

THE CITIES OF MINOR ASIA AS THEY WERE IMPRINTED IN THE CONTEMPORARY GREEK NOVELS

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Abstract

The myth and the speech of the city are on their own the criteria for the physiognomy of its urban environment, but, at the same time, they have the ability to conserve, to save and to project also the elements that one can find in the other criteria for a city's physiognomy, such as its shape and its usages.

The historical account of a city can be found deposited amongst its monuments as well as the written narrations that exist in reference to the city or include references of the city. This is true in literature, for example, where it has been proven to play a key role in the composition of the speech and the myth of the city. In particular in the case of realism as a form of literature, the writer is obliged to continue the story telling while meticulously checking the truthfulness of every detail in order to reconstruct with precision the space and the social environment.

The shock of the 1922 catastrophe of the Christian populations in Minor Asia has been a landmark in the contemporary Greek literature. The novels that were inspired by the Minor Asian refugees and exiles go beyond the nostalgia for what was lost and trace back a whole topography of an urban space that no longer exists. Therefore they contribute to the myth building and written speech of these cities. Today, these novels help us construct a reference system for the physiognomy of the Minor Asian metropolis, as well as many other Ionian cities.

Key words: *Asia Minor city, literature and city*

Introduction

As a landscape, the city has always had the ability to evoke images in people and to stimulate both for their brains as well as their emotions. After processing these stimuli and images, everybody then develops a particular relationship towards this urban space. This relationship could take them to a heightened level or it could be summoned together with other people's relationships and create a common thread. In both cases, however, this human relationship with the urban landscape could also produce a series of actions which could affect the physiognomy of the city. From this point of view, the research and examination of such relationship and the actions of the people in connection with a city has a double interest for researchers of the city's physiognomy:

They can research the specific elements of the image of a city that affect its inhabitants towards making them develop a certain attitude towards the city or to compose a more general view of the city.

They can interpret and measure how much these human actions that occurred because people had certain images and stimuli had an effect in the physiognomy of the city.

Therefore, we can estimate the character and the dynamics of the co-influence which is developed between the urban environment and the human nature.

The issue of a city's physiognomy is exclusively related to how a person perceives its landscape. The latter consists of a series of elements, divided in certain categories.

The city in each moment of its historic life represents not only the physical space that it occupies but also the notion of a country, as it is expressed in Jacques Derrida's equation of: the Country = Place + (oral and written) Speech + Myth. (Stefanou J. and Collaborators, 2000)

In particular, the city with its built urban space contains the environment in which the many people live their lives across the centuries and in different chronological eras. This is a fact that creates a varied series of perceived images, happenings, experiences, thoughts and perspectives. It is therefore natural that the city is not just a place but a system set in a place and therefore it becomes the object of human narration.

Humans have the tendency to use oral and written speech to document what they feel and think, therefore satisfying many of their needs which stem from their own psychology to the everyday problems they encounter. We should then confirm that in such narrations of the city we will find a large amount of material which could be defined to present to us a human understanding of the character and identity of every urban manifestation that said human had created, experienced, visited or was the focus of his or her activities.

The myth and the speech of the city are on their own the criteria for the physiognomy of its urban environment, but, at the same time, they have the ability to conserve, to save and to project also the elements that one can find in the other criteria for a city's physiognomy, such as its shape and its usages. (Sotiriou, 1988)

The historical account of a city can be found deposited amongst its monuments as well as the written narrations that exist in reference to the city or include references of the city. This is true in literature, for example, where it has been proven to play a key role in the composition of the speech and the myth of the city. In particular in the case of realism as a form of literature, the writer is obliged to continue the story telling while meticulously checking the truthfulness of every detail in order to reconstruct with precision the space and the social environment.

We may conclude that literature has managed to overcome the limitations of realism and the truthfulness of the city's old and contemporary image is retained by flexibly moving between memories and the conscious recognition of a space. The literary text is eternal because it is solid in its nature, while everything else around changes: the reader's perception, the literary styles, the aesthetic choices, the circumstances that give context to the text. (Paganos, 1983 p.p. 26-27)

In the novel, as well as on many occasions in the short story, the writer is obliged to create his or her environment in order to make the narration read truthfully. Therefore the writer chooses either the brushstrokes of a broad composition, such a big city with its piazzas, buildings, markets and its traffic, or a composition in a minor scale. In both cases, in realism the writer has to recreate credibly the environment. In this part of his or her work, imagination is not the only measure employed, but also research and the facts that control the detail in order to achieve a realistic impression of the narration. The writer Alexandros Kotzias states: "... even the neighbourhoods where the personas of the book live and frequent are well known to him or her – this is where he or she grew up, where he or she played or worked or taken a walk and experienced life. Every book, therefore, has a specific neighbourhood or a specific street. The writer, before he or she starts to write has cleared this already in their mind and imagination, helped by actual reconnaissance of the real space. (Truthful Bronze, 1989)

The cities of Minor Asia before 1922, can be represented by both the metropolis of its age, Smyrna (Izmir in modern Turkey) in the coast, and Aidinion (Aydin) in the mainland.

In order to try to reconstruct the image of the city of Aidinion and its surrounding area, we will use the novel of Dido Sotiriou "The Dead Are Waiting".

In the novel, Aidinion, or Aidini in the colloquial, is presented as a characteristic provincial town of Minor Asia.

In her introduction to her book, the writer registers as the first characteristic of her birthplace town its 'uneven narrow streets' ['kalderimia' in Greek]. ... What other characteristics of Aidinion can we find in her text?

First of all there is the topography of the city recognised by its natural landscape, like the rivers that run through the city and the surrounding suburbs. Especially her reference of the 'waters of Tsakiroglou', which means its river banks, where the young heroine of the text wishes to pick up her butterflies and the mantis (also called 'the horses of the Virgin Mary'). In addition, she describes the fresh garden of Edem with the olive trees mixed with wild roses and brambles. Finally, from a topographical point, she refers to the main road artery of the city, the Uzun Erim, and the suburbs, which were the popular destinations for the middle class population of the city - Tsakiroglou, Bounari, Kepetzi. The narration also features the church of the metropolis of St George [a metropolitan church], where the father of the young heroine was a councillor, and the rest of the institutions of the Greek community, the hospital and the Club, which – as the narrator points out – were the centre of intellectual and cultural activity.

It is significant that the character of the city is not affected by the start of the First World War. "A colourful world was mixing and coming and going with great ease for whatever transaction. Greek merchants and villagers with their black buggy trousers and their colourful knee-high socks. Armenians with fezzes, terrorised by the raids, but still holding their own. Jews with white robes, who could outwit the Levantines. Impoverished Italians and Germans seeking vital minerals. Well-natured Turkish peasants who bought and sold while seating cross-legged in the textiles markets, accompanied by the necessary hookah and you would thought that their relaxation was more important to them than the cut-throat nature of commerce." (Sotiriou, 1988, p.46)

The Greek element in Aidinion had a variety of occupations. The leading group was the merchants and the businessmen. In the book they are referenced at least four factories for the production of soap which belonged to Greeks. The descriptions of the industrial spaces are detailed – the space and the production of soap within that space. We observe, for example, that the buildings and organisation of the factory follows the pattern which was common at that age in Europe. The writer informs us that in the industrial area of the city, where there is also a river that runs through it, apart from the soap factories there are also workshops for textiles, carpet making and tanneries. Moreover, the area has as a characteristic many inns for the comfort of the workers, most of whom are temporary staff and they come from the Minor Asia mainland, as another of Dido Sotiriou's novels, "Bloody Earth", informs us.

The family scenes which are presented in the novel are a very significant part of describing the ethos of the era and contribute to the creation of the physiognomy of the place. The gatherings of the wider family, the grandmother in the role as the matriarch, as well as the strong position of the mother, works in juxtaposition to the patriarchal character of the grand-father in the novel of Ilia Venezis', "Aolean Land"; the food, the drinks, the preparation of the family meals are also placed as evidence of the Minor Asian urban middle class culture. "The kitchen was always in motion and in action. The smell of the roasts, the fried, the donuts, the halva and other delicacies were mesmerising. There was no need for a celebration as an excuse." A characteristic scene of such activity is the gathering of the relatives, friends and neighbours every Wednesday for the preparation of the vermicelli. (Sotiriou, 1988, p.34)

The cultural, social and financial differences between the Greek and the Turks are pointed out in various parts of the narration. In relation to Aidinion, the writer is usually surprised by her interaction with the Turks in their own neighbourhoods and their way of life. "When you were lost and found yourself in the Turkish neighbourhoods, with all these people, it was hard not to get confused". (Sotiriou, 1988, p.p.52-53)

It is time now to move to the metropolis of the Minor Asia, Smyrna. The city that, as Guy Milton writes, was more advanced than Athens and it was populated with more Greeks from those living in the Greek capital. (Guy Milton, 2008, p.29)

For the impression of the city to its visitors we look in two books by Dido Sotiriou. In the "Bloody Earth", the visitor is a villager from the Minor Asia mainland, from a village in the area of Aidinion. Let's see exactly what he experiences: "When I got out on the quay I forgot everything, including my fear. The first impressions came and took me gently to tame me and I did not know where to look first and what to enjoy first. The sea? The boats at Chamidie that sailed through the water without sinking? The grand marble houses with their wooden closed, mysterious, balcony shutters? The carriages with their rhythmic sound on the granite paved street? The trams lead by horses? Or all that happy, carefree crowd which was going noisily in and out of their clubs and in the cafes and looked like it was a Fairground and not just one another dreary working day!" (Sotiriou, 2008, p.49)

In parallel mode, little Alice in *The Dead Are Waiting*, daughter of an upper-middle class urban family from Aidinion, arrives in Smyrna by railway and she observes ecstatically the memorable combination of natural and man-made elements. The bay of Smyrna coloured by the sunset and the suburb of Kiai with its villas gives to our little heroine the joy that reality for once has surpassed her expectations. In this specific book, the cosmopolitan air of the city is presented through the introduction of its suburbs and the cities dominating images: "The Quais, the Paralleli, the Belavitsa, Barchanedes, the Great Taverns, Boulevard Alioti, Koules, Trassa, St Fotini, St Catherine, the boats of Kordelio, the trams of the Quais which were driven by horses, the cafes full of joyful people, the jasmine sellers, the cashew nuts, the 'Politakia' playing the santouri, the painted women, everything looked like multi-colour ribbons around a happy maypole.

Myself, if I wanted to describe the city I would have called it city of playfulness and joy, frivolous and affectionate like its women. A warm open-hand hug which holds you close." (Sotiriou, 1988, p.54-55)

The fact that the family of the main protagonists are upper-middle class gives us many different elements of the luxury for which Smyrna of that age was known for. They rent a villa in Caterald, in the neighbourhood of the Levantines, as well as a second house in Moskof street, which used to be the Persian Consulate. We gather information for both buildings including external appearance as well as its interior design and decoration.

Dinner at the luxury hotel of Cramer allows us another glimpse of the cosmopolitan character of the city combined with historical observations of the new Turks' attempts to emulate a European style. The social life is described during the afternoons that the family spends at Sporting and the Hunters' Club. The character of Smyrna as a place of learning is presented through little Alik's stories of her attending lessons at the Homer College. We also have descriptions of the coastal suburbs which are named in the narration as: Karatas, Karantina, Gios, Tepe and Kokargiali.

Finally, we have references to Boutza, the suburb of the city mainly inhabited by 'the rich and the powerful'. Let us see how the buildings are described, their architecture as well as its usages in the specific extracts: "For the summer we rented a house in Boutza for the holidays. Next to the impressive villas of the English and the aristocracy of Smyrna, our house looked very humble and non-important.

In the house of Mr Politidi one could find a lot of rich English and Greek from Boutza, where they played cards and listened to music, drunk whisky and had conversations for sports and the arts. In the enormous garden there was a tennis court, a cricket court and stables for the horses.

Boutzas however did not have the joyfulness of Kordelio, nor was as lively. There was no sea in Boutza and no beer parlours where life spills into the streets. People spoke low and they laughed tactfully, careful not to make many hand gestures and safeguarded their contact. Life was happening inside their closed villas, The high-life of Smyrna lived there with all the comfort,

education and the means to occupy themselves with cultural and intellectual subjects. In the big houses you could see large and rich libraries with rare paintings of the French and the Italian Renaissance,” (Sotiriou 1988, p.p. 124-125)

Not a visitor but an actual inhabitant of the city who also describes it in his work is Kosmas Politis and his renown novel “At Chatzifragou”. The novel has the style of popular fiction and it includes a plethora of social and historical elements.

The place, as the title suggests, relates to the working class neighbourhood of Smyrna. The protagonist of the novel is Smyrna the city itself, and its specific neighbourhood. It is not only useful because of the places’ names that we get from Mr K. Politi, but also detailed descriptions of the streets.

As we mentioned, the writer has selected a working class neighbourhood. The upper-middle class suburbs of Smyrna are not presented in the foreground. If we also combine this with the fact that Politis is looking the city through the eyes of the children rather than the adults, we conclude that his intention was to narrate the city seen through the eyes of the working class, common people as he has kept them in his memories and his subconscious from his childhood.

In addition, the writer, although he refers to the cohabitating communities – the Turks, the Armenians and the Europeans – , he actually presents us with a city which is at its core a Greek one. This is very important as in the novel the city is not just the aesthetic environment for the narration, but it is the focus of the narration itself. “At Chatzifragou” the description of the space and of the urban environment is not symbolic either.

The presentation of Smyrna intends to add more authenticity to the stories in the plot of the book.

Today we do not have the ability to cross reference the descriptions of the city from Kosma Politis. The city that he describes does no longer exist, as the old Smyrna was destroyed in 1922 combined with the massacre and the exodus of its Christian population. This is the city that the writer maps for all eternity.

In order to resurrect Smyrna, K. Politis gives us various topographical, chronological, and narrative perspectives that aim to create a dynamic representation of the city to the reader.

We are particularly interested in the walkabouts of the book’s characters, as these provide for the writer the opportunity to describe whatever images of the city they see. Therefore many of the incidents take place in the streets, since only seniora Fiora remains firmly in her house. The city is a complex of pathways, as M. Butor reminds us. (Butor, 1964, p.48)

By indexing this great material for the physiognomy of the city that we find in the book, we could extract:

- Descriptions of neighbourhoods and places of interest. The piazzas, the buildings, the streets and the shops. For example, we can choose a Turkish working class neighbourhood; we will see that it borders with the Greek community of St John, which is also the border with the Jewish neighbourhood. Its main characteristic is its tranquillity, in relation to other neighbourhoods, its narrow streets, the mosques and the short houses with the grilled windows. The streets: ‘the narrow street of Madam’. This narrow street had no street sign, as was also the case for all the narrow streets of the city: they named them, like a pet name, inspired by an incident. In the case of the one named above, it happened to be the location of beer brewery which was managed by the widow of a German businessman, Madam Hilda.
- Pathways and routes: the route that priest Nicolas takes from Chatzifragou to the Metropolitan Mansion of St Fotini. We observe the priest as he walks to the Fardi of St Catherine, passes Zerva’s Bakery, then passes from Boyatzidika through to Fasoula. Over there the narrator has the opportunity to paint Fasoula’s Inn with just a few literary brushstrokes and to recall the memory of the frequent visits of priest Nicola to the Greek Chemists (however, on that day, he does not go in). From then on, priest Nicolas will turn left and he will follow through the

length of the French neighbourhoods so that he ends up at St Fotini, after he has said hello to the Catholic priest – a character who will enter the story again a couple of pages later. The narrator's eye does not follow priest Nicola as he enters the church but lingers, as a faithful dog, outside, waiting for him; in the meantime the narration follows the traffic in the street and allows us a rare glimpse of a typical afternoon scene at the French neighbourhoods. When after twenty-five minutes priest Nicolas comes out of the church, the narrator closes the parenthesis of the afternoon street traffic and he follows him as he turns into the Great Tavernas and enters the Taverna of Mister Argiris. There both men will talk about the screen ['Templon'] that separates the altar, an issue that plays a key role in the state of the priest's mind. But before the narrator actually enters the Taverna, he has another opportunity to describe everything the priest sees, hears and smells on the way. So this walk becomes not only a drive for the telling of this fictional story but an excuse to transmit to us the various views of Smyrna and to the make a list of the names of the different areas. (Politis, 2010, p.p. 31-40)

Similarly there is also the description (chapter 6) of the route Aristos follows each day in order to take lunch to his father. A chance meeting between Aristos and Stavrakis at the theatre (though, nothing is by chance in a novel!) allows Politis to narrate the episode when Aristos fell to the sea and thus was forced to learn how to swim. Although there is a need in the narration to expose Aristos' swimming abilities, the beautifully impressionistic description of the pathway of Aristos at Quais and at the docks of Smyrna is actually redundant to the main story: here the plot is deployed for the reconstruction of the space. (Sotiriou, 1988, p.p. 111-113)

In chapter 3, the excursion to the castle is narrated and it is constituted mainly of topographical detail. The children follow one route when going up and another when coming down. However, a large part of that chapter is devoted to the extended description of the panorama view from the top: the whole of Smyrna, with its bay, its mountains and its suburbs and villages, is laid under the eyes of the children who sit at the hill. (Sotiriou, 1988, p.p. 55-58) In this instance more than ever Politis proved to be a virtuoso topographer who managed to paint a huge lively canvas through the medium of language. The names of the places play a significant part, especially those who have a Turkish origin (Daragatsi, Korkogali Gioz, Salahanes, Karatassi, Bachri Baba, etc); these names differentiate the landscape emphatically from that of the writer's new country. The name of the places as well as the elements of the smyrnaic dialect, which he uses a lot in the novel, point and eternally argue for the specificity of this remarkable landscape from which the writer feels he has been exiled, like a new Adam. Politis invests in two names of real locations with a symbolism when he writes the phrases "from Edem and back" (in his first page) and "beyond the Paradise" (Politis, p. 54): if Smyrna was not the Paradise, it was definitely closer to it than any other place in the world.

- Customs, morals and some periodical facts: The text starts with the racing boats which take place on the same day as the Ascension Day. The crowd is watching from special wooden platforms. The majority of the crowd is concentrated at Quais and as result horse-driven coaches move with difficulty. The mention of that incident brings to the writer the opportunity to talk about the rich villas of Quais with their multinational characteristics ("every city had raised the flag of its nations, other Greek, others French, other Italian, English, Holland, German"). In the fair of Trinity church the landscape is filled with intense sounds and smells. The smells from the donuts, the milkpies and the coffee are singled out in the text. At the same time there are music instruments and music bands that play music such as tsamika (Greek traditional), amanes (Anatolian traditional), karsilama (Anatolian traditional) and polkas. Dancing is not organised only in the piazza but also takes places in the house yards in the neighbourhood. In the book there is also mention of the city's two annual charity balls, which

the narrator notes take place in spite of the fact that one may fall during Lent. One of these balls is about the hospital of St Charalambous and it is being organised by the Hellenic Club, and the second one is in support of Spitalion of Saint Antoine and it takes place at the European Club. The plot of the novel also gives us an indirect mention of the New Club, which was a closed club for the distinguished citizens irrespective of their nationality. (Politis, 2010, p.146)

- Professional activities: In the neighbourhood of Chatzifragou people have manual occupations. They are occupied with agricultural pursuits and the preparation and packaging of agricultural products, such as the famous figs of Smyrna, or they are workers in the factories (foundries, lumber mills, chimney makers), or as assistants in merchant shops. In addition, they can be craftsmen such as carpenters, ironmongers, moulders. In the French neighbourhood, on the other hand, workers, shop assistants, shop keepers and others come and go because this is where the main road artery exists between the residential neighbourhoods and the docks. A special mention should be given to the bank clerks and clerks of related offices who are considered particularly advantageous in their professional life and this reflects the different class layers.
- Social activities, relationships between cohabitating populations. Relationships between Turks and Greeks, Greeks and Jews, Greeks and Europeans.
- Characteristic human-types. The priest Nicolas, the worker Pantelis, Stavrakis, Aristos, the Jew from Corfu Simon.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the shock of the 1922 catastrophe of the Christian populations in Minor Asia has been a landmark in the contemporary Greek literature. Although the main focus is mainly in the catastrophic events themselves and its impact, the nostalgia for the Ionian paradise lost also prevailed in many cases. The city, with main protagonist the city of Smyrna, as well as the countryside came alive again due to the myth building and narrative skills of some writers. Within these documents we could now put together a reference system for the physiognomy of the Minor Asian metropolis, as well as many other Ionian cities.

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