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Ruin: Essays in Exilic Living by Adrienne Kalfopoulou (review)

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Calas referred to himself in *Artforum* in the early 1980s as a “poet, diagnostician, and polemicist” (264). The great contribution of Hoff’s book is to present a picture of Calas that gives equal weight to each of these facets of Calas’s personality. There has already been a renaissance of work on Greek surrealism in recent years: from Michalis Chrysanthopoulos’s (2012) and Nikos Sigalas’s (2012) books in Greek to Effie Rentzou’s (2010) incisive study in French. I trust that Hoff’s *Nicolas Calas*, with its lengthy Appendix of unpublished materials, its exhaustive bibliography, and its extensive citations of poems, letters, and essays—some published and many translated for the first time (the originals always helpfully appear in-text or in the notes)—will serve as an important sourcebook for the further study of Calas, and I hope that it will spur critical work on many of the important questions it broaches.

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Adrienne Kalfopoulou, *Ruin: Essays in Exilic Living*. Pasadena: Red Hen Press. 2014. Pp. 209. Paper \$15.95.

Ruin: Essays in Exilic Living is a searching and innovative collection that makes a significant contribution to Greek-American letters. While the volume’s narrative threads are engaging, the book’s chief interest is not story for the sake of story. Rather, when Kalfopoulou recounts events from the last six or so years of her life, and the life of the Greek and American nations, her narrative serves as a vehicle for meditation, for her probing exploration of Greek literature’s most pressing questions. They are the old questions of home and exile, of justice and oppression, of antiquity, liberty, and loss. In its engagement with neo-colonialism and economics, Orientalism, and empire, though, *Ruin* is also very much a book of twenty-first-century literature, and Kalfopoulou serves English-speaking readers as a worthy ambassador of the Modern Greek experience. In

her hands, the apparently mundane attains global significance—garbage on the street, immigrants sleeping rough, debt talks on the news, maintaining family connections by Skyping across oceans. Coming to the book in 2016, readers will find that the everyday difficulties of her life five and six years ago in an economy crippled by debt are all too relevant, all too timely, right now. No one reading after the summer of 2015 can encounter these moments without a shudder of recognition: reminders, as the first memorandum was in the works, that during the Occupation, Greeks survived by eating apple cores tossed from windows by Nazi officers, reminders of how ludicrous the bailout loan seemed even as it was being received, and also Kalfopoulou's hauntingly prophetic line: "The Greeks are wary of George Papandreou's assurances that Greece will be saved by the troika" (112). To read this book in the wake of the political upheaval of 2015 is to confront how tragically predictable it all was while the first memorandum was in the works.

While *Ruin's* most obvious contribution is to offer English-speaking readers clear, accurate, and penetrating insights into the current economic crisis and to subvert (through parallels drawn to Occupy Wall Street and other global movements) ahistorical, prejudiced assumptions about the Greek nature of European financial trouble, the book is equally notable for its accomplishment as a work of lasting literary art. Whether they are dramatizing Kalfopoulou's taxicab rides through an Athens on strike or her commutes on the New York subway or the movement of tourists in the Acropolis museum, past a "woman's ridged marble shift" (58) or the demands of Christine Lagarde and the IMF that she still heads, the essays are consistent in their ability to expand the horizon of every tradition that the collection claims. Those traditions are at least three: Greek-American literature, American literature, and nonfiction, as well.

Ruin might not be even feel very Greek-American to many readers, since unlike books that are set within the large diaspora communities of New York or Chicago, Kalfopoulou narrates from Greece—from an unidealized Athens in all its gritty glory—or she narrates from America, from Brooklyn. There is no pandering to what American readers will find familiar, namely, Greek festivals and their baklava, or icons at church. There is none of the tired boasting about the accomplishments of ancient forefathers but rather questions, crucial ones, about what we are to *do* about that legacy, especially now that their riches only foreground contemporary Greece's poverty. Kalfopoulou's is a refreshing divergence from what Yiorgos Anagnostou has insightfully called a "narrative about ethnic socioeconomic success [which] constructs Greek America as a homogeneous collectivity in accordance with the script of American liberal multiculturalism" (2003, 280).

Because Kalfopoulou is not anchored in a Greek-American community, but rather moves perpetually between Edinburgh, Athens, New York, and elsewhere, each essay begins with mention of where on the globe the author finds herself this time and why. The movement quickly becomes a motif, becomes thematic, while it also remains incidental to the action, a matter of course, a mere function of being Greek in the twenty-first century. The author's father, who cannot understand why his daughter wants to go back and live in Greece, serves as a figure for the twentieth-century diaspora Greek, whereas Kalfopoulou lives the consequences of that generation's dedication to ensuring their progeny knew the language and the landscape of the *patrida* (home country). And precisely because movement between countries—exile—is cast as an unavoidable

consequence of the Greek passion for leaving and return, the book manages to expertly subvert the typical trope of travel writing, where *travel* is needed to supplement the uneventful life of privilege experienced in the West. As such, the book marks for Greek-American letters a worldwide shift from a diasporic or immigrant subjectivity to that of the transmigrant. As noted by Nina Glick-Schiller and her collaborators (1995), new technologies of transportation and communication have fundamentally changed the experience of migration, in that it is now possible for migrants to keep strong ties to more than one nation at once. *Ruin* will be an important book for those interested in studying the experience of the global transmigrant, as well as for those interested in how the paradigm of transnationalism can be applied to contemporary Greek lives.

Another way the book challenges what we knew to be Greek-American literature's boundaries has to do with Kalfopoulou's range of references. A bibliographic treasure trove for those who love learning about one book from another, *Ruin* brings in a dazzling array of thinkers, from Slavoj Žižek and Federico Garcia Lorca to lesser-known theorists of finance and culture. The first epigraph is from Meena Alexander's *Poetics of Dislocation*, the second from Franz Kafka. The commonly cited George Seferis and C. P. Cavafy are by no means absent, but they are not more prevalent than Hannah Arendt, with whom the book is in sustained dialogue. Thus, she subverts the tendency of supposedly ethnic literatures to become somewhat insular and self-referential: Kalfopoulou dares to open out into the entire Western philosophical tradition and thus makes the book a bridge between American and European literature—and a warm invitation for further cross-culture reading and referencing. In several ways, *Ruin* accomplishes the sort of pan-Europeanism, free of national exceptionalisms, which the European Union aspired to but has so far struggled to achieve.

Ruin similarly nudges the boundaries of American literature to open a little wider. It is an American book and as such proves just how capacious that category can be—even as such a book, boldly asserting the Greek idiom and Greek words, has been lacking so far. She makes space for real Greek lives inside American literature by first exposing prevailing stereotypes for what they are (“Zorbas stereotypes or sea-blue posters of idyllic nature”; 71). Then, in the tradition of Sandra Cisneros and Junot Diaz, she studs the English text with Greek words—*chora* (country), *rousfeti* (bribe), *mnimonio* (bailout memorandum). These are obviously not there for the sake of a Greek flavor, in the way that so many books surrender to the temptation to give readers what they already know, what they are expecting—Homer, syrtaki, plate smashing, and ouzo. Rather, these words *challenge* readers to imagine a new Greece, a Greece that exists right now in the globalized world, but that cannot be perfectly translated, or ever entirely understood. Similarly, some turns of phrase will give American readers pause: when she writes “language and its landscapes are infected with yearning,” we may wonder how do the landscapes belong to the language? And why is this yearning an “infection” (1)? Readers who grapple with these questions will arrive at the closest understanding a non-bilingual can have of what it feels like to think in English and Greek at the same time. One could speak of the book's bilingual mission, practicing in English what is typical of Greek prose; as I will explain below when discussing the book's form, the structure makes it feel as if the book has been translated from Greek, since that language is more forgiving of abstraction and meditation. Greek prose readers are, I think, a little more accustomed to following writers out of the concrete world and out of narrative into meditation, and it is part of what I term *Ruin's* ambassador

role to stay true to its allegiance to thought over story and invite Anglophone readers to *think* hard along with the author.

Expanding the horizons of Greek-American literature, of course, means expanding the horizon of American letters, and the book's insistence on employing Greek words allows it to expand the limits of English. For example, on the first page, Kalfopoulou writes: "Greece, the country, or chora, I have been living in" (1)—there is no obvious need to tell readers what a country is, but over the course of the book, these seemingly gratuitous translations reveal to non-Greek speaking readers what Greek speakers know and will enjoy seeing represented: the common roots of Greek words generating connections between apparently unrelated words and opening up more complex possibilities of thought.

In the same way in which the book challenges the boundaries of ethnically delineated literary traditions, it also pushes the boundary of a tradition demarcated by genre. The book declares itself to be an essay collection, although it contains enough memories and biographical material to be called a memoir (or the vogue "memoir-in-essays"). However, when we attend to form, we see clearly that it is very much a collection of essays and a refreshingly *essayistic* one at that. What I mean is that many nonfiction writers pay lip service to Michel de Montaigne and bring up his very quotable assertions about the essay that "[i]t is the inattentive reader who loses my subject, not I" (1969, 373), yet in their practice at the writing or the editing table, they bend the arc of nonfiction toward narrative and urge the use of scene and the other tools of fiction. Kalfopoulou recognizes in magnificent fashion just how many *more* tools the essayist has at her disposal: meditation, exposition, rumination—the essayist's inheritance is the whole toolbox, not just of narrative but of *philosophy*. This is the essay of Montaigne, of Francis Bacon, of György Lukács, and of Theodor Adorno: the events are all related in service to idea. The essays question the distinction between scholarly and creative writing, too, reminding us that the need to choose between the two is a recent requirement, and one that we would do well to further interrogate. As mentioned above, this could also be seen as a result of the book's dual citizenship in the Greek and English literary tradition; whatever the reason, it is an example that I hope will be both studied and followed. After all, Kalfopoulou shows us just how compelling philosophy can be when it is grounded, as hers is, in powerful, concrete images: the *Meltemia* winds termed "a muscle in air" (63) and the "scavengers' metal lust" driving the men to pull shreds of metallic trash from their filthy heaps (125).

Kalfopoulou's willingness to inhabit the more philosophical end of the essay's spectrum of possibility leads to an almost incidental engagement with such theorists as Arendt. Clearly aware of the resistance that a dialogue with such a dense philosopher might face, she displays cunning and couches the Arendt parts of the book within discussions of her college daughter's day-to-day life. Juxtaposed with the college student (and her noodles and homework), the philosopher is rendered approachable, humble. This allows the book to offer readers the pleasure of accessing otherwise quite inaccessible thinkers. Even so, sustained references to these difficult philosophers do inhere a significant risk. It is uncustomary for a contemporary work of nonfiction to ask readers to remain engaged in meditations such as Kalfopoulou's, where the emphasis is on idea and the references are to philosophers and poets, and taking such a risk may end up limiting the book's appeal to an audience more comfortable with scholarship and theory. For example, in a short essay connecting Occupy Wall Street to the Greek

garbage collectors' strike in 2011, she takes us through Aristotle's and Arendt's thinking about the relationship between the public and private spheres in the polis. The book's genius is its fearlessness in the face of difficulty and its refusal to hold readers' hands or underestimate their ability to figure things out or look them up. Kalfopoulou rarely makes explicitly obvious the connections between a given anecdote and the central idea of an essay, thus making the book a more rewarding read for those eager to do that readerly work, but possibly alienating those who are not accustomed to such a demanding style. I hope, however, that most will embrace the challenge and reap this book's substantial rewards, recognizing also that what sometimes appear to be disjointed asides are actually openings out into further possibilities of thought, and invitations for the reader to ponder issues on her own, beyond the confines of the book and Kalfopoulou's story. The title essay "Ruin" is the most compact and displays the author's prose style at its best, linking all anecdotes and thought-adventures up together with the perfect balance of subtlety and clarity.

On the other hand, impatient readers might grow frustrated or judgmental of the author when they read Kalfopoulou's complaints about the way in which Greek strikes inconvenience *her*, when she is someone who actually *has* a job. She should, the impatient might think, just be grateful. This frustration, however, seems to be all a part of the plan—for such impatient readers will have to face their *own* privilege and their own dismissiveness. Attentive readers will see from the start that Kalfopoulou is up to something wise. Staying with her, they will find that she tackles head-on what might be the contemporary, well-meaning, but comfortable progressive's most intractable problem: privilege. Knowing that we are lucky to have jobs does not make those jobs easier to do and only heightens the stress and pressure. It is in the face of this great challenge that *Ruin* demonstrates its admirable willingness to handle the trickiest of thought-problems. "I am not starved, or being shot at, or physically threatened in any way. I am in New York and quite privileged to be here but I am coming apart," she writes (101). The absence of a comma in the second sentence, the choice to resist punctuation, is illustrative of Kalfopoulou's writing at its best, when she manages syntax with the subtlety of a poet's hand and allows the startling precision of her images to bring us intricate truths with the entire, unmitigated force of their complexity.

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