

# Travelling Poets During the Greek Dictatorship: Nikiforos Vrettakos and Titos Patrikios in Italy

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Two of the most acclaimed Modern Greek poets, Nikiforos Vrettakos and Titos Patrikios, sojourned in Italy during the seven years of the military junta in Greece (1967–1974). Both of them preferred displacement over succumbing to a regime they did not believe in. During their stay in the Belpaese and later on when they returned to their host country, they both composed poetry, published after the collapse of the dictatorship in Greece. In these special “travel poems”, Vrettakos and Patrikios seem to be seeking their personal and national identity within a foreign land. Although they were allowed to openly express themselves there, their work is tempered with feelings of homesickness. Memory and trauma are poetically represented in these “Italian” poems along with the natural, urban and cultural landscape of Italy. Several questions arise when reading these poems inspired in Italy by Vrettakos and Patrikios: What is Greece and what is Italy? What defines the homeland? How do we characterize the other? Who is the foreigner, who is the stranger and who is the local? What is national, what is international and what is transnational? And what do border crossing, “nostos” and return mean to either of the poets? This paper seeks to comparatively examine two Modern Greek poets of different generations through their poems or prose, focusing on identity and alterity issues, memory and trauma. The aim is to prove that both of them, self-exiles in Italy, composed works in which they were both in search of consolation and identity, yet constantly recalling traumatic experiences of the past or pleasant memories that eventually caused pain. These compositions form a special type of travel literature, a genre recognized as such in Greece only in the last quarter of the 20th century (Παναρέτου 1995).

*Key words:* exile, Greek dictatorship, Italy, Patrikios, poetry, Vrettakos



## INTRODUCTION

Nikiforos Vrettakos and Titos Patrikios suffered the same fate of self-exile abroad during the regime of the colonels in Greece. They both composed poetry or prose in their host country, Italy, and their work could be included in Greek travel literature, albeit differing from the Greek travel writing canon.

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## GREEK TRAVEL LITERATURE

Whereas travel writing about Greece by non-Greeks has been studied systematically, travel writing by Greeks has not received the same degree of attention and analysis, with the emphasis on impressions and the art of recording them (Tziovas 2009, 157). Moreover, the literary status of travel writing has only been recognized in Greece in recent decades; this fact is unsurprising, since it is a genre reflective of, and responsive to, the modern condition of increasing globalisation, mobility, travel and cross-cultural contact (Thompson 2011, 2). Greek travel literature has only scarcely and theoretically been studied and identified as a genre in Greece and it was only at the end of the 20th century that a corpus of Greek travel literary texts was compiled (Παναρέτου 1995, 15–17). Most of the Greek travel literature authors of the 20th century, such as Nikos Kazantzakis, Kostas Ouranis, Elias Venezis, I.M. Panayiotopoulos and Takis Papatsonis, moved for recreational or work purposes and incorporated their travel impressions into literary texts, travel accounts or articles, namely prose (Παναρέτου 1995, 9–10). Some of them also undertook travel specifically for the sake of writing about it, whereas others, such as Yiannis Psycharis, Alexandros Pallis and Dimitrios Vikelas, are considered to be diaspora writers having produced travel narratives (Tziovas 2009, 158).

However, few are the Greek writers who fled from totalitarian regimes and whose writing features themes related to exile, displacement, distance, separation, detachment, border crossing and identity seeking in their oeuvre (Gaertner 2007, 1). The majority of them were political exiles in Eastern Europe in the aftermath of the Greek Civil War (1946–1949) who produced novels and short stories in which they negotiated the trauma



of their political defeat and exile (Apostolidou in Tziovas 2009, 215–216). On the other hand, Nikoforos Vrettakos and Titos Patrikios were two poets who travelled west and successfully amalgamated travel impressions with exile sentiments, despite the fact that the definitions of exile and tourism occupy opposite poles in the modern experience of displacement (Kaplan 1996, 27). Both unwilling tourists, they absconded to Europe to evade political persecution by the Greek regime of the colonels, suffering homesickness, and yet relishing their independence and freedom to wander. Considering the interface between travel and exile and the fact that most of their travel texts are in verse rather than prose, unlike the larger part of Greek travel literature, their poems/prose in this paper can be considered to appertain to a special and seldom studied kind of Modern Greek travel literature.

#### THE REGIME OF THE COLONELS IN GREECE

From 21st April 1967 to 24th July 1974, Greece was ruled by the Greek military junta, widely known as the regime of the colonels. On the evening of 20th April 1967, a group of right-wing army officers led by brigadier general Stylianos Pattakos and colonels Georgios Papadopoulos and Nikolaos Makarezos seized power in a coup d'état, which they denominated the “revolution to save the nation”. They immediately occupied or sealed key points, such as ports, airports, radio stations, newspapers, ministries, police headquarters and the telecommunications centre. Political freedoms and civil liberties were instantly suppressed and several articles of the Greek Constitution, such as those protecting freedom of thought and freedom of the press, were suspended. New rules were imposed “by order of the revolutionary committee” and a new government was sworn in.

Following the coup, more than 6,000 suspected communists and political opponents were imprisoned or exiled on the grounds that they were enemies of the country. Most of them were subjected to internal exile on deserted Greek islands, such as Makronisos and Gyaros, or remote inhabited islands such as Leros and Agios Efstratios (often called AiStratis). Others,



including famous artists, authors, activists and journalists, were in external exile, involved in the resistance and organising protests in European capital cities or helping and hiding refugees from Greece (Διαμαντόπουλος 2000; Doulis 2011). Two of the most important Greek poets of the 20th century, Nikiforos Vrettakos and Titos Patrikios, were among those who lived in self-exile abroad during the years of the regime. This paper begins with the presentation of Vrettakos's case because of his belonging to an earlier generation of Greek poets than the latter.

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### NIKIFOROS VRETTAKOS IN ITALY

When the military coup occurred in 1967, Nikiforos Vrettakos (1912–1991) departed for Trogen, Switzerland. He first visited Italy in May 1969 but, in the meantime, had to postpone his return to Italy until April 1970, when he finally reached Palermo, the capital of Sicily, and its university to deliver lectures. He was astonished and “dreamfully impressed” by the analogies between Sicily and his motherland, the Peloponnese (Rotolo 2002, 114). A few months later, the founder of the Sicilian Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, Bruno Lavagnini, proposed that Vrettakos relocate to Palermo, with the purpose of collaborating on the Greek–Italian Dictionary which the Institute was to publish. Vrettakos resided in Sicily until June 1974, working and raising awareness of the critical situation his country was undergoing. Unfortunately, he was constrained by having to spend five months as an inpatient in Cervello Hospital, suffering from tuberculosis, as a conclusion to his Sicilian stay. He returned to the Italian island on a final trip in 1985 (Rotolo 2002, 114–115; Rotolo 2015, 29).

Spending the last four years of the regime of the colonels (1970–1974) in Sicily, Vrettakos composed a number of poems there, which he entitled *Sicilian poems*. In those poems he expressed his personal trauma of self-imposed exile and his emotionally painful survival in a period of crisis in his homeland. Moreover, the poet appeared to be in search of his identity while in a foreign country away from home.



## THE SICILIAN POEMS – SEEKING IDENTITY AND HOME

Most of Vrettakos's *Sicilian poems* were written in Sicily from 1970 to 1974 and consist of the poet's memories from his Sicilian sojourn, his friendship with the local people and his traumatic personal experiences; they are exile poems (Στέφος 1993, 369–370). However, they are also a kind of travel poetry, a kind of “topography” (Λεοντή 1998, 24), in which Vrettakos sought the Greek national, topographic and cultural identity in a foreign country. The Greek identity, as formed by the aesthetics of the 20th century, the so-called “greekness”, is based on avoiding the mimicry of foreign models and returning to topos, the Greek place, landscape, geography, climate, the Attic Sun and the Aegean Sea, the sky and mountains, the sea and islands (Λεοντή 1998, 195).

Since Vrettakos wrote most of the *Sicilian poems*<sup>32</sup> while displaced in Italy, they abound in bitter feelings caused by the loss and memory of the Greek landscape, of the poet's homeland. The prefatory verses to the poetry collection, deriving from the poem “I had” included in another collection entitled *Internal Adventure*, present this sense of longing:

*And Greece,  
now, like a faraway moon of chalk  
dims, in memory's space...*<sup>33</sup> (Βρεττάκος 1990, 7).

Probably the most characteristic poem, which indicates the basic element of the Greek identity according to Vrettakos, the Greek sun, inaugurates the collection. It is entitled “My sun”, revealing the poet's intimacy and emotional attachment to the sun and light, which is a motif in Greek Modernism (Λεοντή 1998, 211). Vrettakos declared:

*They took my sun away, but I will find it.*<sup>34</sup> (Βρεττάκος 1990, 9)

32 Most of Vrettakos's *Sicilian poems* have not been translated into English. Therefore, the English verses appearing in this paper are the fruits of a personal translational effort. The same goes for Patrikios's prose and some of his poems. In these cases, the original text is also cited.

33 ... *Κ' ἡ Ελλάδα,  
τώρα, σαν ένα μακρινό φεγγάρι από κιμωλία,  
φέγγει, αμυδρά, στις μνήμης το διάστημα...*

34 *Μου πήραν τον ήλιο μου, αλλά εγώ θα τον βρω.*



Residing in a foreign country, the Greek sun is the first thing Vrettakos craves. The sun and light as identity features are a recurrent theme in the *Sicilian poems* and in many of Vrettakos's contemporary poems. The poet in Sicily dreamed of the sun renewing his old passport (Βρεττάκος 1990, 11), but this was merely a dream, since the regime in Greece would not renew his passport, in order to prevent him from returning. Vrettakos's loyalty to the sun is symbolic of his allegiance to Greece; encountering the sun abroad engendered ambivalent feelings within the poet, as in the poem "Meeting the sun in the Sicilian hills":

*The thunderbolt of your friendship found me, sun,  
in unprotected hills  
and smashed my heart,*<sup>35</sup> (Βρεττάκος 1990, 12)

and the poet felt mute and blind, unable to express himself anymore. The Sicilian hills were "unprotected" in contrast to the hills in Ploumitsa, Vrettakos's motherland, hills which could be defined as protective.

The memory of the Greek identity, of home, caused pain. Yet the poet took the sun with him when leaving, as well as the water, another element of nature connected to Greek identity, for instance in the poem "Leaving" (Βρεττάκος 1990, 14). And if this friend was sometimes lost, there were moments when it reminded him that home was love, wherever it originated from:

*And then I said  
while seeing our common sun visiting me  
[...]  
that the strongest thing in this world  
is not death, as we think. It's love.  
[...] And I said  
for this reason that the shiniest thing in this world  
is not the sun, as we think. It's love.*<sup>36</sup> (Βρεττάκος 1990, 20–21)

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35 *Με βρήκε, ήλιε, ο κεραυνός της φιλίας σου  
πάνω σε λόφους που δεν προστατεύονται  
και μου σύντριψε την καρδιά.*

36 *[...] Κ' είπα τότες  
βλέποντας τον κοινό μας ήλιο που μ' επισκεπτόταν  
[...]*



The second feature of Greek identity is the sea, which also symbolizes love in Vrettakos's poetry (Κακούρου-Χρόνη 1993, 288–289), the sea that unites Greece and Italy, the sea which the poet gazed at in order to describe his homeland in its waters:

*Soon, from welcoming hills, I'll be able  
to look face to face at the sea  
like a friend recognized after long absence.  
There, on the shore beyond,  
I'll know my country still exists.* (Vrettakos 2005, 34)

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The poet was aware of the fact that Greece was not visible along the sea horizon he was looking at and, if it were, the sea of Palermo is not situated toward Greece anyway. Yet he hoped to hallucinate “the beating of her heart” (Vrettakos 2005, 34). So, the sea Vrettakos contemplated was a consolation, a shelter; it was hope (Κακούρου-Χρόνη 1993, 290) and led him to a dreamful realization of his most intense desire, the nostos, the painful return to his motherland, walking on the waves, riding on Arion's dolphin, following the music heard from his land (Βρεττάκος 1990, 16).

At other times, the view of the sea mingling with the ancient Greek ruins in Sicily formed a timeless, common cultural identity for the two places:

*Transparent time, sea and archaic columns,  
intersecting the horizon and time  
in Selinunte [...]*<sup>37</sup> (Βρεττάκος 1990, 13)

The relationship between Greece and the sea is timeless and eternal at the same time, because in Greece the sea fills your veins with salt, light and sounds from eternity (Βρεττάκος 1990, 20).

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*ότι το δυνατότερο πράγμα σ' αυτόν τον κόσμο  
δεν είναι όπως νομίζουμε ο θάνατος. Είναι η αγάπη.*

*[...] Κ' είπα*

*γι' αυτό πως το λαμπρότερο πράγμα σ' αυτό τον κόσμο  
δεν είναι όπως νομίζουμε ο ήλιος. Είναι η αγάπη.*

- 37 *Διάφανη ώρα, θάλασσα κι αρχαϊκές κολώνες,  
που τέμνουν τον ορίζοντα και το χρόνο  
στη Σεληνούττα. [...]*



The natural landscape in Sicily – trees, flowers and animals – bears a resemblance to that of the poet’s motherland in the Peloponnese. This can be geologically and geographically explained, since Sicily and the Peloponnese are in the same parallel. So, Vrettakos would seek the Greek identity even in the Sicilian plants:

*Was it the silver olive tree, my old girlfriend?*

*The lemon trees that snowed flowers in my heart?*<sup>38</sup> (Βρεττάκος 1990, 14)

The olive trees, revered and recurrent in Greek mythology, history and landscape, the lemon trees that abound in both countries and emitted a pleasant odour in the air the poet breathed (Βρεττάκος 1990, 19), but also other trees that grow in both countries and cover Europe in their scent (Βρεττάκος 1990, 20) and flowers, such as geraniums (Βρεττάκος 1990, 21), mimosa (Βρεττάκος 1990, 22), “the big magnolias” (Βρεττάκος 1990, 24), are certainly not the only ones in the Sicilian hills, but they exemplify the common topography of Greece (the Peloponnese) and Italy (Sicily).

Sometimes, the “Greek garden” is just a metonymy of the Greek cultural identity. Vrettakos explains this in his poem entitled “Via Noto 34”, in which he describes the address in which the Sicilian Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies is housed in Palermo, referring to the Institute’s director, Bruno Lavagnini:

*his face lights up as if he were to enter  
a Greek garden. And it’s true.*

*The rooms bloomed. From Homer to  
Solomos, you thought the names  
were flowers moving.*<sup>39</sup> (Βρεττάκος 1990, 23)

38 *Νάτανε η ασημένια ελιά, η παλιά μου φιλενάδα;  
Οι λεμονιές που χιόνισαν στην καρδιά μου ανθούς;*

39 *το πρόσωπό του φωτίζεται ως νάσαι να μπει  
σ’ελληνικό περιβόλι. Κ’ είναι αλήθεια.  
Οι αίθουσες έθαλλαν. Απ’τον Όμηρο ως  
το Σολωμό τα ονόματα, θαρρούσες  
πως ήταν λουλούδια που σάλευν.*



The Greek poets' oeuvre in the Institute's library are flowers blooming in the Greek garden and they are alive, they move, they are ready to talk to anyone interested in them.

In the *Sicilian poems* Vrettakos was in search of the Greek identity, but he sometimes seems to be struggling, realizing he is an expatriate, detached from his homeland, from the place he was born and raised. So, these poems are also a kind of heterotopia which means a real topos, a place seen as something different (Λεοντή 1998, 85). Vrettakos was seeking his homeland but far afield from it, whereas a heterotopia can also be a marginal place, such as a prison, a hospital, a ghetto. Moreover, a heterotopia can be a place with works of art from all civilizations and times, which are supposed to be protected, places such as museums, libraries and archaeological sites (Λεοντή 1998, 86). Alterity in Vrettakos's poems, though, is not to be detected only in heterotopias. Otherness is a wide term, including a plethora of different forms that something appears in, and we have to define what this something is (Γκότοβος 2001, 30), by connecting it to linguistic, cultural, social characteristics. In Vrettakos's Italian-themed poems, alterity can be studied at a geographical, individual, national and global level.

Even if Vrettakos resided in Italy for several years and expressed his gratitude to the local people cordially hosting him, he remains on the periphery, never ceasing to regard it as a foreign country, a place away from home. Consequently, his perspective remains the one of an outlander, of a Greek person. The *Sicilian poems* abound in nostalgia for homeland, bitterness for detachment and desire of homecoming. The sun, the sea, nature, the Greek antiquities of Sicily are the connectors between the self-banished poet and his home, they are the similarities between Italy and Greece which the poet is seeking, in order to find consolation in the foreign yet welcoming place he is in ("I was in a foreign but brotherly bed" (Βρεττάκος 1990, 20), he wrote). The poet was far from home, far from the "protective" hill of Ploumitsa (Rotolo 2015, 14) where he reached adulthood, in "unprotected hills" (Βρεττάκος 1990, 12), which did not offer him the sense of safety, security or intimacy, causing him a lot of pain. Although these 'others', the foreigners, were like



brothers to him, they consoled him (Βρεττάκος 1990, 15), even if the world around him was often incomprehensible (Βρεττάκος 1990, 25). Lastly, some other heterotopias in the *Sicilian poems* are the library of the Sicilian Institute (Βρεττάκος 1990, 23) and Cervello Hospital where he received medical care and observed other inmates, such as the “amico partigiano Luigi” (Βρεττάκος 1990, 18).

## TITOS PATRIKIOS IN ITALY

Titos Patrikios was born in Athens in 1928 and has recently celebrated his ninetieth birthday. He was active in the resistance movement against the German occupation, but during the years of the Greek Civil War he was displaced within the borders of his own country to detention camps on the islands of Makronisos and AiStratis. Later, he was exiled outright to Paris and Rome, working for UNESCO and several French research institutes. The poet’s loss of his home and his mother tongue are clearly evident in his poems, which combine nostalgic recollections of sexual encounters with an almost allegorical longing for what is absent: the body of the beloved woman, as well as the body of the beloved homeland. Patrikios found in his displacement a profound but guilt-ridden motivation to speak for those who could (or would) not (Bakken in Patrikios 2006, 16).

Patrikios is considered to be a humanistic “poet of witness and engagement, a survivor of imprisonment, hard labor, censorship, protest and exile. His biography, in short, is the biography of the intellectual left in post-War Greece. He narrowly escaped death by firing squad, once had to bury his poems to keep them from discovery by the authorities, and endured years abroad, away from his home country, Greece, utterly displaced from his family and literary community” (Bakken and Yiannias 2007). Of course, this is the case of many leftist poets and artists at the time, such as Patrikios’s “spiritual father”, as he calls him, the poet Yiannis Ritsos, who was also Vrettakos’s friend.

Patrikios lived between Paris and Rome from 1959 to 1975, but he also visited multiple Italian cities. He repatriated a year after the restoration of democracy and even now he still cannot



help returning to Italy at least once a year. In the poems and prose he composed during the years of the Greek dictatorship that he spent in Italy, he immersed himself in the architectural, urban, cultural, artistic, natural and political landscape of the country. He reflected on the past while also problematizing the current reality, he compared ancient and modern Roman times and people, and he gave readers an insight into history, often expressing memory and trauma.

#### MEMORY AND TRAUMA IN PATRIKIOS'S "ITALIAN" POEMS/PROSE

Patrikios's post-1950s poems are "full of nostalgia and disappointment with one's country and its people, especially in their acceptance of the Papadopoulos dictatorship, which caused his exile to Rome and Paris" (Myrsiades 2008). In 1967, some months after the establishment of the dictatorship in Greece, Patrikios's bitter memories were awakened. In the poem entitled "Names", written in December 1967, which belongs to the collection *Optional Stop*, he recalled some of his friends, poets who *had* suffered and *still* suffered, banished on deserted Greek islands, while he was away from home but, at least, free to live and express himself:

*The only thing I can write  
is your name  
poet friends, forgotten companions,  
Kostas, Manolis, Tasos, Yiannis.  
A pencil and a piece of paper  
are to be found under any circumstances*<sup>40</sup> (Πατρικίος 2018, 135)

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40 Το μόνο που μπορώ να γράψω  
είναι τ'όνομά σας  
φίλοι ποιητές, σύντροφοι ξεχασμένοι,  
Κώστα, Μανώλη, Τάσο, Γιάννη.  
Ένα μολύβι και χαρτί  
Βρίσκονται σ'όλες τις συνθήκες.



About a year later, in September 1968 at a Poetry Conference in Barberino, Italy, Patrikios tried to raise awareness on the problematic survival of those exiled poets in Greece:

From the beginning I posed the problem of the exiled by the Junta poets, Yiannis Ritsos, Kostas Kouloufakos, Manolis Fourtounis, Tasos Spyropoulos, Yiannis Negrepontis, for whom they all expressed their solidarity. At the very same moment, a decree was approved unanimously denouncing the Junta and demanding their immediate release.<sup>41</sup> (Πατρίκιος 2006, 217)

In May 1968, during the Paris uprising he experienced firsthand, he composed a poem of introspection and self-consciousness, entitled “Intermediate stations”:

*Another winter has passed  
without seeing the colour of your mountains  
change on time of day  
without knowing whom I will find again  
of those I would like to be waiting for me.*<sup>42</sup> (Πατρίκιος 2018, 137)

It seems that the poet addressed his verses to his homeland, Greece, which he yearned for, being abroad. Nostalgic, bitter emotions made Rome, the ancient and glorious city, look miserable (Πατρίκιος 2018, 137). The mountains, just like Vrettakos’s hills, represented the homeland for Patrikios, as in the poem “The mountains”, even if Greece is a country supposed to be defined by the sea and sun:

*In the beginning was the sea.*

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41 “Έθεσα από την αρχή το πρόβλημα των εξορίστων από τη Χούντα ποιητών, του Γιάννη Ρίτσου, του Κώστα Κουλουφάκου, του Μανόλη Φουρτούνη, του Τάσου Σπυρόπουλου, του Γιάννη Νεγρεπόντη, για τους οποίους όλοι εξέφρασαν την αλληλεγγύη τους. Την ίδια κιόλας στιγμή εγκρίθηκε ομόφωνα ένα ψήφισμα που κατάγγελλε τη Χούντα και απαιτούσε την άμεση απελευθέρωσή τους”.

42 *Πέρασε ακόμα ένας χειμώνας  
χωρίς να βλέπω το χρώμα των βουνών σου  
ν’ αλλάζει με τις ώρες  
χωρίς να ξέρω ποιον θα ζαναβρώ  
απ’ όσους θα ‘θελα να περιμένουν.*



*I was born among islands,  
me too an island that emerged temporarily  
just in time to see light – this also like a stone –  
and then sink back again.  
The mountains came later.  
I chose them.*

*Somehow I must share the weight  
that for ages pressed this country down* (Patrikios 2006, 104)

So, it was a matter of choice, a matter of identity someone could assume. Modernist Greek poets praised the sea and sun; he chose the mountains and stones to express his national identity and carry the burden of classical inheritance. It is the stone he sang of again in Rome, in September 1969:

*Again the same arrogance:  
to chisel your life on another life,  
as if you wanted to withdraw  
your own figure from inside the stone  
believing you had liberated it* (Patrikios 2006, 106)

While Patrikios seemed to be seeking his identity, one should not forget he was in a foreign country. Even if he may have been feeling at home, free to express himself, alterity and otherness often appeared to be dominating, as in the poem entitled “Foreign skies”:

*Always foreign, we turn  
from country to country, from city to city.  
The little glint of the home country  
in the corner of the eye  
always fading  
under foreign skies* (Patrikios 2006, 107)

Patrikios struggled to recall his homeland’s light, its image, the feelings associated with it. He felt alien; the country he resided was a foreign country, his identity faded, transformed, vanishing day by day. The memory he preserved from home represented persecution, torture, hardship, betrayal because the body could not suffer torture anymore (Πατρίκιος 2018, 146), the war, and following wars that never stopped, and lack of progress (Πατρίκιος 2018, 147). Until a woman recovered his homeland:



*You brought back my land.  
Light and red dirt  
Stomped upon by tyrants and enemies.  
You brought back the storms  
of the autumn sea  
that rinsed the dust  
from my face  
and I felt beneath my flesh  
the same spine of mountains  
that through the years  
kept the homeland standing* (Patrikios 2006, 109).

But this woman reintroduced another feature of his Greek identity, his mother tongue, the means of communication he should have negated, living in a foreign country:

*You brought back my language.  
Old words, buried  
in ruins and ash,  
now come to light  
[...]  
Raw metal of words,  
thirst, and adequacy  
of communication* (Patrikios 2006, 109).

Last but not least, this woman reinstated his city, Athens, the capital of Greece:

*You brought back my city,  
which lives and changes away from me,  
containing the houses that disappeared  
and the river that was covered over.  
and she brings the dream of an unknown sea:  
You brought back the dream.  
Unknown sea, unexplored  
sea of mine,  
volcanic island,  
a bet with death.  
Not knowing if we'll sink again  
or if we'll surface even higher* (Patrikios 2006, 110)

Patrikios's friends and old companions were in prison; some of them were heroes, and others could be regarded as cowards



(Πατρίκιος 2018, 153). The poet was mutable away from home, like some kind of liquid obtaining the shape of the container in which it is enclosed (Πατρίκιος 2018, 154). He felt like a stranger in somebody else's house, since it was a friend who accommodated him in a temporary dwelling which was not his *home* (Πατρίκιος 2018, 158).

Titos Patrikios recalled the years of hardship, dictatorship and exile even in poems and prose he composed and published decades later. In January 2004, he wrote the poem “Political refugees in Rome, in 1970 and later on”, in which he once more reminisced about his self-imposed exile in Rome during the Greek dictatorship:

*So many persecuted people I saw in the cities  
I was forced or I chose to live in  
but I met them closer in Rome  
which received us like a maternal hug.  
We had all fled similar fascisms  
companions speaking another language, brothers at once  
with common starting points, with divergent perspectives,  
and then I discovered on the opposite coast  
tortured on opposing paths, fugitives  
from regimes I used to admire.*<sup>43</sup> (Πατρίκιος 2018, 390)

The capital city of Italy, Rome, where he resided during the dictatorship, proved to be like a mother to him and to other political refugees of the time, who did not speak the same language as the Greek poet, yet they all shared the same destiny and often the same ideology.

43 *Τόσους κνηγημένους έβλεπα στις πόλεις  
που αναγκάζομουν ή διάλεγα να ζήσω  
αλλά τους γνώρισα από πιο κοντά στη Ρώμη  
που μας δεχότανε σαν μητρική αγκαλιά.  
Όλοι είχαμε ξεφύγει από παραπλήσιους φασισμούς  
σύντροφοι αλλόγλωσσοι, μονομιάς αδέρφια  
με τις κοινές αφετηρίες, με αποκλίνουσες προοπτικές,  
κι έπειτα ανακάλυπτα στην αντίπερα όχθη  
βασανισμένους με αντίδρομες πορείες, φυγάδες  
από καθεστώτα που άλλοτε τα θαύμαζα.*

Patrikios recalled his sojourn in Italy, the monuments he visited there and the historical facts related to those monuments. Sometimes, sightseeing in Italy allowed him to evade his harsh reality, due to the impact of art and beauty. For instance, while visiting Florence on 13th September 1968 and some of the city's most renowned museums, such as the Uffizi Gallery and the Pitti Palace, Patrikios assumed that "the beauty of a city is not something self-sufficient. It is easily transformed into hell by violence, oppression, occupation. That is what happened in Athens a year ago with the coup [...]"<sup>44</sup> (Πατρίκιος 2006, 214). For this reason, Patrikios seemed to be searching for a new homeland in Florence, an attractive one, as he defined it, exclaiming "at last, here is an attractive homeland"<sup>45</sup> (Πατρίκιος 2000, 50), even if this was far from his own homeland. Patrikios is an art lover; he admired the paintings in the Italian museums and meditated upon their meaning and significance, as he did when he contemplated a painting called *Ideal city*. The poet realized that only temporarily had he found an ideal city in his imagination, elsewhere, in foreign cities, in different times (Πατρίκιος 2000, 83). Patrikios was aware there could be an attractive homeland but not an ideal city and that he was "a Greek as the others see him"<sup>46</sup> (Πατρίκιος 2000, 60). Therefore, the poet was Greek, an expatriate in a foreign country, where he discovered Greek elements but not a Greek identity; because, as he mentioned, when we are far away from home, we love it "passionately, agonizingly, but without obligations", as Dante loved Beatrice<sup>47</sup> (Πατρίκιος 2000, 65).

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44 "η ομορφιά μιας πόλης δεν είναι κάτι αυθύπαρκτο. Εύκολα μετατρέπεται σε κόλαση από τη βία, την καταδυνάστευση, την κατοχή. Έτσι, έλεγα, έγινε η Αθήνα πριν από ένα χρόνο με το πραξικόπημα [...]"

45 "επιτέλους, να μια ελκυστική πατρίδα".

46 "ένας Έλληνας όπως τον βλέπουν οι άλλοι".

47 "Από μακριά αγαπάμε τη γενέθλια γη παθιασμένα, βασανιστικά, αλλά χωρίς υποχρεώσεις. Όπως ο Δάντης τη Βεατρίκη".



## CONCLUSIONS

Nikiforos Vrettakos and Titos Patrikios are two of the most acclaimed Modern Greek poets who travelled to Italy during the seven years of the military junta in Greece. Both of them favoured a self-imposed exile abroad rather than succumbing to a regime they were averse to. Nevertheless, had they not crossed the borders of their homeland, they would have faced internal exile, which was the case for many other left-wing poets of the time. During their sojourn in the “Belpaese” and later when they paid short return visits to their host country, they both composed verses or prose, which were published after the restoration of democracy in Greece or even decades later. In these special travel compositions, Vrettakos and Patrikios seem to be seeking their personal and national identity, in a foreign land in which their new-found freedom of expression allowed them to explore their longing for their homeland. The themes of historical and personal memory and trauma are poetically represented in these “Italian” poems/prose, along with the natural, urban and cultural landscape of Italy.

In these compositions Nikiforos Vrettakos and Titos Patrikios were inspired in Italy; the poets address questions of national identity and otherness, in an effort to comprehend what homeland is, who the others are, what national, international and transnational is and what border crossing, “nostos” and return mean to each of the poets. Vrettakos was undoubtedly painfully nostalgic, yearning for his homecoming, whereas Patrikios also expressed homesickness, yet seemed to have more peacefully accepted the loss. Both poets were outsiders in a foreign country, which was friendly yet ultimately not their home. They were Greeks in Italy; they had crossed the border, losing all markers of their identity: their house, their land, their family, their people and their language. Although homeland relates to a sense of belonging, being welcomed is insufficient for having a national identity. In search of consolation, they envisioned the Greek natural landscape when they contemplated the Italian sun, sea or mountains, projecting home on to their current reality. Furthermore, Patrikios sought his consolation in Italian art



and, unlike Vrettakos, explicitly referred to the persecuting regime that had resulted in his exile, the burden of which was hard to overcome. In this special subgenre of travel poetry, narratives of melancholy, discomfort, bitterness and homesickness are predominant, notwithstanding both poets' gratitude for the opportunity to live in Italy, a country that, at least, felt like home.

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