

# **THE OLD GREEKS**

**PHOTOGRAPHY, CINEMA, MIGRATION**



# **THE OLD GREEKS**

**PHOTOGRAPHY, CINEMA, MIGRATION**

**GEORGE KOUVAROS**





• • • • •

## CONTENTS

Between Worlds .....	9
1. The Old Greeks .....	21
2. The Enigma of Arrival .....	39
3. A Place in the Sun .....	62
4. The Generation of the Photograph .....	87
5. A Trip to the Moon .....	106
6. <i>Nostos</i> , or the Time of Returning .....	131
7. Nocturnal Kinship .....	150
8. <i>Mnemosyno</i> .....	174
Epilogue .....	193



You said, 'I will go to another place, to another shore.  
Another city can be found that's better than this.  
All that I struggle for is doomed, condemned to failure;  
and my heart is like a corpse interred.  
How long will my mind stagger under this misery?  
Wherever I turn, wherever I look  
I see the blackened ruins of my life,  
which for years on end I squandered and wrecked and ravaged.'

You will find no other place, no other shores.  
This city will possess you, and you'll wander the same  
streets. In these same neighborhoods you'll grow old;  
in these same houses you'll turn gray.  
Always you'll return to this city. Don't even hope for another.  
There's no boat for you, there's no other way out.  
In the way you've destroyed your life here,  
in this little corner, you've destroyed it everywhere else.

C. P. Cavafy, 'The City'

What are they after, our souls, traveling  
on rotten brine-soaked timbers  
from harbor to harbor?

George Seferis, 'Mythistorema'

To whisper for that which has been lost. Not out of nostalgia,  
but because it is on the site of loss that hopes are born.

John Berger



.....

## BETWEEN WORLDS

|

On one side of a small sheet of yellowed paper that has been folded in two are the words: 'Government of Cyprus Identity Card.' If I open the sheet and press its dog-eared edges flat, I can glean the details that define the identity in question. Common name, surname, father's name, nationality, race, birthplace, date of birth, occupation: it's all there...even the right thumbprint used to index the person to whom these details refer.

No.	103186	Sex	F	C.N.	ΠΑΝΑΓΙΩΤΑ	S.N.	ANDEA
Code		Father	ANDREAS	C.N.	ANDREAS	S.N.	NEOPHYTOU
				Nationality	BRIT SUBJ	Race	GREEK ORTH
				Birthplace	TSADHA	Date of Birth	2nd FEB 1935
				Occupation	HOUSEWIFE		
				Address	TSADHA		
					PAPHOS		
Interviewing clerk or agent's signature, seal and date of issue <i>[Signature]</i> Cyprus Nicosia District				R.O. or A.R.O.'s signature, seal and date of issue <i>[Signature]</i> Registration Office			

Affixed to the adjoining page is a badly creased black-and-white photograph of a striking young woman that I recognise as my mother. The white sleeveless blouse buttoned to the neck, the short brushed-back hairstyle, the drop earrings, the expression adopted before the camera – not smiling, but direct: as much as the handwritten details on the adjoining page, these things situate her in a particular social world, one in which a person's address is simply the name of a village, where race is equated with religion, and nationality is the colonial designation, 'Brit Subj.' The date on the card is 4 September 1957. Earlier in the same year, compulsory identity cards were introduced by the British authorities. The intention was to strengthen the island's civil administration and keep track of the local population during a period of significant unrest.

The touching thing about this antiquated document is that it characterises a particular social world and marks its passing. But we should not assume that this passing means its end. This continuation is evident in the legacy of the social divisions used by the colonial authorities to govern the island as well as in the whisperings of events that require an insider's ear. In the details that define my mother's appearance, I encounter a foretelling of what is to come – the hopes and disappointments that define the journey – and an expectation that these things will not be forgotten. This expectation is not a permanent part of the photograph. With each day, the links between the generations become more tenuous, the breaks more pronounced. But as long as this yellowed document

continues to be passed from one generation to the next, as long as I see in my mother's expression elements of my own hopes and disappointments, there is always a chance that something will persist. This is where I want to begin the story of migration told in this book: in connection to those encounters that evoke a delicate balance between survival and extinction, expectation and obligation, onlooker and image.

||

The images that I have in mind are also moving pictures or scenes drawn from my own recollections and experiences as well as those of others...My mother is sitting quietly in an airport departure lounge. A lifetime has passed since she made the trip to the registration office to have her photograph taken and obtain an identity card. Never a big reader – the odd article in a magazine or newspaper is the extent of her reading – she waits without obvious purpose. Occasionally she gets up to stretch her legs. With her handbag firmly pressed against her side, she wanders through the over-lit boutiques and food halls trying to make sense of the price tags and responding politely to the solicitations of the sales assistants. A cup of tea is usually enough to replenish her spirits and keep her alert until it is time to board. Her habit is to put the foreign currency received as change from the purchase in a discrete section of her handbag, for the next time she passes through the airport. With the cup of tea in one hand

and her handbag in the other, she makes her way back to the seating area near the departure gate. For a brief moment, she might even close her eyes – not to sleep, but to ease the pressure caused by the long hours in transit. I cannot claim to know what she is thinking at these moments. Despite our closeness, her views and expectations of the world are fundamentally different from mine. But what I do know is that her situation has its origin in a decision made years ago to leave her home and begin a new life elsewhere. I know that, despite the toll they take on her health, the long hours of the journey are how she deals with the consequences of this decision – for herself and the members of her family. Alone in this journeying and increasingly vulnerable to the depredations of old age, she remains in a permanent state of leave-taking.

‘Migration is never a spontaneous gesture,’ Nikos Papastergiadis reminds us in *The Turbulence of Migration*. ‘It presupposes some knowledge of the other side, a guide, a map or, at least, a rumour.’<sup>1</sup> For generations of postwar migrants, film and photography served as this map. They laid the ground for how the journey was conceived and served as practical tools for dealing with its consequences. Grasping these consequences requires that we take the matter of experience seriously, in its individual as well as collective dimensions. The preference for the latter over the former by writers and scholars stems from an understandable wariness regarding any suggestion of an unmediated or purely personal form of experience.

‘For experience is not infrequently played as the trump card of authenticity,’ Annette Kuhn explains in *Family Secrets*, ‘the last word of personal truth, forestalling all further discussion, let alone analysis.’<sup>2</sup> Fully aware of the pitfalls involved, Kuhn nevertheless argues for the importance of granting individual experience a place in critical writing: ‘Just as I know perfectly well that the whole idea is a fiction and a lure, part of me also “knows” that my experience – my memories, my feelings – are important because these things make me what I am, make me different from everyone else’ (33).

John Berger takes a different approach. Rather than insisting on the distinctiveness of his memories and feelings, he endeavours to understand how these things connect him to others. ‘Experience is indivisible and continuous, at least within a single lifetime and perhaps over many lifetimes,’ Berger claims near the start of his collection of short stories *Pig Earth*. ‘I never have the impression that my experience is entirely my own and it often seems to me that it preceded me.’<sup>3</sup> The act of writing about a particular moment of experience involves a continuous process of comparison – ‘like with unlike, what is small with what is large, what is near with what is distant.’ Searching for an image to encapsulate this action, he refers to the shuttle of a loom: ‘Repeatedly it approaches and withdraws, closes in and takes its distance. Unlike a shuttle, however, it is not fixed in a static frame. As the movement of writing repeats itself, its intimacy with the experience increases. Finally, if one is fortunate, meaning is the fruit of intimacy’ (6).

For Berger, intimacy is a consequence of the struggle to write experience – to develop a language adequate to the challenge of finding oneself caught in the cross currents of forces and events that precede and resist one's claims to ownership.

Not surprisingly, it is at this point that the experience of migration enters the bigger picture of Berger's writings. In *A Seventh Man* he describes the large-scale economic and political factors that, during the postwar period, drove the emigration of people from countries like Greece, Turkey and Portugal to the big industrial centres of Europe as well as those states of mind that reveal migration's inner toll. He positions the migrant worker as caught between a hoped-for future and an idealised and constantly re-imagined past. In the same book, he provides a compelling metaphor for the displacement that defines migrant experience: 'His migration is like an event in a dream dreamt by another. As a figure in a dream dreamt by an unknown sleeper, he appears to act autonomously, at times unexpectedly; but everything he does – unless he revolts – is determined by the needs of the dreamer's mind.'<sup>4</sup>

Berger's metaphor describes the experience of someone who is neither wholly inside nor wholly outside of the experience that she or he endeavours to comprehend. This is the experience of someone who is between worlds. This phrase is the title of one of Edward Said's most moving essays. Here too an engagement with personal experience occurs in the context of a reflection on the consequences

and legacies of migration. Recounting the author's formative years in Jerusalem and Egypt, his secondary schooling in a series of elite colonial schools in Cairo, his relocation to an austere puritanical school in north western Massachusetts, his Westernisation at college and, finally, his arrival in New York in 1963 to teach comparative literature at Columbia University, Said's autobiographical essay is a belated attempt to measure the cost of this movement across cultures. It is also a response to the shock of his diagnosis of leukaemia: 'All of a sudden, then, I found myself brought up short with some though not a great deal of time available to survey a life whose eccentricities I had accepted like so many facts of nature.'<sup>5</sup> To be 'brought up short' is to come face to face with the inevitability of one's own demise. It is also to encounter experience in its most universal and most devastatingly contingent guise.

In Said's case at least, the outcome was a renewed engagement with writing – but of a type different from that he had practised before. Shortly after receiving the diagnosis, he began to compose a long explanatory letter to his mother, who had been dead for nearly two years. This letter inaugurated a process of biographical reflection that led to 'Between Worlds' and culminated in the book-length memoir *Out of Place*. The image that links these publications is drawn from the author's recollections of his boyhood years in Jerusalem and Cairo. He describes a feeling of 'doubt and of being out of place, of always feeling myself standing in the wrong corner, in a place that seemed to be slipping away from

me just as I tried to define or describe it.’<sup>6</sup> Tracing the consequences of this feeling leads Said to recount the stations of his journey. In ‘Between Worlds’ it also draws him back to the author whose work and biographical circumstances most directly speak of the state of being between worlds: Joseph Conrad. In Conrad, he recognises the familiar fate of a writer who makes his home in another language yet whose work remains grounded in a profound sense of alienation. Conrad’s writing, he concludes, is constituted by an experience of exile or alienation that cannot ever be rectified: ‘No matter how perfectly he is able to express something, the result always seems to him an approximation to what he had wanted to say, and to have been said too late, past the point when the saying of it might have been helpful’ (555).

Between the alienation that constitutes the foundation of Conrad’s writing and the feeling of out-of-placeness that marks Said’s recollections there is an indivisibility of experience that is based not on a projection of one’s own feelings and responses. Rather, it is founded on the recognition of alterity – ‘of always feeling myself standing in the wrong corner, in a place that seemed to be slipping away from me just as I tried to define or describe it.’ Near the end of ‘Between Worlds’ Said returns to the motivations driving his decision to write a memoir. He notes the profound changes that have irrevocably transformed the places of his childhood – Palestine, Egypt and Lebanon. The writing of the memoir is an attempt to rescue this lost history – to

create through the act of writing a homeland or place to live. His final remarks warn of the shortcomings of such an endeavour: 'One achieves at most a provisional satisfaction, which is quickly ambushed by doubt, and a need to rewrite and redo that renders the text uninhabitable. Better *that*, however, than the sleep of self-satisfaction and the finality of death.'

### III

As she sits in the departure lounge, waiting for her tea to cool, my mother might ask herself: am I going home – or is home the place that I just left? Is the past behind me – or is it ahead of me, still? With each year the confusion caused by these questions becomes harder to contain, shrouding each moment in a worrying sense of impermanence. No sooner has she returned and unpacked her bags than she sets her mind to leaving, once again. 'They are waiting for me,' she offers as an explanation. By 'they' she means the members of her family left behind, brothers, sisters and cousins to whom she feels responsible, as well as people no longer living, her parents, uncles and grandparents. Her leave-taking speaks of both the present and the past, the living and the dead. If I were to characterise its wellspring, I would venture that it is a matter of both obligation and need, as well as that point in our lives where these two things become, as they have for her, indistinguishable.

Like many women of her generation, her history of migration was, to a large extent, a history written for

her – a history of farewells and feelings of homesickness that has left a deep imprint on her behaviour. In a constant state of leave-taking herself, she regards the leaving of others as an act of abandonment. If I mention a forthcoming trip, for instance, her response is automatic: ‘Why do you need to go? Stay in your home.’ Leave-taking is a necessity for happiness and the re-opening of a wound.

Reading over my attempts to describe her behaviour, I am conscious of using a language that is mine – not hers. In fact, this is something that I do every day: she speaks to me in one language; I reply in another. So ingrained is this way of communicating that I barely notice its occurrence, let alone the inevitable blind spots that arise. It is when I imagine her in transit, moving from one place to the next, that the costs of these blind spots achieve a painful quickening. Who is this person, really? What is it that I have failed to see or understand that has been there all along? These questions imbue our relationship with an unsettling sense of contingency – a sense that what has always seemed essential or permanent could have been otherwise.

In Orhan Pamuk’s novel *A Strangeness in My Mind*, the central character, Mevlut Karataş, the son of a *boza* and yoghurt seller, leaves his village in Central Anatolia at the age of twelve to help his father sell his wares on the streets of Istanbul. The story of Mevlut’s life is part of a much larger drama that is the life of the city. During his night-time wanderings around the city selling *boza*, Mevlut’s fantasies and feelings of loneliness blend with

the unstable material phenomena all around him. The city and its appropriated buildings speak to him of the unfinished business of lives – Greek, Armenian and Turkish – swept away by the often-violent forces of change. These intimations become acute in the wake of the 1999 earthquake that seems to foretell an even larger destruction to come: ‘In those moments, he would realize that this city where he’d spent forty years of his life, where he’d passed through thousands and thousands of doors, getting to know the insides of people’s homes, was no less an ephemeral thing than the life he’d lived there and the memories he’d made.’<sup>7</sup>

To grasp the people and places to which we are closest as no more essential or permanent than the memories that pass in and out of our consciousness: this is the feeling of displacement that defines the story of migration told in this book. The films and photographs that I discuss provide a platform from which to grasp this feeling. They also serve to pose a question that animates so many stories about migration: how should the figures that initiated the journey be remembered? What obligations arise as a result of their passing? This concern with memory and the obligations borne by a later generation stems from the recognition that my principal actors – those who initiated the journeys – are reaching the end of their lives. With their passing the onus shifts to their children to gather together what remains and to account for what has been lost of these lives. How does one do this when the means by which a history is grasped is no more substantial than snatches

of phrases, pieces of broken stories and stubborn attachments to faded photographs?

‘What has been left behind may either be mourned, or it can be used to provide a different set of lenses,’ Said writes about his own history. ‘It is what one remembers of the past and how one remembers it that determines how one sees the future.’<sup>8</sup> From very early on, I was conscious that, for my sisters and I, the world that we left behind had disappeared; for my mother, it remained ever-present. Her determination to keep faith with this world meant that whatever we did here-and-now was always judged and deemed wanting by a there-and-then to which we could make no claim. Photography and film taught me how to make sense of this situation: that a person or place could be both incontestably present and always already passed. That the world which we inhabit is always being shadowed by other worlds whose persistence demands something of us.

Now, I want to understand how these lessons are essential to a certain experience of migration – in other words, how it is *lived* by those who made the journey and those who grew up in its wake. Residing in the cleft between what we can say and understand about ourselves and others and what will always remain grasped only as a whisper, the films and photographs that guide this endeavour represent another form of in-betweenness in which we venture out into the world and move closer to the experiences that bind us to our forebears. They furnish us with stories in which elements of our own history are enacted in the histories of others.