

The ferry had arrived early and his friend was not there yet. He got off the ferry with slow, measured steps, as if to bridge the *then* and the *now*. This gave him the opportunity to have a brief look at his old town. Everything felt both familiar and different. Looking around he saw the old grand houses encircling the harbour, still standing, imposing; some of them looking much older like himself. Others were newly groomed, judging from the freshness and vividness of paint, the stone cleaned and new shutters. The white, blue and pastel shades huddled together. The proximity, the closeness, the intimacy of it all was touching. But he couldn’t let himself fall prey to this closeness, he couldn’t suffer this or allow himself into that kind of intimacy. After all so much water had gone under the bridge. There was nothing left of that adolescent boy. You cannot afford to deceive yourself at my age, he thought and he tried to distance himself from it all. Yet deep inside him he was aching.

Further down, at the waterfront he was surprised to find the donkeys waiting as they used to back then, but now they were waiting to carry the tourists up the winding paths, to the hotels and *pensions* that had sprung up along the slopes and cliffs of the surrounding hills. Some cats were lying about sleepily, waiting for the fishermen to get back. He looked at them and smiled. They were all kinds of colours. Some dogs were strolling about in an expectant mood as if waiting for their families to arrive, on that ferry or the next. Hope keeps one going he thought. But he had managed to get

beyond hope, because he knew that hope can also hurt.

Now, as he walked on the old cobblestones, one of the dogs approached him, wagging his tail and looking up straight into his eyes, ready for some kind of an exchange of souls. Or was he saying, 'I am free for adoption and I like you. Please take me home.' *Home?* Alexi paused...The word buzzed like a spell in his head. The dog's eyes were smiling almost. He remembered his old dog, upset, barking by the wharf back then, the day he left the island.

His grandfather's words echoing in his ears, right here at the water's edge: 'You've got to go, my boy. We are in trouble now. It wasn't wise of you, my child to get involved. Her father will ruin you; he'll make it difficult for all of us. You shouldn't have done it. Now it's too late. Don't harbour any hopes about his daughter. I know you love each other son, but it wasn't meant to be. It's over. You must write, especially to your mother. I don't know how she'll bear this. She is devastated. You need to act like a grown up from now on, and be responsible.'

Alexi remembered Phoebe's father. He was a merciless man. Unyielding. He was the president of the island's council. He was the grand patriarch. His wishes ruled the family and the island. He had made his intentions clear. Alexi had to pay for eloping with his daughter. Under no condition was the daughter of a captain to be compromised and marry the son of a sailor. After all the family was one of the noble families of the island. It descended from a long line of famous sea captains and generals.

His own father never forgave him either.

Now looking back at his home town Alexi thought of power and how power determines one's future and how power begets power. It controls bodies and minds and lays down the rules for submission, he thought.

This is how he ended up in Australia, barely twenty. That had been his exile. Not even a political exile which he would have been able to talk about. He would have been able to share it with friends, to fight against. His had been an exile of silence, an exile of guilt, of forgetting.

Years later, in his new country, when Alice appeared in his life, everything changed. She had been different to everyone he had known. The newness had been enticing, exciting. He had loved again without fear and without constraint. And Alice had made him feel wanted. She made him part of her world. Through her he had come to love his new country. He gave himself totally to this new experience and to do this he even abandoned his own language to stop the yearning, to fend off nostalgia. Mother tongues carry so much with them. He had to close the doors and windows to his own country, to his past, to his mother tongue. He couldn't do things half way. He was merciless to this other self he carried inside him and for a while he felt that he had succeeded. But when Alice walked out one day, she took everything with her, even his newly founded sense of belonging. He should have seen it coming. In moments of clarity he could see why it all happened, why Alice left.

'You are here and yet not here. You are absent. This can't go on.' Alice would complain. 'Your mind is always somewhere else.'

'What is happening..?' she would ask him, trying to understand.

But he couldn't understand himself. He couldn't accept that weakness inside him, the inability to be all there. Alice was right. He wasn't all there. His island was lurking behind a wave, behind a sail, behind a cove. Part of him was suspended

somewhere in between countries, in between languages. This feeling of being incomplete, of something being amiss followed him.

And with Alice's departure the door was left wide open for the past to enter. The yearning for his homeland, the loss of his parents and Phoebe, that inward grief flooded him.

Now back on the old stone-paved paths of his hometown, he could almost retrace his steps back to his childhood. The old kiosk was still in the centre of the square with the daily newspapers hanging from the awnings that surrounded it. The sight was welcoming, though the owners were not the ones he knew back then. There was even a rack with English newspapers, with the *Economist* and *Time* magazines displayed on it. He bought the *Economist*, starting with small safe steps, falling back on the familiar. He flicked through it noting the stories on Greece:

Greece and the Euro: "Sell, sell your islands, you bankrupt Greeks, and the Acropolis too." Such was the furious headline of *Bild*...

The French Finance Minister said Greece failed to act on its original promise to raise €17 billion from the sale of state assets. This figure was raised earlier this year to €50 billion.

He began to feel a vague sense of foreboding. Where was all this leading he asked himself as he walked on.

Right behind the newspaper kiosk stood the old chapel where he used to come with his grandmother and she would light candles to Virgin Mary to protect father and all sailors and bless the house with a good yield of olive oil. Now right next to it there was a large fresco, donated by a local artist, featuring a blue and silver mermaid with an ethereal expression on her face, gently holding a ship in her palms.

From behind the whitewashed walls brightly coloured bougainvillea and jasmine spilled over into the laneways. Craft galleries and souvenir shops now flanked the harbour on both sides. He noticed there were many tavernas; there were bars and coffee shops, some of them closed or for sale. Along the promenade, in the open-air cafés, people were enjoying their coffee, others were chatting or reading their newspapers by the murmur of the sea. This had always been a gentle sea, familiar and soothing to his body. That's how he remembered it. Not the wild, endless sea of the southern hemisphere, with that drifting, overwhelming sense of infinity emanating from its angry plumes.

He sat down at the next café, near where his grandfather used to go and ordered his first Greek coffee in years. Straight ahead he could see the old bakery from his childhood days; it was still covered in bougainvillea. Next to him a large group of British yachtsmen were talking in an animated way. They had sailed all the way from Italy. They were happy with their achievement and they were drinking to that.

Alexi looked around at the nearby tables with mostly tourists and tried to reassure himself that he wasn't a tourist; after all he was a local but that thought floated by with a question mark and made him feel uncomfortable.

A mellow zephyr was now blowing softly over the bay, caressing the town, heading up towards the hills. This gentle breeze felt familiar to him, calling him back. Shimmering tongues of small waves were lapping the rocks below his feet.

A Greek song with a melancholy tune was playing softly in the background:

The isle of Cythera we will never find
That ferry journey we have long missed.

The sound of the lute took him back to an old lute player in the local festivals and wedding celebrations. Alexi remembered his smiling eyes and the look of yearning on his face.

Up on the hill stood his old house with its shutters closed, withered by time, waiting for him, without the geraniums and roses his mother used to love, without the old bougainvillea and its pergola. Naked, abandoned. He wouldn't look that way, not yet. He wasn't ready for it.

Opposite him, on the other side of the harbour, rose the hill of the Muses with its old shrine, hidden in olive and pine trees where they used to play hide and seek as kids. His eyes rested on it. It looked almost the same as back then, untouched amidst the change. That's where they first kissed. Above them the olive trees were bursting with fruit. The cicadas singing madly in those long summer days. Further down was their rock pool. She would emerge with droplets of sea water, sparkling on her svelte body, her brown hair, wet, to her waist. And then, there they were again together in primary school and later in high school, sharing the same desk, competing in geometry and probabilities. And Phoebe would come first.

A few metres away he caught sight of two women, in flowing beige sundresses, walking with a poodle towards the café in a leisurely way. The sun's glare and his tired eyes from the jet-lag made it difficult to see their faces. The lack of sleep from the long trip was catching up with him.

Suddenly an idea flashed past him. 'What if it was her, Phoebe?' he thought, recalling vaguely his friend's phone conversation and the innuendos.

'Alexi is that you?' she would ask him. And he would recognise the voice, her smiling eyes.

'Welcome home,' she would say or something similar.

But here he paused. '*Home?*' Something pricked his body. He had tried so hard to go beyond such notions, beyond that kind of certainty. That precious certainty of *home*. He has done without it too long, too long even to dream of it. And anyway what would this lot know about it, cosy in their own home, in their own country, in their own language? What can they know?

'This is Apollonia...your daughter. She really wanted to meet you...' she would, finally, say, looking straight into his eyes, waiting for his response.

Could it... be...? His...child.? Alexi wondered. But as that thought came, he felt lost for words, his mouth started quivering. The atmosphere all of a sudden felt heavy. He couldn't breathe. Quickly he got up, knocking the chairs near him. He left his coffee money on the table and made his way out of the café, bumping against the two women with the dog, who were looking at him with curiosity.

Out by the waterfront he took a deep breath. Once on the small wooden pier, he looked back at this amphitheatre of a town and tried to put his thoughts and his feelings into some kind of order, from this rocking deck on the sea. Up on the hill his old house was staring down at him, and as he glanced at it he saw his childhood self with a crew-cut, in shorts and old sandals, running down through all those

meandering, cobblestone paths, rushing down in haste eager to greet him.

High up the old hills, the jagged mountain peaks and Saint Elias' monastery, now aglow in a golden red light of the late afternoon, were beckoning him to stay. The frown on his forehead and the tightening on his chest started to relax. His hunched shoulders opened up, trying to lift themselves. He checked his watch. His friend should be here any minute now. What would he look like? Will he be able to recognise him?