

Serifos

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



Seawall, Richard Diebenkorn, 1957

Serifos is almost perfectly round in shape and spiky with outcroppings, like a gigantic echinoid. From the boat, it appears utterly barren, not a single tree to be seen along miles of mountainous coastline. One would have to get used to the apparent dryness, the feeling of exposure and harshness. Yet this is a well-watered island, literally, wells and underground springs providing for all its needs. As the boat docks, one notices a scraggly line of wind-bent tamarisk trees along the beach, whose most important function apart from

acting as a windbrake may be to remind the townspeople of the colour green.

*

After an hour of intensive searching through Livadhi, a town which consists mainly of cafes, restaurants and tourist-packed pensions and hotels, I manage to find accommodation in the Serifos Beach Hotel—rather expensive but a demi-pension including breakfast and one meal per day. There is a patch of green in the plot behind the hotel, a small bamboo plantation and a couple of stunted plane trees, to solace one's sun-seared eyes. As I gaze up the mountain at Chora, a sprinkle of glittering sugar cubes scattered across the slopes and summit of bare and towering Mount Troules, there is nothing, not even a dime of shade, not a single visible plant aside from a ragged psoriasis of scrub.

*

Scribbled a bit, slept a bit. Having trouble keeping my eyes open, which are still smarting with all this wind-whipped dust. Gave up the idea of trudging up to Chora after starting along the road when I realized it would take the better part of two hours. The town looks striking, provocative, stark, magnetic—maybe all the real life is up there. Will bus up later. I'm beginning to wonder if the wind isn't a permanent feature of life in Livadhi, situated between the sea and the ring of mountains at its back. The wind comes hurtling and thrashing down the steep slopes and blasts the town into a veritable dustbowl. People who live here must develop scales

and nictitating membranes over their eyes. I wonder how they keep their hair on.

*

The island wine for which Serifos is renowned in the Aegean is really quite interesting, velvety and bitter, colour between rust and magenta. By no means a great beverage but good and probably, like retsina, habit-forming. Seems to contain a sediment of pulvered donkey-hooves and packs the same kind of wallop. At present, it is my sole consolation and I am well placed to enjoy it as the hotel owns a small vineyard adjacent to the bamboo grove.

*

There is clearly a strong genetic strain or racial type on Serifos. The women are short and burly with legs like tree trunks and enormous hips—selected for work and childbearing. The men, oddly, are almost all high-shouldered, scapulars rising prominently and curving in toward the back of the neck, tending toward hunchbacks in later age—the physical expression of the saurian and truculent island temperament. Petros, the *afentikos* (boss or owner, from Turkish *effendi*) of the hotel is an exception to the rule, slim, wiry and good-natured. Whenever we exchange a word, he winks—a form of punctuation.

*

I am the first diner in the hotel restaurant this evening. A Greek couple walks in and, after some speculation as to which of the twenty or so tables to choose, settle at the one immediately next to mine. Then a young English couple arrives and sit directly opposite. The Greek couple moves across to be next to them since two provide more company, however mediated, than one. A Greek family appears: a daughter of about eight who is a dead ringer for Miss Piggy and two unappeasably ugly sons in their early teens with big, gourd-like heads, drooping lower lips and absurdly small ears, who look like a cross between oversized kewpie dolls and swelling watermelons. Then several more Greek families, followed by a young German foursome with spiked multi-coloured hair, gold earrings, abbreviated T-shirts. Now a solo diner-drinker obliquely across stares at me quite pointedly, trying to make eye-contact. Either he is gay or desperate. Finally a middle-aged Danish couple with a haughty air about them. The man sends back the carafe of local wine. "It's awful," he pronounces. A short while later he summons Petros with a crook'd finger and complains about the food. "We cannot eat it, it's awful, the sauce is...sore. Here, *you* eat it." Petros makes no response. With a woeful, embarrassed grin on his face, he turns and scuttles toward the kitchen.

I let a few minutes pass and then call Petros to my table. In a loud voice and carefully enunciating my words, I compliment him on the hearty cuisine and order a second carafe of his exceptional home-made wine. He smiles shyly, winks, and says "Thanks." Soon a plate of fruit is delivered to my table, another way of saying "Thanks."

*

The feeling I have tonight is that the little world I am moving through is an unrelieved harlequinade, a species of Grand Guignol. But then what do these people think of me, a solitary man dressed in black, constantly scribbling in a notebook? And what does the writing reflect anyway, the little world or the solitary man? And if the latter, how credible could it possibly be?

*

Decided to walk to Psili Ammos, reputedly the finest beach on the island, somewhere along the coast about two miles northeast of Livadhi. Armed with the recollection of Dana Facardo's *Greek Island Hopping* ("cut through a dried-up watercourse full of tufts of cistus, thyme, lavender and purple vetch, with white egrets circling overhead, till you arrive at one of the loveliest bays in any island"), I set off with great enthusiasm and high expectations. After about half an hour of hard trekking following the directions Petros gave me, the first puzzlement began to set in. There was no thyme or lavender to be found anywhere, only clumps of thornbush and a few disconsolate sheep grazing amid the sharp rocks. Vultures, not white egrets, circled overhead. There was no valley or "dried up watercourse" either, merely a thin dusty esker doubling for a path, like the barest part in hair, vanishing into a flaking surface of mountain scalp. After another hour's plodding up and down a series of arid, sun-baked hills in an increasingly strong wind, I finally emerged on a cliff above the sea, facing a grey islet about a mile to the east. Naturally I had left the map of Serifos in my hotel room, so I was now thoroughly baffled. There was no beach to be seen in either direction except for a small cove-like stretch of shingle far below being churned to white froth by the *Meltemi*.

I retraced my steps one hill back and hiked off to the east, crossing stone boundary walls and heading toward another ridge, from which I saw what resembled a beach, a narrow strip of sand dividing a muddy salt-flat inland from the boiling whitecaps beyond. Another scramble down the mountainside, fighting the wind at every step, until I reached the water which I now saw was bristling with rocks and slimy with a massed phalanx of reeds. No swimming here. Nothing for it but to climb the further crest rising precipitously to the south, which took maybe another half hour. Suddenly I was teetering on the cliff edge with the sea leaping a few hundred meters below and the wind doing its best to shove me into it—one of the most terrifying moments of my life as I clung desperately to stone and bush to keep from plunging straight over. Regaining my balance and a little courage, I continued south and west, bending low to the ground, having no idea where I was. A herd of mountain goats came charging out of nowhere, dividing on either side of me as they thundered past, and disappeared in a cloud of choking dust. Thoroughly stunned, I was by now beginning to feel I might never make it back, seeing nothing but wind-scraped rust-brown mountains ahead of me and the sea grinding its jaws far below. Each breath felt as if I were hauling a heavy bucket from a very deep well. The wind howled in the tubes of my ears every time I opened my mouth and at one point it just about ripped the shirt off my back.

Finally, when I had pretty well given up all hope, I found myself on a crag overlooking the harbour of Livadhi, with one last ridge to skirt as it curved around the bay. I had to walk at a tilt, pushing my right shoulder into the wind. In a little while I discovered a path which led to the far end of the long arc of the town beach. Five hours had passed since I first set off so jaunty and assured but it felt like weeks.

Studying the map back at the hotel, I could see my mistake. Psili Ammos was perhaps another quarter mile to the north. All I had to do was strike out to my left as I faced the grey islet of Vous and I would have arrived within the hour. Story of my life, as they say. But perhaps the map would have been as inaccurate as *Greek Island Hopping*. The relation between text and reality, between the description of Serifos and Serifos itself, is always skewed, always asymmetrical. But it makes for an interesting journey.

*

I pass the mornings reading Roland Barthes and find myself growing increasingly irritated. His advocacy of semiotic *jouissance* or textual playfulness—life is also regarded as constitutively textual—without coming to rest in any final Signified would appear to generate a sense of freedom and guiltless delight and a canonization of the surface. This is a compelling and attractive hypothesis, only it doesn't work, simply because life remains too fundamentally serious—because of death which cannot be discharged in an endless play of signifiers and because of all the parenthetical deaths we suffer along the way, the dispersions of self, which fall inescapably within the purview of morality. I would argue that morality and mortality go together, fit like a "t." As for the "I," this is nothing other, he writes, "than the instance of saying I: language knows a 'subject,' not a person." This is disingenuous: the textual I is always *felt* as *ostensively* personal. In any event, it was Barthes the person and not the subject who was struck and killed by a laundry truck, as if Destiny had decided to clean up his act for him. Whatever he may have uttered in his last moment was inescapably personal.

I have no doubt that what we call a central self, that round echinoid with spiky outcroppings, exists if only as a paradoxical potentiality, a manifesting latency. Otherwise the personal life is emptied of its content and would lack shape as well, begin to disintegrate, to become a loose collection of whims, desires, reflexes and scattered memories, held together only by its imaginary location in the body and by a system of mutual recognitions which social life provides. This, I admit, is often the case but *it need not be*. Hence the essential dishonesty of the semiotic affidavit: "the I which writes the text...is never more than a paper I." There is no such thing as a paper I, there are only more or less substantial, more or less coherent, selves. The problem of self-reference, whether spoken or written, is only the other side of the desire for consolidation in a unified point of view. The textual I is an expression of longing for the intrinsic I. That it generally misses its goal is only to be expected and should not deter us from continuing the search for this holiest of grails, from diving for this loveliest of shells. Even if we never manage to find it, the quest itself, as Cavafy implied in his great poem "Ithaka," gives form and cohesiveness to our lives. And some form of consummation may always surprise us. When it comes to the dialectic of surface and depth, we should probably regard ourselves as hybrid creatures, living in what the Greeks call the *sto metaxi*, the in-between.

*

I am writing up the previous entry at breakfast in the hotel courtyard. My table stands beside the glass doors, which Elevation the kitchen maid is busily cleaning. The Windex

squirts and sprays off the panes into my coffee, dampens my face and hands and cloys the marmalade on my bread. To complete the process, Petros' father backs his truck onto the terrace, shrouding both myself and the soggy remainder of my breakfast in asphyxiating billows of diesel exhaust. This, too, is an event that befalls the personal, not the textual, "I."

*

I'd like to visit the monastery at the other end of the island but there is no transport. I go to the museum but it is closed. I inquire about the famous sea cave at Koutolas but learn that it has been declared off limits by the State. I bus up to Chora to have a look at the church of Saint Athanasios and the guidebook's "remarkable neo-classical building" which serves as the town hall, but the first is locked and the latter is by no means remarkable. Try as I might, I can dig up no information about a mysterious "Homeric school" which several of the travel writers confidently mention. The archive remains evasive.

*

At the next table. A young Serifiot, trimmed beard and gilt-rimmed sunglasses, one of the "harpoons" as they are called, on the hunt for tourist women, is intently peeling a packet of drinking straws.

"Do you know what I am going to do with these?" he asks his

friend.

“No.”

“Nothing.”

*

Serifos tells me that the effort to reach what Wallace Stevens called the “basic slate” will always fail. That what we like to think of as *bedrock*, that which undergirds our being in the world, any sort of meaning or explanation or comfort, is itself the merest chimera, shifting, ambiguous, protean and elusive. And yet it’s all we have. Simply allowing ourselves to be confined to the surface of things would be intolerable, a gross capitulation to intellectual laziness. Strolling along the port, idly watching the sunlight ricochet of the tips of the wavelets, I suddenly noticed a starfish, but such a curious starfish: wavering part way between surface and bottom. How was this possible? Starfish don’t hover or float like jellyfish. The mystery proved to be an optical delicacy. A small boat moored broadside at the jetty had as emblem a prow-mounted silver star which reflected on the water in such a way as to give the uncanny impression of this dreamwalking creature in its middle latitude. The truth is: there is just no bottom to things. The truth is: we have to keep diving.

*

It's obvious that the Serifos theme and signature key is gale-force wind. Today it shattered the glass partition separating the hotel terrace from the pebbled walk leading into it from the road. This will at least spare me Enevthera's diligent ministrations and keep my coffee drinkable. It also brings to mind the Denise Levertov poem "Where Is The Angel?" which concludes, if memory serves,

*Where is the angel
to wrestle with me and wound
so curses and blessings flow storming out
and the glass shatters, and the iron
sunders?*

The answer, of course, is: right here, in Serifos, where the "violent gesticulations" of wind and weather she writes about would easily crack the "curved glass" of her wintergarden and let inspiration in. It's not a bad poem but I can't help thinking it would have been a better one had she written it here.

*

An eventful afternoon at the beach. Found a fragile butterfly shell while diving but when I opened my hand to inspect it after surfacing the wind blew it away. Found it again on the sea bottom a few minutes later—the chances of this happening are infinitesimal. Later, as I patrolled the beach searching for interesting pebbles and sculptured driftwood, something

came flying by and stuck to my foot. It was a hundred euro note, *tsamba* as the Greeks say, a wind-gift to make amends. To add a touch of spectacle to the day, an *Olympiaki* helicopter landed on the road that fringes the beach, draping everyone in layers of yellow dust. I waded back in to wash off and found another hundred drachma note tucked between two crabshells. Returned to the hotel and ordered a carafe of El Plonko Magnifico to celebrate my booty.

*

Short conversation at supper with a visiting Athenian. He asks me how I like Athens and I reply, "Athens is crazy. How anyone can live there with the traffic, the *nefos* (smog), the heat, and retain his sanity is beyond me. Life in Athens is impossible." "There is no such thing as impossible," he retorts, "anyway, that is what the philosopher *TsáPolsát* says." It takes me a few moments to figure out that *TsáPolsát* is not some ineffable Eastern sage but Jean-Paul Sartre. "Well," I continue, "to make the impossible possible you need something like a little peace to reflect in, which you can never find in Athens." "Ah," he says, "but we have found a place where there is peace," and pointing to his head, "*Echome eina dhomatio mesa me tin aera.*" (We have a room inside with air conditioning.) I am struck by his formulation since the word *aera* which he uses to refer to air conditioning is also the word for "wind," presently sending our table napkins flying and creating some havoc among the diners. Peace does not come dropping slow. Why did you come to Greece? he asks me in turn. "*Na kathariso to mialo mou,*" I reply. (To clean my brain.) "Ah," he says, "*aera pali.*" ("Wind again.") I remember that *aera* was the battle cry of the ancient Greek hoplites.

*

On the whole, I don't care much for the Serifiotis and I can understand why the poet Andreas Karavis eventually left the island. They are mainly a surly and uncommunicative bunch, clenched, reticent, grasping. I like Petros but even he needs to be pumped for his generally uninformative answers. The people tend to resemble their landscape, harsh, dry and stony. Transactions are unpleasant. I don't think I've received a single *parakalo* ("you're welcome") to my preferred *evharisto* ("thank you") and the merchants literally slam your change on the counter and look elsewhere. Often they don't have change, requiring you to leave an unintended tip for services unrendered. The *initial* impression they make is one of noble laconic dignity but it quickly dissipates into a sort of ramshackle indifference, a blithe not-caring, very much like their architecture. A house often begins in stone and wood and ends with an upper storey or veranda or kitchen annex made from thin strips of rusty tin. The feeling one gets here is that of beauty marred.

*

It is odd not hearing the sound of one's voice for days on end—or rather, the sound of one's voice in one's own language, for I do have several spasmodic conversation every day, if only to place an order for coffee and discuss its sugar and milk content. One becomes gradually aware of how much one customarily fills the space one inhabits with words that are language-specific and of how the very sound of these words, not the words themselves or their signification, but their *aural intelligibility* as counters testifying to the mother tongue establish one's conviction of reality. We are really

sonic beings—noise-makers by necessity—in order to evade the wavering sense of accidentality that always threatens to dispossess us and to make us feel we are not here (hear). Ultimately, though, it is more than mere undifferentiated racket that we require in order to console us with the fiction of presence but actual *speech* in our native language. Maybe this is why writing, the silent dimension of spoken language, can so easily distort our sense of the Real and radically dislocate us. We need words carried on the breath to deflect the wind that beats against us, like a thin bulwark of tamarisk trees.

*

What with the wind raising dust-dervishes everywhere and grim Mount Troules rising grey-brown and granite-bleak at every turn, I wonder if there exists on Serifos an impenetrable wall behind which the real life of the island takes place, protected from prying eyes. Is it worth seeking out? If one should choose to remain here for a time, would there be any alternative? The perpetual wind, the rocky, desolate landscape, and the coldness of the people make this island a demoniacal place. And yet I am tempted to stay.

In his popular TV series *My Greek Odyssey*, Peter Manias devotes an episode to Serifos in which he provides a different and more tolerant perspective on the island, describing its savory cuisine, flourishing viniculture, and its troubled history as an island-wide iron mine. He focuses on the multitude of caves, tunnels and hollowed-out mountains and dwells on the ruthless exploitation of the miners, culminating in the violent general strike of 1916. Much local detail is left aside in his account of the island but one can detect the

source of the harsh, mineral character of its inhabitants in its turbulent past.

*

I have been on Seriphos for a week, yet it feels like a month. This has always been my experience in Greece. Just as different materials while filling the same volume may have different densities, so there is a kind of *density of experience*. If one thinks of a week as a temporal container, it seems to hold more time, or at least denser time, in Greece than anywhere else I have travelled. Time here is heavier, richer; you pack more of it into a calendrical volume.

*

Rereading what I've just written, which requires a postscript. Time can also *weigh heavily* here, in the pejorative sense, but as a general principle I think it's true that in order to get to know a place, you have to stay long enough to get absolutely blind bored in it. Then you must stay long enough to get through to the other side of your boredom. Then you can leave without feeling like a skipping stone. In this connection Barthes is surely right when he defines boredom as "bliss viewed from the shore of pleasure."

This means giving up certain preconceptions about what makes up happiness and about what it is we are really seeking when we travel to distant places, which often turn out to be uncomfortably near, projections of the commonplace and

quotidian. I remember in this connection a stanza from George Frederick Cameron:

*The phantom passion must be laid,
The harper taught another strain,
The knee must seek another shrine,
For thou are not—thou art not mine.*

*

Regret, it occurs to me, is only a failure of anticipation. Two unshaven old men in black captain hats sitting and talking at the local *ouzeria*. One says, "*Enai efkolo na pethane.*" (Dying is easy.) The other smiles with a kind of melancholy diffidence and looks out to sea. "*Eki enai i varca mou.*" (There is my boat.)

*

Went diving for shells and found some real beauties, varieties of what I have named the Royal Purple sea urchin, almost three times the size of the common order *Psammechinus miliaris*—but at such a depth that my fingers seized up and I could scarcely handle them. Twice I managed to fetch one back to the surface and broke it each time as my hand convulsed with the cold. These were the deepest dives I have ever made, maybe close to forty feet. When I returned to shore I found I had lost sensation in both my thumbs and in the tips of my fingers—a

curious feeling of non-feeling which lasted for over an hour. That evening in my room as I was getting ready for supper a little volcano seemed to erupt in my chest and I found myself half paralyzed, barely able to move to the door to summon the chamber maid. A while later the local sawbones arrived and after a ritual examination informed me I was in the throes of a heart attack and would have to be flown by helicopter to Athens immediately. I refused and spent the night listening to the wind smash against the French doors and the bamboo plants beating against the windows. Lightheaded in the morning but somewhat restored. By supper time I was fine and enjoyed the meal I missed yesterday evening. Next day diving again and this time managed to recoup my losses in the form of a magnificent domed urchin shell nubbled with symmetrical streaks of purple and green—but at a lesser depth.

Another emblem there, as Yeats once said.

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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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