

Paros

by [David Solway](#) (July 2020)



Blue Coast with Cliffs, Emil Nolde, 1938-45

*Because I deeply praised and trusted earth
and did not spread my secret wings in flight
but rooted in the stillness of my mind,
the spring again has risen to my thirst,
the dancing spring of life, my own joy's spring.*

—Angelos Sikelianos

Travel is no longer the quite pleasure it once was, especially on Aegean boats, even if one is looking forward to visiting the Blue Island of Paros. On the *Limnos* today the decks were so crowded that at times it was almost impossible to move. The greatest source of danger is the perpetual buffeting proximity of the ubiquitous backpack with its battery of sharp metallic appendages—eating knives, tin cups, canteens, camera tripods, what have you. Some oblivious donkey of a tourist clumps by, bent under the Atlantean weight of his travel kit, turns suddenly, and with one tremendous jolt sends you careening to the planking. You pick yourself up only to be sent flying by another of these self-absorbed leviathans who continues on his way utterly unaware of the casualties strewn in his wake.

Most of the passengers, once they have found their spot, stare raptly into their mobiles while the starkly beautiful islands float unobserved and ghostly on the horizon. Others plug in their iPods and begin bobbing heads, snapping fingers and gyrating torsos to some fantastic private rap/grunge/electronic/hiphop reverie. There is, of course, nothing to be heard, and for the spectator the effect is ludicrous and discomposing—hundreds of people moving languidly or spasmodically to the ghostly, autistic rhythms of an

inaudible music. I observed one plainly fruitful flirtation that evinced the new mode of conversation, intimacy and seduction among this traveling generation. A man of about thirty and a woman maybe five or six years younger strike up a beautiful friendship. Within an hour they are busy fondling, exchanging compliments and meaningful glances, only they never unhook their respective headphones. Whatever they say to one another has to be shouted at the top of their lungs across nigh-impenetrable walls of interior heavy metal—the contemporary Pyramus and Thisbe. Even the tenderest endearments require megaphonic bellowing and frequent repetition.

“I think you’re really beautiful.”

“What?”

“I SAID I THINK YOU’RE REALLY BEAUTIFUL.”

“WHO?”

“YOU. YOU. I THINK YOU’RE BEAUTIFUL.”

“OH.”

“WHAT?”

It never occurs to these barking lovers to remove the tongs from their ears and *talk* to one another. But at least they are assured of almost complete privacy as practically everyone else is also plugged into the mysterious current of centripetal, encysted sound. They are like creatures from another world, equipped with alien sensors for transmitting and receiving encoded signals indecipherable by humankind. It seems that speech is rapidly becoming the phantom limb of modern communication.

Naoussa is a pleasant town, a smaller and more

gemütlich version of Mykonos, with its whitewashed houses and labyrinth of cobbled streets. It is not as developed as the capital of the island, Parikia, but there is no doubt that it has arrived. Tourist shops proliferate and the hills around the town are pocked and scarred by an epidemic of new building sites in the gaps not already filled with hotels and bungalows. Yet there is a gentleness that still clings residually about the place, in the tame sparrows that bustle around the cafe tables inquiring for crumbs, and as usual in the elderly people like the retired *capetanio*s who introduced me to his eighteen year old cat Bobbis, affirming the cats are man's best friend, or the grey-haired cigarette lady who actually remembered me from one day to the next. It is also in the local dialect—my landlady, Kyria Maria, referring to the village (or *chorio*) as a *choriotissa*, “little village.” Maria has just opened a new pension but refuses to meet the buses to tout her rooms and is very diffident about prices. Would there were more like her.

Paros is an extremely cultivated island—in both senses of the term—and one of the major tourist depots in the Cyclades. It is at least partially self-subsistent, enjoying a thriving fishing industry and the mining of the world-famous Parian marble. It is thus unlike the majority of popular islands which are essentially dollar sponges and would simply dry up with the decline or collapse of tourism. I assume that Paros is the “mystery island” that figures in the initial pages of Kevin Andrews' *The Flight of Ikaros*. The island which he describes at the time of the Civil War was a hot, inclement, impoverished place, the houses built partly out of calamus poles and the people scraping at the earth for a precarious living. But from the internal evidence—the name Naoussa, calamus, viticulture—it appears to be the same island which is now so flourishing and industrious.

Naoussa sits in a crescent nook formed by two long pincer-like promontories that project northward for several

kilometers on either side of the town. The left or western salient is difficult of access, at least on foot, the hiker having to cut back inland for some distance and then circle the inner bay before reaching the root of the peninsula itself. Accordingly, I choose the eastern tang for my morning walk. The road follows the contours of the coastline pretty faithfully and leads past several comfortable but dull beaches. But the view is varied with myriads of brimming and tumbling flowers by the roadside and a scatter of small, humped islets in the bay, like so many sunbathing dolphins. I pass fields thick and gold with unharvested rye, chunky with grazing cows and Pavarotti donkeys, and the usual traffic of barnyard fowl. Another turn in the road and there looms up the Typhonic electric plant giving off billows of black smoke and a low, unbroken, mechanical hum that obliterates every other sound and is itself milled out a kilometer further on by the grind and crush of the surf. Then the island is restored to itself.

There are three Canadian girls in the next room. Their names are Liz, Sherry and Linda, though I am unable to match names to faces even after frequent meetings. I noticed them on the boat, met them on the bus, and once again at Maria's pension where I provided my customary translation services in making arrangements. A few days have passed and I wish them speedily gone. They are polite, well brought up, friendly, but like so many travelers in their early or mid-twenties, they operate on the assumption of privilege, as if they had a right to whatever advantages and favors might accrue to their mere presence. And so curiously incurious about the country, the island, the village they happen to be visiting. They carry about with them, if not quite an air of flagrant superiority, an attitude of natal pre-eminence and perfect immunity to the complexity and fascination of the world around them.

It is an elusive thing to catch in words. It is as if

their world-picture is already complete and there is no space or need for new additions, as if they are not missing anything, are unaware that anything more needs to be "done" apart from slathering on the sunblock. They are cheerful and good-natured and entirely at ease in the cramped, invisible bubbles in which they live. But they have no lateral perception and certainly never look behind them, as is evident from the fecal deposits they leave in the communal toilet, although the cleaning brush stands poised like a moon rocket beside the toilet bowl. I scrub it to spare Maria and to restore my country's honor. It never occurs to these girls that water is a precious commodity on a Greek island—even on Paros—so they take long, leisurely showers which empty the cistern. When I see them in the port they are generally absorbed in the intricacies of their cameras, spending much of their time photographing one another. Liz is pretty and quiet. Linda is smiling and gregarious. Sherry is tall and independent. Or perhaps Linda is tall and Sherry is gregarious and Liz is independent. It's hard to tell. But this much seems true: they are part of a generation of which it may be said that repeated exposure to it progressively blurs the difference between individuals.

First real swim of the season. About an hour's walk east of Naoussa, a small island reposes in the bay between a forked elbow of land that forms a partial enclosure several kilometers across. This island is joined at tidal intervals to one of the land segments by a wide sandbar, thus making it a kind of outcropping. The semi-bay that results from this formation is broad, shallow and warm. You wade out for a hundred meters or more in knee-deep water, then the bed plunges as you swim around the edge of the island toward the principal bay of the town. It reminds me of Lakka on Paxos, much the same coquillage—sea urchins, cockles, whelks—and the same underwater scape of saffron corrugations. Swimming back I

suddenly felt at home, the salt taste on my lips and tingle on the skin, the sense of primal well-being that floods the whole body, the prospect of a grilled supper and a bottle of *dopyo kراسي* or local wine.

Wanting only to trim away the bushiness above my ears, I trusted what's left of my locks to the village barber, a grim reaper if ever there was one. *Kyrios* Dimitrios paid no attention to my request, instantly lopping off everything on one side with one fell swoop of his scissors, forcing him to even up on the other side. Before I knew it my ears were sticking out in that earnest Puritan way that exposed ears have. This was followed by oddly geometrical incisions around the sideburns, so that they resembled two small rectangular windows with the shades drawn. All the while Dimitri, stocky, white-haired, obsessive, after asking my nationality, kept chanting, "You are Canadian. Yes. Yes. You are Canadian." "And you are Greek," I countered. "Yes. I am Greek. Yes. And you are Canadian." I emerged looking like a seven-year old Greek boy in the shape of an aging Canadian adolescent.

Tried to track down the Irish poet Desmond O'Grady, who has lived off and on in a house on the west peninsula for fifteen or twenty years. I have no knowledge of his work as yet, but grew interested when I read in the Paros guidebook that he is one of the "old hands" among the foreign population and that the *kafeneion* he frequents has been dubbed "the university." The clerk at the tourist office assured me that "he is not only a wonderful poet but a wonderful person," and hailed an Irish friend of his who, judging from his fluent Greek, is also a fixture. This friend informed me that Desy was expected in a couple of weeks, that he is published by Oxford and has appeared in the Norton Anthology, and is indeed a fine poet. "One day," he assured me, "he will find his

rightful place in the Guinness Book of Records. I am referring, of course, to his heroic bibulations." He promised to leave a few copies of Desy's books for me at the tourist office. Apparently, O'Grady is no longer a *Parianos*, having moved his library back to Ireland, the surest sign of repatriation.

Walked to Koloumbithris on the west peninsula to the beach that is considered remarkable for its Cubist-like rock formations. The character of the west peninsula is different from that of the east: somewhat lush, denser, greener, all calamus, palm and pine. The beach itself, which consists of several little rock-enclosed pockets of sand, sprouts an even thicker vegetation of pubic hair. The bathers are laid out haunch to haunch and everywhere one is affronted by rippling dunes of breasts and penises like stranded sea-cucumbers. Took the caique back across the bay.

Finally succeeded in getting hold of O'Grady's work and learning a bit more about him. His house is just across the bay on Mount Vigla and is something of a local shrine. He is famous all over the island for his exuberance, his exclamatory presence and moonlight recitations, his drunken hijinks, and of course for the fact that he is a poet. Richard Winch, an English writer who was also one of the foreign pioneers on Paros, regaled me this morning with anecdotes from the pristine history of Naoussa before the advent of the rented Suzuki. His eyes shimmered as he spoke of the all-night parties, the women, the attempted murders. And he dwelt with relishing attention on the fiasco of O'Grady's absent first wife, whom the poet had described as a sinuous and elegant Persian princess, unexpectedly stepping off the boat one day, weighing 300 pounds. "She's gone a tad over the top," O'Grady said, sheepishly. I spent the afternoon reading through his

verse, some of it published in Egypt, of all places, and the *Selected* put out by Gallery Press, an Irish house.

O'Grady has many faults. For one thing, he is too wordy, even redundant: "like the dorsal fin out of the back of the shark" or "prematurely grey at twenty." He is also overfond of the construction Northrop Frye called "the adjective noun of noun." For example: "out of the raised eyebrow line of the wave." And he can be embarrassingly gushy and sentimental in the "O my country" or "O my friends" manner, an excessive tendency to the vocative justified only by deep drinking.

He certainly can manage the occasional apt expression—"We loot the seafloor's fleamarket/of small treasures for you"—and is able to run a poem over the long distance, not merely sprint for a couple of lines. The big barrel-chested breath is obviously no problem for him and his poems can huff and puff over pages without pausing for refreshment. He reminds me of Melville's Yoomi plying the Mardian archipelago. But when he's good he's not so bad. Here is one stanza I particularly like from an early piece entitled *The Island*, even though his editor, deaf to the ambiguity in the grammatical construction of the last line, has dismissed it as chauvinistic:

*For I have grown tired of cultivating the soul,
Controlling the flesh, perfecting the mind;
Of working at words through the night
Till the eye's and the mind's sight
Give up—it's all no good, no good at all
When there's no woman to break and to bind.*

Still, on the whole too prosy for my taste and perhaps a touch too derivative of Dylan Thomas. One more thing I find objectionable. The poems are insistently and at times bathetically autobiographical. His subject is, to put it mildly, not Life but His Life. For example, the major theme of

a poem called *At the Dark Edge of Europe* has nothing much to do with Europe or European history and everything to do with the four women he has loved in his lifetime. Or a poem on the Greek dictatorship which is really a litany of personal frustrations and private reminiscences. It's probably unfair to invoke the gigantic figure of Yeats, but the comparison is instructive because Yeats started in the resolutely personal, the foul rag and bone shop of the heart, and even if he ended there he nevertheless expanded his themes toward universal significance, precisely what O'Grady is too rhetorically and vocationally *Gaelic* to do. There is a touch of Eastern diffusiveness as well, as if he were trading in Sweet Vjestika Aphrodisia Drops or intent, as a meditationist might say, on proliferating molecular concord. As a result many of the poems are on the whole neither Irish nor ecumenical, merely confused.

Decided to walk rather than caique out to Lageri beach, which is on the futher inside lip of the east peninsula. Here the land is pancaked or gently undulating, still reedy in places with blotter-smudges of marsh and mudflat. Overshot the mark and plodded past Santa Maria to the end of the peninsula itself facing the open sea and Naxos hovering greenish and strangely disembodied in the distance. Retraced my steps and branched off onto a small road that eventually dribbled into rubble and thorn. It began to rain and I took shelter in the boat-annex of an empty house, a white, Cycladic cube softened in the Parian manner by arched embrasures and chamfered corners, accompanied by two meditative mountain goats who had somehow found their way down from the craggy interior. A half hour of silent communion until the rain tapered off. Walked back to the main road and then up another cut-off, over a fence marked *Private Properly*, along the top of a low ridge and then down to the bay and the wide sickle of sand which is Lageri. Sea fauna of the standard type: cockles in abundance,

a few turkey-wings and cones, crabs, periwinkles. What is more interesting is the seafloor absolutely printed with small starfish, like asterisks on a sepia-coloured page. One has the impression that one is reading as one swims.

I am fascinated by the nature and ubiquity of the yawn. Fully half the tourists in Naoussa are couples or quartets in their mid-twenties, and the girls especially are given to frequent and prodigious yawning. I have been observing this manifestation for several days and am truly impressed. It's not that they're bored or listless but rather that they form part of a generation that is magnificently unself-conscious. On only two occasions out of the several hundred which I have counted has the yawner covered her mouth. This is the case even at table: attractive young women, in the midst of earnest or bantering conversation over their food, suddenly open their mouths wide, wide, revealing teeth, uvula, gullet, morsels of half-chewed mash, then slowly bring their lips together and continue with the meal and the talk, sublimely unaware that they have committed a breach of table etiquette. It is an expression of supreme physical content, the body taking precedence over the centers of awareness or the simple acknowledgement of other people. The yawn has become the sign of our modern hedonism—or maybe shedonism would be a better word. It's true the men yawn as well, but the women clearly out-yawn them by a considerable margin. At supper last night, like Sesame Street's manic Count, I tallied 38 female yawns and 11 male; at breakfast this morning, 17 female and no male yawns. It seems to have the same significance on the human plane that stretching does in the cat world—a supple, purring narcissism and the mind in conspicuous abeyance.

It's truly mesmerizing to contemplate the depths and complexities of history with which each tiny region in this

country, every microdot island, is imbued. I spent almost two years on Paxos, which is six miles long by fewer than two miles wide, and I think I know a considerable amount about it. I walked the island back and forth innumerable times, got to know the people, asked questions, read the available literature, found the sole classical reference (in Plutarch), and yet I'm quite aware that there are secrets, facts, attitudes, which the inhabitants jealously suppress from the foreigner's inquisitorial gaze. Now I'm visiting Paros for the fourth or fifth time in the last decade, and the only region I am proximately familiar with is Naoussa and the peninsular north. It's more than enough to keep me busy. As for the rest of the island, Parikia, Marmara, Marpissa, Piso Livadhi, Drios with its teeming butterflies, it's just an occasionally opened book. And the history of the island as a whole is infinitely laminated, from the proto-Cycladic civilization which once flourished here right up to the present moment.

The Russian naval presence in the middle of the 18th century, its headquarters on an islet in the bay of Naoussa, is still fresh in people's minds in light of what they call *i katastasi* (the "situation" or "occasion"), a particularly juicy bit of local history. A Russian carrier, reputedly the largest in the world, was sailing in the evening for the straits between Naoussa and Naxos. It happened that the lighthouse keeper was in his cups celebrating his name day and had forgotten to illumine the lamp before leaving for the tavern. The waters around this part of the coast are notorious for their sunken rocks—major disasters have been recorded, including the foundering a few years ago of a tourist ferry (the Captain was watching a soccer game on TV)—and an international incident was only just averted when someone remembered that the lighthouse was unattended. The keeper was too drunk to do anything about it, so a replacement was found and dispatched hastily by motorboat. What would the most famous Parian of all, the scurrilous Archilochus, have not epoded of this?

Greece never makes it easy and I am the perfect accomplice. Yesterday's storm had built itself into a five beaufort doozy, which has not entirely subsided. The tourist office says the ship may not sail today, which means I would miss my flight tomorrow morning. One traveler's cheque stands between me and the cast of mercy. The dilemma I'm now in is clearly my own fault. I should have left yesterday and avoided all this unnecessary drama, but I've always been a bit obtuse, busy interpreting omens rather than simply reading signs.

Well, it's only 8 a.m. Maybe the weather will drop unpredictably in the next couple of hours. Departures from this country have always been accompanied by near-panic, near-misses, near-total destitution (once my entire family lived off tomatoes for three days in Pireaus to save taxi fare to the airport). Something always works out—which is the lesson of modern Greece.

I leave this time with deep sadness. For the first time since I began coming to Greece, even though I've spent years in this extraordinary land, I don't feel quite so exposed or vulnerable. The foreigner who plans to live here needs two things apart from an income: a sense of detached amusement and a genuine willingness to respond. A modicum of self-confidence also helps, the ability to demand, to pass judgment, and to remain aloof as well, when circumstances require. In other words, to channel the Greek temperament. Not to mention a robust skepticism about what one is told concerning the island. I recall an HGTV *House Hunters* episode that painted a scrubbed and prettified picture of Paros, featuring gorgeous, well-appointed villas replete with lavish amenities including ample showers and impressive fireplaces. Unfortunately, like most Aegean islands, Paros suffers from critical water shortages and an equally critical lack of firewood owing to

centuries of forest denudation. Showers will be few and winters will be rheumatoid. And unwary buyers will be sucking lemons.

I am once again conscious of how inexpressibly beautiful and rich Greece and its sea are. I recall those wonderful lines from my favorite modern Greek poet Angelos Sikelianos: “no matter if I live in calm or storm,/the rounded moment shimmers in my mind.” Every island I pass or visit strikes me as a possible home. Even Syros, where the boat is presently in harbor, and which I always considered too commercial, too raw and sun-blasted, would suit very nicely: the metropolis to provide goods and services, a cottage on the south coast, and the lighthouse islets to the northeast for what promises to be remarkable swimming and diving. And the time would be all one’s own, the days free for walking, swimming, reading, writing, playing music, drinking the *dopyo kراسi*, and praising the Creation. A possible scenario and a pretty damn good one. Christ, this is such a lonely, lovely, terrifying, marvelous life, sometimes I have no words to embrace it with.

This is a chapter from a work-in-progress, Lenses and Reflections: Greek Island Sketches.

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David Solway’s latest book is [Notes from a Derelict Culture](#), Black House Publishing, 2019, London. A CD of his original songs, [Partial to Cain](#), appeared in 2019.

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