EVA VLAMI AND THE IMPRISONMENT OF THE PAST

Compared to Greek poetry, which has had its devoted students and translators for decades, the fiction of Greece is as yet relatively unknown outside the national boundaries. Aside from the works of Kazantzakis and Prevelakis the Greek novel has not had a wide readership among literate non-Greeks, nor—if publishing statistics are to be credited—among the Hellenes themselves. It should not be difficult to understand, therefore, that many impressive talents would go unnoticed under these conditions, particularly in a Europe or an America where many cultures, major and minor, are competing for the attention of the large reading public.

Eva Vlami, perhaps because her protean talent is certain to perplex a hasty reader, has not been given the recognition she deserves. Her first book, GALAXEIDI: THE FATE OF A NAVAL TOWN (1947), is a reminiscence that chronicles the growth, the brief glory, and the gradual decline of Vlami’s ancestral home. Unfortunately, perhaps because it was strongly influenced—almost overwhelmed—by Pandelis Prevelaki’s CHRONICLE OF A CITY, it does not show the author’s unique talents off to her advantage, in spite of its being written in a superb if uncompromising demotic Greek. Something is missing, possibly an unmistakable narrator who could have provided the order that would fuse the scattered vignettes, sketches and character studies into art. Without this necessary perspective, the book does not present an integrated view of life but a number of sharply divergent though well perceived fragments.

Still, with all its failings, GALAXEIDI: THE FATE OF A NAVAL TOWN is an interesting book, one poised between discursive and creative literature: the reader is informed about the town’s many eccentrics; the secret schools under Turkokratia; the dress of the various classes; the rituals of the holy days; the construction of the cathedral’s iconostasis; and the building

1. Γαλαξείδι. Η μοίρα μιας ναυτικής πολιτείας.
2. Το χρονικό μιας πολιτείας (1938).
of a great ship. But all of these are presented without the overriding structure that would compel the reader to mourn the inevitable decline of Galaxeidi from maritime greatness.

Why did the town of Galaxeidi decline? Vlami answers the question briefly in the book that served as her apprenticeship: the individualistic townspeople, by temperament incapable of submerging their identities and combining their fortunes into corporations, lost their markets when steam power was introduced.

It is with SKELETOVRAHOS (1949),1 a fully orchestrated novel in the traditional sense, that Vlami shows herself to be a major talent; besides being a superb work of fiction, it is one of the few creative works that deals knowledgably about a significant part of Greek life heretofore pretty much ignored by Greek novelists: the ocean. This is strange, however, since the sea is such an important part of the lives of the Greek people.2

But writers of the sea are a perplexing breed. Why, for example, are the great sea narratives in English written by Joseph Conrad, a Pole, or by Americans, a people who after the end of the 19th century seem to have lost all interest in the sea, while relatively few Englishmen, whose nautical tradition is one of the most impressive of modern times, have produced works of literary value? Yet it is with this “English” tradition that Vlami’s SKELETOVRAHOS must be compared, and it is significant that she has not read the works of Joseph Conrad, Herman Melville or Richard Henry Dana but has fashioned her sea novel from the oral traditions of her Galaxeidiot kin.

The conflict between two captains, Skeletovrahos, the tragic hero of the novel, and Yiannakas, cast as an antagonist because he is dissatisfied with the way things are done in Galaxeidi, makes up the thrust of the novel. Skeletovrahos symbolizes old values and ideals, the sailing tradition and the glorious past. The history of his family—which has produced a bishop, a war-lord, a scholar, a pirate and Skeletovrahos’ own father, a merchant captain—is the history of Modern Greece itself. Yiannakas is the new man, a rational man who must comprehend his inability to defeat the elements, yet

1. Σκελετόβραχος.
2. I must insist on the distinction between literature written about, say, the Aegean and works like MOBY DICK, NIGGER OF THE NARCISSUS, TWO YEARS BEFORE THE MAST and SKELETOVRAHOS. In the former, because of the nearness of land and the relative briefness of voyages, there is no sense of a unique society independent from that of the town or city. In the latter, the ship becomes a world in itself and its society becomes a metaphor for the larger one on land.
willing to adapt to the new ways of the world. Compared to the splendid Skeletovrahos he is less heroic because his reason forbids him to ignore progress and the limitations of man.

We are led initially by Vlami to view Skeletovrahos as a hero and thus to identify with him. His gesture is titanic—the building of a great sailing ship at the precise moment when steam has been winning the day, and sailing this ship, "The Galaxeidi," to Asia, a voyage seemingly without end. He is destined to fail, but his act appeals to us by its very heroism.

Skeletovrahos hopes to reverse the tide of history and show that sailing ships are still capable of long, profitable voyages. He convinces the basically reasonable men of Galaxeidi of this folly because he has on his side man's conservative nature and his old heroic codes and values. The Galaxeidiots appreciate this gesture and know that Skeletovrahos has some logic with him when he emphasizes the facts that orders for shipments by sail are declining and that steamers will be responsible for technological unemployment since they do not require large crews. His defense, however, is ultimately invalid and sentimental. He is a tragic hero, blinded by his sense of tradition and unable to cope with the mysterious forces of history. That he is crushed by reality comes as no surprise to us, but we are appalled at the end when he realizes—like most tragic heroes—that he was responsible for the decline of his beloved town as a shipping power. His ability to convince and his failure to adapt to history have destroyed others besides himself.

The conflict between Skeletovrahos and Yiannakas is a personal as well as an ideological one. The projected marriage of Yiannakas' daughter, Drosoula, to Nikola, the son of Skeletovrahos, would relate the two men. But when Nikola is compelled by his filial loyalty to accompany his father on a voyage to Singapore, Yiannakas decides to break the engagement and betroth Drosoula to a wealthy and capable young man from the Greek community of Odessa.

Now it is Drosoula's turn to be placed in a dilemma. Like Nikola, she is offered the choice of fulfilling the personal obligations she has to her betrothed at the expense of disobeying her father. The decision is beyond her. She depends upon Rini, Nikola's mother, to help her. In a scene of raw power, Skeletovrahos' wife stops the wedding, confronts the bishop—who is ignorant of the fact that Drosoula has already been formally betrothed—insults Yiannakas who, as a man of reason, is unable to kill her as he threatens, and "abducts" the bride from a wedding she does not want.

"The Galaxeidi's" trip to Asia is splendidly described. The crew members are individually characterized and their superstitions—an important
part of sailing tradition—are subtly documented. At first, these folk beliefs fascinate the reader since they are reminders of an older way of life, one that has almost perished. Later, however, these beliefs begin to appear characteristic of men who would choose a way of life that is deliberately reactionary and illogical. Their interest and belief in ghosts, spirits, vampires and their slow acceptance of the warlock Koutroulis as their savior whenever anything unexpected occurs (even Captain Skeletovrahos is guilty of this) is almost proof of their inability to function in a newer and more rational world. They sum up the past, and nothing is clearer than this when they see, far in the night, a glow they think is supernatural. When all of Koutroulis' attempts at exorcism fail they are even prepared—so great is their fear—to sacrifice one of their number, only to realize, at dawn, that the supernatural glow was a steamship, which in their fury they do not salute and which they attempt to race, only to be left behind with blackened sails.

The personality of Kosmas, the ex-monk, is a fascinating one. He is a thoughtful man, an artist who knows he has lost his ability to paint because he has lost his faith. The icons he conceives are impossible for him to execute. It is Skeletovrahos' icon of "Our Father" that gives Kosmas the idea to paint "The Second Coming," the work that like the shield of Achilles in *The Iliad* sums up the author's grasp of the novel's meaning. The icon, a great physical and mystical vision, seems to surpass Kosmas' early version of Christianity, even Christianity itself, and to attain a religious view that is a fusion of all humanistic religions. In the icon man's decisions are weighed in a Second Coming and the *act* of decision is man's most important act, related of course to the choice of whether he is to progress to something better or not. Most of the crew is confused into thinking that it is "not a Second Coming," it is a "bordello" because the body and man's sexuality are *not* rejected as in most Byzantine icons. The Second Coming is always immanent, the icon states, a fact that intimidates them all, implying as it does that they have made the decision by which they will be judged and have not been aware of it. This is true. They are dammed to die on "The Galaxeidi" for they had made the wrong choice when they rejected progress. Skeletovrahos weeps secretly when he understands the meaning of Kosmas' icon, knowing now that he made a mistake in not submitting to history.

The novel is successful for many reasons: the splendid descriptions, the convincing and delightful characterizations, the wealth of beautifully organized incident that directs the narrative to its ordained conclusion, and the grand demotic that surges through like the vast sea itself. Beyond all this, however, is Vlami's achievement in making creditable and emotionally mov-
ing a blinded man’s struggle with historical forces. At the novel’s end, paralyzed from the waist down, Skeletovrahos knows he has made a mistake and apologizes to those he has harmed: his son and his crew, who were drowned when “The Galaxeidi” drifted helplessly in a typhoon and was cut in two by a vast steamship; Drosoula, the girl who lives in his house and can never be his daughter-in-law: deranged now, she is going down to the port, dressed in her bridal gown, having sensed the excitement and convinced that her betrothed is returning at last. But it is not Nikola’s arrival that has brought Galaxeidi out in force: Nikola has been erased by history. It is Yiannakas, the new man, whose steamship roars triumphantly into the harbor of Galaxeidi.

Skeletovrahos is a hero with a backward view, and we give him our credence and suffer with him only because we, the readers, have had to confront and uproot within ourselves this dangerous sentiment for an illusory past. We feel for Skeletovrahos and view Yiannakas, who has our “intellectual” sympathy, as a threat to the tradition of changelessness. But we know that Yiannakas is right. Men cannot ignore progress. Men must be able to submerge their personal feelings of independence, of family ownership of sailing vessels, into a new demand for corporate ownership. (The ship “Galaxeidi” that makes the great voyage to Singapore is still Captain Skeletovrahos’ ship and not a collective effort.) Yiannakas forces us to confront a new view of man, one that we instinctively reject because it threatens our veneration for tradition. He is rational man, beset by problems, struggling with a world not of his making, trying to grapple with a past that might imprison or destroy him. He rides the crest of history because he is aware of his own insignificance. Men like the heroic Skeletovrahos, who do not submit to change, are the ones broken by it.

As fine a novel as SKELETOVRAHOS is, Vlami’s next effort, THE DREAMS OF ANGELIKA (1958) is so ambitious and so astonishing a performance that it places her firmly in the front rank of Greek writers. It is a great novel, not only because its subject matter, the death of the Megale Idea, is treated profoundly and convincingly, but because Vlami was compelled to create a form to contain the complexity of what she had to say.

Eva Vlami could not write the novel she did write if she had forced her

1. Τά δνειρά τῆς Ἀγγέλικας.
2. Briefly, the hope that eventually all the lands where the Greeks lived—and had lived for millenia—would once again be part of Greece. With the Asia Minor Disaster of 1922 this hope came to an irrevocable end.
thematic content into the confines of the realistic novel of society. After all, she had to deal not only with reality but with dreams. It is a psychological novel, one told in interior monologue (though not in stream-of-consciousness) and in a timeless present that we discover is dream while the dreamer is dying. "Those who are about to die have very confused dreams," is a refrain that weaves its way through the novel almost as a counterpoint. As a social novel, THE DREAMS OF ANGELIKA is probably the most searing document of the psychological effect of the Asia Minor Disaster. That it would be written by a woman not of the Generation of 1930 indicates, I feel, that the younger group of Greek writers has been unforgivably slighted.

Angelika is betrothed to Asimis Pallaskas, a young man who has seen his share of his nation’s struggles, having gone through the battles the Greeks fought from 1912 to the end of the First World War. Their marriage is delayed because of the Greek invasion of Asia Minor that was to be the fulfillment of the centuries-long Greek aspirations to reconquer Anatolia, to revivify the Byzantine Empire, and to make Saint Sophia once more a Greek Orthodox shrine. Angelika is never married because Asimis and thousands of young men like him perish in that disastrous war. With him and them irrevocably dies the Megale Idea. From its death and the inevitable flux of history comes a new Greece, one smaller and more humble than the dreams of the Greeks.

The dreams of Angelika, the dreams of the Greeks, are really the dreams of Skeletovrahos now seen to be vain, almost delusory, and the nation cannot bear their loss. Before Angelika dies—commits suicide by drowning—she goes mad, and it is in this madness that the dreams come bubbling up, dreams that seize the imagination of the careful reader and sweep him up with them. "Those who are about to die have very confused dreams."

But in THE DREAMS OF ANGELIKA everyone is slightly mad. General Markou, Angelika’s uncle, is a fantast, a believer in tradition to an irrational extreme:

I am certainly not one of those who believe that Constantine Paleologus died and thus needs a memorial service. These are stories that the Turks and the Turk-corrupted historians tell... fairy tales.

In the General’s rooms we see a wild assortment of deadly weapons, heavy Byzantine brocades and patriotic souvenirs. He is a believer in spiritualism and participates in a number of seances with a few other retired generals and admirals who, as a class, evidently have a bent for such things.

A man named Soudaras, with an uncanny likeness to the dead Asimis,
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is a war-and ideal-obsessed political figure, in some way responsible for the war in Anatolia who, in the perplexing time-scheme of the novel, goes about buying up as much land as he can in order to create a vast graveyard for the dead soldiers, not those dead during the Asia Minor campaign—for them it is too late—but for those of future wars. He has a stewardess, a strange wraith-like woman named Kyria Zoe, who speaks in a katharevousa so uncompromising that it approaches liturgical Greek. It is she whom Angelika finds in the house of Asimis when she goes to see if her fiancé has really returned—having heard people say that they had seen him back in Athens—and Kyria Zoe tells her that a “new master has taken over the house of your betrothed.” And in truth, Soudaras—or is it a transformed, sepulchral Asimis?—has purchased the Pallaskas house for his great dream, the vast graveyard.

During this time, also, there is a curious series of thefts in the cemeteries of Athens and Piraeus: crosses disappear overnight from old graves and no one, not even the military guards who are commanded to watch over them and apprehend, or even kill, the cross-robbers, is able to put an end to this. The incidents eventually are given a political coloration and charges are exchanged in Parliament. But the Parliament in THE DREAMS OF ANGELIKA is a baffling place, and the parliamentarians are preoccupied with an important debate on whether the dominant religion should be disestablished, a matter that must be preceded by a series of educational lectures on other faiths. Angelika attends one evening to listen to a long lecture, in a mandarin-like katharevousa, on the birth of Buddha, his life, and his entry into the various stages of consciousness, a recitation that is a masterpiece of surrealist prose.

Asimis is dead (or is he, for he and Soudaras have too much in common: possibly they are the same man, two faces of the same ideal?); whatever the truth is, Angelika cannot know, for she is trying to hold on to her sanity in a world that is mad itself. The only possible representative of rationality in her life is Stratis, a journalist friend of Asimis, who tries to answer the riddle of the stolen crosses (finally blamed in the Venizelist opposition, which initiates a series of violent mob scenes), but Stratis is killed in a theater crowded with people who have come to see a famous spiritualist portray, before their very eyes, the long-hoped for fall of Constantinople to the Greeks.

Crushed by life and bereft of her illusions, Angelika returns to her house, now condemned for the death-obsessed Soudaras’ ideal, his graveyard, a woman betrothed without the possibility of being married, a woman who remembers the warmth and light of family memories in a home that is now darkened and cold. There is nothing left for her. She is alone. Like most of
Vlami’s heroines, like the countless girls of *GALAXEIDI: THE FATE OF A NAVAL TOWN*, whose fiancés have perished in distant seas, like Drosou-la in *SKELETOVRAHOS*, whose betrothed, Nikola, has drowned in the Orient, like all of them Angelika must die unwed, in a magnificent image that is carried throughout Vlami’s fiction: dressed in her wedding gown, Angelika is placed in her coffin, married to death.

What are we to make of his perplexing and great novel, one that is in the unique position of being so impressive that it would seem to be of immediate interest to the broader, international readership, yet so firmly and uncompromisingly Greek that it might not be able to leap beyond the boundaries of the Hellenic world? As a social novel, *THE DREAMS OF ANGELIKA* is probably the most thorough fictional treatment of the Megale Idea and its death. Besides this, though, the generalizations it makes about life in Greece and the Greek contrasts are of the highest and most convincing quality. They are: the clarity of rationalism as opposed to the murkiness of spiritualism; reality as opposed to myth; demoticism as opposed to katharevousa; republicanism as opposed to monarchy; dreams of a present validity as opposed to dreams of a past glory; the reality of Greece, little but magnificent Greece, as opposed to the illusions of a return to Byzantine and Roman Imperial grandeur. Possibly these generalizations are the sort that can be made convincing only in fiction, but Vlami does all this with a commendable reaction of writing down to her readers.

In her final book, *AT THE MOON’S LOOM* (1963), Vlami deals with a theme that she had touched on in *SKELETOVRAHOS* and confronted head-on in *THE DREAMS OF ANGELIKA*: the enslaving nature of myth. In this last novel, she merely takes the image of the dead girl in her wedding gown and develops it one stage further. If the folk mind weds the unmarried dead to death itself, why can’t the living marry these same dead to each other? If marriages are arranged here on earth, why can’t they be arranged in the Lower World as well? Since the realistic form would not permit in this context the “willing suspension of disbelief” on the part of Eva Vlami’s readers, she employs the heightened diction and the simplified structure of a folk tale.

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1. I have been told that the audience for *THE DREAMS OF ANGELIKA* has been a limited, one, but this unusual writer must not let that distress her, for it is writers like she who with the perspective of a few years — or of a few thousand miles — prove to be landmarks of a nation’s fiction.

2. Στὸν ἁργαλείον τοῦ φεγγαρίου.
Dialecti, the chosen one, is betrothed to a dead man, and the reader finds himself first shocked, then puzzled, then fascinated by the possibilities.

Vlami’s devious use of the qualities of the *ethographia* might bemuse a hasty reader, since we have the usual interests in the careful treatment of custom and ritual and a convincing description of peasant life in *At the Moon’s Loom*. Almost convincing, possibly, because there is an eerie quality to the villages of Grammenochori and Trikorfo and something unearthly about the peasants themselves. We are in the presence of magic and madness: every object we try to focus on seems doubly exposed and every spoken word sounds mysterious and hollow, like an echo from a well.

The beauty of Dialecti, the youngest of seven unmarried daughters, strikes the rich widow Strataina, who wants the girl for her son. But George has not returned from the war yet. Strataina *knows* her son is dead, but still she waits. “Whoever has not been mourned is not dead,” Agouro, Dialecti’s father says, as though trying to justify betrothing his daughter to a dead man. Why is unmarried life in deep poverty better than a death-in-life in great wealth? The impoverished Agouro may not be aware of it, but his comments, like those of Strataina, first perplex, then begin to convince the other villagers, even though they are shocked by the sacrilege that is occurring. “You dressed your daughter in a bridal gown to send her to the Lower World,” Agouro silences a critic of his actions: “I send my daughter to the Lower World in order to dress her as a bride.” We see later that his defence is convincing because before the novel is concluded a number of villagers arrange marriages between principals who are dead.

What becomes unmistakable is that *At the Moon’s Loom*, because it approaches myth, is getting at a truth that is more real than “reality”.¹ The peasants of Grammenochori and Trikorfo are not mad: they are merely unaware that there exists such a sharp division between folk beliefs and actions, particularly when they are supported in this integral view by Byzantine ritual and their Christian and folk traditions. The position of Dialecti is not incredible: after all, nuns go through this all the time. The parallel is clear when Dialecti enters church during liturgy and hears the singer chanting, “Hail Bride Unwed” : Χαίρε Νύμφη Ἀνύμφευτε.

Up to this point *At the Moon’s Loom* could almost be considered a horror tale about the sacrifice of an ignorant girl to the beliefs of her elders. But Dialecti’s struggle, when she discovers that she is betrothed to a

¹. This is why the Greek word *mythistorima* is so gratifying, since it evades the rational connotations of “novel.”
dead man, confronts us again with Vlami's preoccupations. The girl wants to be free, but the demands of the past seize and imprison her. The folk are not so much death-obsessed as death-permeated. They cannot ignore and forget death, but must try to merge it into the everyday life. Because of this, life for them becomes a brief prelude to the eternity of death. When the two worlds are thus fused, the one we know is overwhelmed by the Lower, much as Soudaras' cemetery threatens to take over all of Attica.

The Greeks, Vlami seems to say, are not really death-obsessed; they are more accurately myth-enslaved. In SKELETOVRAHOS we see the captain-hero refuse reality and deliberately return to an older form of travel until, defeated and crushed by history, he sees how wrong he was to fight against progress. In THE DREAMS OF ANGELIKA the desire to recapture past grandeur leads the Greeks to a disastrous war merely because due to their historical past they are unable to think in other terms. In AT THE MOON'S LOOM the older people and through them the young, whether dead or alive, are compelled to live out the fantasies, which are confining and life-hating, of the folk mind.

Only men like Yiannakas who are both strong and rational can survive in a world that tries to drag them back to the past. Heroes like Skeletovrahos, who are disoriented by tradition, are crushed by history, and girls — whether they live, like Angelika, in great cities, or, like Dialecti, in the unchanging village — are destroyed because they are unable to break the chains of the past. Only the free can triumph.

Philadelphia

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