

Rethinking Insularity in *The Wind Under My Lips* by Stephanos Stephanides

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Abstract: The article discusses the role of insularity and island-born narratives in the context of cultural interaction. It poses questions about the role of insular structures in the production and concentration of cross-cultural narratives to contest *I-land* models of self-location. To illustrate this flexible aspect of insular being/thinking, I read analytically fragments of *The Wind Under My Lips* by Stephanos Stephanides, a Cypriot-born writer who writes in English.

Keywords: insularity, cultural crossways, linguistic identity, exophony, cultural translation, Cyprus

This article aims to contribute to a relatively underdeveloped section of the critical vocabulary of contemporary literary and cultural studies. Having already attuned their theoretical paradigms and analytical tools to the speeding events of migration, border crossing and intensive cross-cultural exchange, they have come up with the means, tropes and terms of study that encourage the disruption of firmly-fixed forms, ‘impermeable’ boundaries, and ‘hymns’ of the indomitable nation. Against this background, notions of ‘home’ recede, giving way to departures, linguistic self-location breeds dislocation, art and literature become multiply rooted.

My concern is that amidst these forms of flexibility, islands and islandness are less likely to be adopted when thinking about crossways. Island life can produce visions of insularity/isolation and narratives that shun “undesirable otherness” (Bernardie-Tahir and Schmoll 2014). Such attitudes project models of insularity that tend to merge the island with an “I-land” (DeLoughrey and Handley 2011) especially when the

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smaller size of the island results in the condensation of the often heterogeneous composition of the local population.

In this article, I discuss the work of a less-known island-born writer who writes in English. Born in a Cypriot village, Stephanos Stephanides joined his father who left for England when Stephanides was only eight. Subsequently, he lived and travelled in Greece, Spain, and Portugal, Guyana and Washington DC. In 1991 he returned to Cyprus and presently he reads lectures in English and Comparative Literature at the University of Cyprus. *The Wind Under My Lips* is his recently assembled memoir, published in several successive parts, in which he remembers his origins.

In this study, *insularity* is approached from several perspectives: as a linguistic property, most frequently evoked to articulate the restraints faced by the so called ‘minority languages and literatures’; as a translation site that, as Stephanides and Bassnett (2008) observe in their seminal contribution “Islands, Literature and Cultural Translatability,” is characterized by a high density of cultural interaction due to territorial limits; and, as a metonymic model of the globe that exhibits the problematic relationship between locality and world-mindedness.

Ever since the great geographical discoveries islands have been represented as sites of floating location, they were frequently located on the imaginary maps of myths and fictional journeys, or overlapping with actual geographical sites, pushing their whereabouts to dreamlands. Such are, for instance, the floating Aeolian Islands (see Stephanides and Bassnett 2008), named after the god of the wind, or the flying island of Laputa in Book III of *Gulliver’s Travels*, a lofty satellite-like twin land that hovers over another down-bound island. Even when islands represent permanent sites in literary works such as Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, their supposed permanence becomes subject to translation and reformulation into more familiar forms. The plasticity of islands, their metamorphic substance and floating boundaries are characteristics that work against ideas of absolute enclosure, isolation and homogeneity.

From a socio-political perspective, it can be argued that the territories of islands have frequently been subject to claims of ownership, ethnic disputes, linguistic variety and continental belonging. But when distanced significantly from the continents, insular life enjoys relative autonomy and some autochthonic cultures, societies and languages have proliferated on islands.

In this essay the controversial properties of islands taken metaphorically and instrumentally to explore the role of syncretic structures in linguistic, and, more particularly, exophonic, Anglophone self-location. These problems are bound to the specific political situation in Cyprus, Stephanides' birth-place, as well as to the quest for a language to reach beyond the ethnic and cultural divide of the split island. As this language turns out to be English, the language of British colonial rule on the island, a peculiar form of politically incited exophony developed in Cyprus. In it, English, the language of the former colonizers, became "reterritorialized", to employ Deleuze and Guattari's term, by the local speakers in their willingness to distance themselves from the ethnic conflict.¹ Being a 'buffer' language in Cyprus, thus, English became doubly subverted by the speakers of Cypriot Greek and Turkish, but, at the same time, this transformation did not alleviate postcolonial tension. In his memoir, for instance, Stephanides observes that English was reluctantly adopted by the more conservative natives in his childhood and they would dissuade him from using it.

Later on, after graduating from Cardiff University, Stephanides chose English as the language of his writing justifying his choice by his cross-border self-location. Interviewed by Adrian Grima for *Babelmed*, he regards his relationships to other languages as "rebirths", as Grima puts it, "writing as renewal":

Language, memory, culture, and identity are not equivalent categories albeit overlapping or interconnected. It is not simply a choice between the vernacular of my native island and an international cosmopolitan language. I left Cyprus as a child and grew up and was educated in the UK. English is lived experience for me and I have lived through different forms of English, not only UK English, but I have lived and worked in Guyana for many years in a Caribbean English cultural environment and many years in the US before returning to Cyprus. I am also fluent in Spanish and Portuguese and have many memories and intimate experiences related to those languages and cultures. (Stephanides, quoted in Grima 2005)

¹ "Deterritorialization" is a term created by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their philosophical project *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972–1980). They distinguished that relative deterritorialization is always accompanied by reterritorialization needed by the design of the new power.

In another writing, an article titled “Translatability of Memory in an Age of Globalization”, he synthesizes his reasoning in a more succinct observation that “when a writer adopts a language other than his mother tongue as his literary language, there is a possibility for expanding the capacity to hear diverse accents of idiom, history, memory and identity” (Stephanides 2004, 103). In other words, writing in a language that is not the writer’s native tongue can be experienced as self-translation, as a symbolic journey in-between the linguistic islands of a cultural archipelago where the ‘I-lands’ of the writer’s birth and relocation are anything but homogeneous and strictly confined cultural locations. These islands represent floating identities and modes of movement and, much like the Laputa island of Gulliver’s travels, and the Aeolian Islands in Greek mythology, they turn out to be allotropic (from Ancient Greek ἄλλος (*allos*) – ‘other’, and τρόπος (*tropos*) – ‘manner, form’), i.e. they take shape as different, simultaneous forms/places of cultural self-location. Exophonic writing, then, indulges the simultaneous presence of cultural experiences and it amounts to what French scholar Chantal Zabus (1991) calls “palimpsest” cultural awareness, i.e. when different cultural layers are accumulated in the historical depths of linguistic experience.

This said, we will now turn to some problematic formulations of insularity that can also be discussed as regards Stephanides’ writing. The literary production of Cypriot Anglophone writers has not enjoyed enough international recognition to be classified as one of the “major” literatures. Marios Vasiliou (2011) suggests that even locally, in relation to Greek and Turkish mainstream writing, it is more like a “stranger at the feast”. On the one hand, and in spite of lending ways to mediate political tension on the split island, English remains invested with postcolonial anxiety and memories. On the other hand, just like Cypriot Greek and Turkish writing, Cypriot Anglophone works appear to be “strangers” at the international feast. Citing Deleuze and Guattari, Vasiliou argues that these very tensions experienced by Anglophone writers both within Cypriot literature and beyond it, have conditioned the idiosyncratic position of Cypriot Anglophone writing. Thus, Vasiliou (2011, 83) warns against the efficiency of “using globally fashionable terms such as magic realism or postmodernism” when reading such texts analytically. He recommends that, instead, we should do justice to the specific conditions of insularity not in the sense that insular cultures are “cut off” from global trends and currents, but that, due to territorial confinement, such movements are

experienced with greater density. Vasiliou's view is that such literary works are "syncretist" (Ibid) borrowing the term from Eleni Kefala and her comparative investigation of similar cases "as responses and reactions to multi-temporal and heterogeneous traditions ... where there is a symbiosis of elements and narratives, originating from different places and times, which might or might not (entirely) belong either to the so-called modernity or postmodernity" (Kefala 2007, 258).

Kefala's observation is justified as islands do turn out to be places of specific social and spatial production. From a philosophical and sociopolitical perspective, they can be seen as sites of intensive translation in-between local and global traditions. Nathalie Bernardie-Tahir and Camille Schmoll (2014) consider islands as dynamic sites of cultural interaction and approach them as "places of condensation", a term proposed by French philosopher Bernard Debarbieux (1995, 100) to evoke "an analogy with the condensation of water vapor: a densification process (water molecules aggregating in a small volume) that gives visibility (water drop) to that which hadn't been [visible] (water vapour)." According to Bernardie-Tahir and Schmoll (2014), "as a synecdoche of the world, islands are both concrete and symbolic places condensing social and spatial production processes." It is, therefore, worth studying the cultural and literary production of islands as they (especially small islands) enhance the visibility of some large-scale world processes like colonization, migration and mainland conflicts, for instance. Being places of condensation, they stage the above-mentioned developments with greater intensity, due to the manageable limits within which those processes take place.

In what follows, I focus on fragments from Stephanos Stephanides' memoir *The Wind Under My Lips* to demonstrate how its syncretic narration and linguistic heterogeneity produce threshold identities and *topoi* that can be seen as the outcome of cultural translation.

Going back to Kefala's definition of syncretist aesthetics, it is important to note that she employs such terminology in her comparative investigation of Greek and Argentinian literature with a particular focus on the work of Jorge Luis Borges and his literary disciples, two of whom are Greek contemporary writers. In fact, her detailed research dwells on major trends in the development of Greek modern and contemporary literature, its quest for national self-location and the dissolution of this impulse in the pursuit of a wider, cross-cultural paradigm. Kefala argues that in most cases this pursuit is

bound to what Borges refers to as the *orillas*, a word which translates as many things – edge, shore, margin, limit, i.e. places where borders and thresholds are formed (see Sarlo, quoted in Kefala 2007, 46) - and island literatures turn out to be particularly productive in such threshold experiences. After all, migrant writers like Stephanides departed from such physical shores to arrive elsewhere, but, as we will see, such departure become a literary strategy of prolonged returns – again, to elsewhere, in the course of which so many detours, translations and negotiations become possible.

The syncretizing function of Stephanides' writing, i.e. the tendency to negotiate between languages, traditions, places and times, diverse cultural and literary perspectives, is certainly conditioned by his lavish experience of cross-cultural relocations and encounters. He himself observes in his memoir that

I had spent the sixties moving between three islands, like three fragments of myself that I could not piece together in any way into a whole. My life seemed totally incongruous. I had expanded my sense of self and home from one island in my early childhood to three islands in my teenage years. And that's how I became Solo Trismegistus. I shared a legacy with Hermes Trismegistus who hailed from Alexandria like my grandfather. So I would be Alone, and three times powerful. This was better than being alone one time. In a multiplicity of aloneness you could never be lonely. Three different lonely voices talking inside of me sought out new voices. Each island voice brought me in touch with myself in a different way (Stephanides 2015, 109).

In this passage, the I-narrator's identity is represented as a syncretic self that reproduces the mythological figure of Hermes Trismegistus (Thrice Great), a threshold deity, worshipped by both Hellenic and Egyptian cultures as the god of communicative interpretation and alchemy; similarly, the narrator's "triple might" takes the form of an internalised insular triad – Cyprus (his place of birth), England (where he and his father relocated on the eve of Cyprus's partition) and Taiwan (where his mother remarried after the family split). On another occasion, in an academic article, entitled "An Island in Translation," Stephanides equally observes that "[t]ime compressed into space, and the spatialisation of the temporal in an island territory, brings dissimilarities next to each other but also a mode of non-comprehension or charged speechlessness in need of translations" (Stephanides 2011, 42). He adds that "I begin with the island of my

birth, [...] because I can speak from a position where I am written and from which I write, where I am translated and from which I translate” (Ibid, 42). This sequence of quotes provides an example of how Stephanides’ syncretic perspective is formed – he renders negotiable disparate elements of self-location in such a way that loneliness (equivalent to an I-land) engenders an impulse for translation; and he becomes able to translate it but only after he undergoes translation himself. In the third part of his memoir, he remembers his initial childhood struggle with English on the British Isles,

All I did was to refuse to speak English. In Cyprus they wanted to ban English from schools. Why did I have to learn it and why did I have to stay here? [...] Did he [the author’s father] think I was dangerous because I threw vinegar at the picture of the Queen in the school he put me in for a few weeks in Bristol? [...] There were no roof terraces here and Auntie Noreen did not know how to make lokoumades, so I had to sleep inside a cold dark house inhabited by kallikanjaroi and people who only spoke English, and no priest would come on the day of epiphany to bless the house. (Stephanides 2015, 107-108)

It is this initial resistance to acculturation that populates Stephanides’ memories with local Cypriot Greek words and names of local practices, left untranslated. Such linguistic “islands” in his Anglophone “return” to the “Mediterranean island”, as he calls Cyprus in his memoir, constitute one of the many layers in his palimpsest-like, syncretic prose. Stephanides justifies his choice to leave such markers of local culture untranslated in another piece of academic writing where he comments on his own creative writing:

As a Cypriot writing in English, I find myself always in the tensions and ambivalences on the edges of different languages. For example, the word I hear for a feeling and image may come to me in the word of the vernacular Cypriot Greek as my grandmother would have said the word. [...] I became caught between intensifying the meaning by stripping it from the sound of the signifier or allowing the intensity to draw on the vernacular word and territorialise it in the rural grape culture and the sound of my grandmother’s tongue speaking of grape must and molasses vibrating within English. (Stephanides 2011, 50-51)

He insists that such local words are bearers of cultural memory and that the reader will be invited to interact in the process of interpretation and translation when confronted with the interplay of the original sign, sound and name.

The multiple directions of Stephanides' cross-cultural self-locations and his experience as a writer, poet, translator, academic, and documentary film maker have laid visible imprints on his creative work. The breadth and diversity of his experience renders the plot of his memoir "The Wind Under My Lips" particularly "thick" with names of relatives and acquaintances, local events, route maps, village life, historical detail and all this wrapped by pervading mythology. Published in three consecutive parts, "The Wind Under My Lips", "Winds Come from Somewhere" and "A Litany in My Slumber", it tells about his childhood on the island, adolescence in the UK and Portugal, and return to the island in a manner that reminds of a contemporary Homeric Odyssey. Though the places and journeys proliferate, the bulk of the memoirs pay homage to life on the island, deliberately filtered through Stephanides' adopted language. I suggest that this linguistic detour serves several purposes in the process of remembering that structures Stephanides's memoir.

First, it operates the way camera angle secures a distance between the observer and the observed that allows to readjust the focus of attention. Stephanides not only writes the Greek island in English, he rewrites his birthplace, the village of Trikomo, his childhood plays, affection for his grandparents and relatives, the falling stars of Perseus, the sounds of the voices of sibyls, songs, litanies, smells of *Pana'yri* food, political circumstances seen through young Stephanides's eyes. If translation can crudely be represented as a departure from one language/culture and arrival in another, exophonic writers are on a continuous journey for any attempt they make to retrieve their places/cultures of origin amounts to another departure to another place. As Stephanides (2009, 104) himself meditates on his birth, "Perhaps it was my first coming into the world. I am not altogether certain. I doubt it. I often wonder. I have the tendency to go round in circles as I have a difficulty with beginnings and ends, so perhaps my entrance into the house with a green balcony was just another crossroads." It is interesting to see how this constant relocation produces an amalgamation of spatiotemporal inconsistencies (the narrative does not follow a neat chronological order, but forms clusters of past and present situations where Cyprus, the UK and Portugal are simultaneously present, for instance); as well as cultural references that knit together Ancient Greek mythology, pagan rites and Orthodox feasts; cultural and political topoi such as the town cinema and curfew imposed in the run-up to decolonization.

Secondly, because of this thick concentration of itineraries, the islands that shape Stephanides's journey become themselves sites of intensive translation. For instance, in the case of Cyprus, insularity encodes a nostalgic return to the "blessed isle" of childhood, which, in turn translates certain traumatic political events as innocent games. The curfew imposed by the authorities when British troops patrol the streets of the capital becomes fun time for hide-and-seek when young Stephanides and his friends would run back home meandering between the police cars. Similarly, the Greek island becomes a place of translation of European popular culture as subtitled films with Sophia Loren are projected in the town cinema and Stephanides' mother translates them for him. England is likewise represented as a site of translation where local migrant cultures, such as that of Cypriot Greekness, become translated into a global language. As a result of these functions, islands become exceptionally dynamic places in this narrative of remembrance, they float in-between the currents and winds and their shores are constantly reshaped by the multiple departures and arrivals.

Finally, Stephanides employs English as a language that overcomes the traumatic division of Cyprus into Greek and Turkish zones. When he remembers his maternal grandmother Milia's advice, he transliterates the Greek and Turkish words of her saying, "Mashallah, I said, to ward off the evil eye, and to hedge my bets with the divine as Milia taught me, I sealed it with the sign of the cross from right to left in the Orthodox way. Milia said, if you cross yourself when you say 'praise Allah', you are protected from both Christian and Mussulman" (Stephanides 2015, 126). Thus, English as an adopted language becomes a means of negotiation between conflicting perspectives, bringing them together through the wisdom of one of the old "sibyls" of Stephanides's memories.

I would like to end with the insightful comment of Marios Vasiliou (2011, 92) who discusses Stephanides' work in his review of Cypriot English literature,

Wandering and floating are metaphors in this work for cultural transfer and exchange, and the role of imagination is paramount in mobilising this process of transfer. The diasporic wandering of the narrator is here not one of lament and sorrow but one of sober optimism about the liberating potentialities that literal or imaginary journeys are impregnated with. The story's refusal to be located in any other place or time than crossroads."

As it becomes evident from these observations, islands can operate as powerful hubs of cross-cultural interchange and translation, in the course of which exophonic writing flourishes. Veering between different linguistic identities, Stephanides articulates insularity as a hub of departures and arrivals that reformulate locality in the dynamics of the world literary space.

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