

## *Seaward: The Sound of Eros and an Athenian Avenue to the Aegean*

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### Abstract

The present paper deals with the imaginary relation of ancient and modern Athens with the sea. Using the material trace on the urban space, the road axis from the center towards the seafront, the paper focuses on the human body of the resident, and more specifically, its connection to the desire, to the pleasure and catharsis, which sea water symbolically entails. *Seawards* is no more than the construction of a brief, anthropological soundscape for this desire, using the sound of the music created to accompany the imaginary descent to the sea. As a method it ties together myths, poetry and popular music to create a polyphonic paradigm replete with emotions and atmospheres.

The paper is structured through different episodes related to the history of the city's connection to the sea. The ancient episodes include first the mythic battle of Athena and Poseidon and its traces on Athenian acropolis, the ancient ritual of the Eleusinean mysteries *ἄλαδεύονται* ("Seaward, initiates"), where crowds of people were descending from Athens to the sea in order to be washed and purified, and Plato's preamble to the *Symposion*. The modern episodes take the way of Syngrou Avenue, the wide and straight

thoroughfare connecting Athens with Phaleron, completed in the 1930's. Heeding the call to write on erotic desire as following an Avenue towards the sea, George Seferis has left three poems related to Syngrou: *Syngrou Avenue* (1930), *Syngrou Avenue II* (1935), and *A Word about Summer* (1936). The poetic discourse of Seferis about the Syngrou Avenue overshadows the contemporary discourse of the margin, the songs by *rembetes*, which relish the sea physically without any ethical dilemma.

A kind of controversy is valid for all the episodes: a strong longing desire and a mourning are detected. The sea functions as a collective unconscious that encompasses the desire for the impossible.

## Preamble

First step: geography.

Starting the account of his travel through Greece, Pausanias enters Attica:

“From the mainland of Greece extending in the direction of the Cycladic islands and the Aegean Sea, Attica’s cape Sounion.”

Pausanias approaches Athens by sea. The cape of Sounion protruding into the Aegean Sea is the first sign of the mainland. As he continues his approach, Pausanias tells us that the initial seaport of Athens was Phaleron, the point of Theseus’ departure for Crete, since the sea there is right next to the city.

Second step: the imaginary relation of ancient Athens with the sea, which is symbolized in the duel of the two gods, Athena and Poseidon. During the duel, Poseidon embeds the phallic trident into the body of the earth of Athens, and water springs up.

On the hill of the Acropolis, the markings (“testimonials”) of this bid by the eventually defeated Poseidon are described by Pausanias as imprinted inside the temple of the Erechtheion<sup>1</sup>:

Inside it there are altars, one of them Poseidon’s... As the building has a dual aspect, there is in it also a well with seawater... It is noteworthy that from inside the well, the sound of waves can be heard when there is a south wind blowing. There is, too, the mark of a trident on the rock.

Pausanias XXVI.5

On the summit of the Acropolis, the sea again appears: not merely as it can be viewed in the skyline of Athens, but also as its very heart, since at the top of the well there rises upwards from the depths, i.e. towards the visitor, the sound of sea waves when there’s a southern wind, i.e., a wind from the direction of Phaleron.

Nevertheless, the Poseidonian markings are the memory of a defeat, the defeat of the sea (Poseidon) in favor of the land (olive tree, Athena). Despite that, the mythical contestation remains palpable even to the present time, since the sea is always there. The dilemma of that inaugural duel will haunt forevermore the relation of the city of Athens to the sea.

The connection of Athens with the sea in antiquity has been materialized by the creation of the port of Piraeus, which symbolizes the military, political and economical relation of ancient Athens to the sea element. Nevertheless, in the present context, I am primarily interested in the counterpoint of this sovereignty: instead of the material trace on the urban space, let's focus on the human body of the resident, and more specifically, its connection to the desire. I hasten to specify that I mean the desire to open up to the pleasure and catharsis which sea water symbolically entails.

In antiquity, this opening up was expressed in the ritual of the Eleusinean mysteries *ἀλαδεύονται* ("Seaward, initiates"), the call for the initiates to advance in a procession to offer sacrifice and ritually bathe in seawater.

This ritual preceded the basic part of the Eleusinean Mysteries, and it was also the name of the special day upon which it was held, i.e., the second day of the Eleusinian mysteries, in the 16<sup>th</sup> Boedromion month, which last we can roughly interpret as September. The name of the day was already a command, as if there were already a strong urge inside the bodies of the Athenians to visit the seashore of Athens, even if they were residing in the interior of the Attica basin. Crowds of people were then descending from Athens to the sea in order to be washed and purified by seawater. People were carried by wagons, and there were caretakers (*epimelitai*) set by the city of Athens in order to supervise and put in order the chaotic descent of crowds to the sea. According to Mylonas we can imagine the procession as having had a cheerful and noisy atmosphere. The name of the procession appears in the inscriptions as "*ALADE ἑλαῖσις*": *ἑλαῖσις*, a word meaning, according Liddell-Scott Dictionary, "driving away", or "march, expedition", which is derived from the verb *ἐλαύνω*, meaning "drive, set in motion, of driving flocks" a verb stemming from the Indo-European root *\*el-*, "to move, to go", common with *ἔλευσις*, *εὠς*, *ἡ*, "coming, arrival", that is related to Eleusis. The movement is towards the sea, "seawards", *ἀλαῖδε*, "to or into the sea", and we can note here that from the same verb we have derivatives such as "elastikos", "elastic, resilient".

The archaeologists suggest that the initiates went swimming in the sea holding piglets, (animals used in several rituals of the goddess Demeter), which were carried with them back to Athens in order to be sacrificed and to purify the initiates with their blood. If we believe Plutarch, the sea bath of the mysteries took place in the present port of Piraeus, at the port of Kantharos, and that is why the procession passed between the Long Walls. Plutarch also informs us about the following incident and gives its explanation:

Moreover, as a mystic initiate was washing a pig in the harbour of Cantharus, a great fish seized the man and devoured the lower parts of his body (*τὰ κάτω μέρη τοῦ σώματος ἄχρι τῆς κοιλίας κατέπιε*) as far as the belly,

by which Heaven clearly indicated to them in advance that they would be deprived of the lower parts of the city which adjoined the sea, but would retain the upper city. ὅτι τῶν κάτω καὶ πρὸς θαλάσση στερηθέντες τὴν ἄνω πόλιν διαφυλάξουσιν.

Plut. Phoc. 28.3, translated by Bernadotte Perrin

The incident, an attack of a great fish on a human body, was seen as an omen, with the city of Athens along with Piraeus being understood as a body with an upper and a lower part. The lower part is lower because of its altitude, i.e., on the sea, but also lower because of having been considered inferior in terms of hierarchy, and thus was to be sacrificed for the benefit of the upper part.

If we accept Travlos' assumptions as valid, the descent of the initiates would be carried out on a stretch between Athens and the coast, between the Long Walls of Athens or even between the Long Walls and the Phalericon Wall, perhaps along a road parallel to Syngrou Avenue, to which we will return in a while. Furthermore, the bath of the Mysteries should have taken place at the beach between Paleo and Neo Phaleron, a beach that does not exist today, having disappeared under the embankment works of the coast during the 1970s in the Greek Junta times.

I'd like us to allow this desire for the sea to hover as a question to be answered: SEAWARD. THE SOUND of the waves from the hill clearly resonates in the Mind of the residents even when it has been completely erased as an actual sound in their environment. This paper is no more than the construction of a brief anthropological soundscape for this desire, using the sound of the music that accompanies the imaginary descent to the sea.

Continuing on the track with Pausanias from the seashore toward the Acropolis, we will now borrow Plato's words from the beginning of the *Symposium*:

It so happened the other day that I was coming up to the city from my home in Phaleron (εἰς ἅστυ οἴκοθεν ἀνιῶν Φαληρόθεν). An acquaintance coming up from behind me, saw me from a distance and called out to me, even making a joke in the way he addressed me: "Hey, denizen of Phaleron – he called out – hey, Apollodorus, won't you wait up?" So I did stop and waited for him. And he, as soon as he reached me: "Actually, Apollodorus, I was looking for you – said he – because I meant to ask you about the conversation of Agathon and Socrates and Alcibiades and all the others present at that symposium about erotic speeches; I wonder, you see, what kind of speeches these might have been... What are you standing there for, why haven't you started on the telling already? It is a far way to the city, and as we go, you can do the talking and I'll do the listening" (τί οὖν, ἔφη, 'οὐ διηγῆσω μοι; πάντως δὲ ἡ ὁδὸς ἢ εἰς ἅστυ ἐπιτηδεῖα πορευομένοις καὶ λέγειν καὶ ἀκούειν). So, then, we spoke of those things as we walked and so it was, as I've said at the beginning, that I have repeated them and learned them by heart (οὐκ ἀμελετήτως ἔχω - ἀφ' οὗ δ' ἐγὼ Σωκράτει συνδιατρίβω καὶ ἐπιμελὲς πεποιήμεαι ἐκάστης ἡμέρας εἰδέναι ὅτι ἂν λέγῃ ἢ πράττῃ).

This excerpt is the preamble to the *Symposium*. The way taken by Apollodorus, is one of the two roads either externally or on the inside of the Phaleron fortification wall. The road unfolds, according to Kaupert, following the morphology of the landscape of Attica, and it enters the city through the Itonian gates, also known as *Ἀλαδὲ* (Seaward) gates.

Let me point out that what concerns us here is a preamble, an introduction. The word is explained by Plato in the *Laws*, as follows:

All speeches ... and everything that reserves a role for the voice, contain preambles, which I would say are preliminary passages that amount to a melodic warming up for the exposition that is to follow

Plato, *Laws*, 722d

This introduction is the passage that OPENS OUT the road we wish to walk upon; in a musical score it would be a first part, while in narration it is a first speech. What is interesting here is that the present preamble places us on a road, both literally and figuratively, literally because the two interlocutors are following the route from Phaleron to the city, a “fitting” route (*ἐπιτηδεΐα*, “appropriate or adopted to a purpose”) for the reproduction of erotic speeches (*πορευομένοις καὶ λέγειν καὶ ἀκούειν*), and, therefore, well suited to the duration and content of the Erotic Speeches of the *Symposium*. Also, the preamble ushers us on the metaphoric path of Apollodorus’ narrative which last is about erotic speeches - “erotic”, i.e., on the subject of eros, but also of an erotic nature.

It is certainly no accident (and here we may refer to Derrida’s essay *What is Poetry*) that Apollodorus states that he does not “lack training” in those erotic speeches; that’s to say, he has trained by repeating them over and over, and having memorized them, he knows them “by heart”.

Preamble toward the city with the repetition of the speeches about Eros starting from the sea by heart: I consider this image equivalent to that of the well on the Acropolis, with the sound of the sea inside it. And that one in turn, I consider equivalent to Papaioannou’s introductory improvisation (*taximi*) in his instrumental piece *Dusk at Tzitzifies*.<sup>2</sup>

Papaioannou, a refugee from Asia Minor at 1922, after the Asia Minor Destruction, as it is called in modern Greece, grew up in a suburb of Peireus, Tzitzifies. This is a suburb adjacent to Phaleron, and together they at that point form the geographical boundary of Athens to the seafront. Papaioannou mentions in an interview that there may have been better musicians than himself, but that he was unsurpassable in soccer and fishing, in which he had been tutored by the famous Zepos.

Let us consider now that we have “come up”, as the ancient text says, that is, that we’ve made our way inland; after we arrive, we will then, skipping a few centuries, take the road down to the sea, this time following the layout of the modern city of Athens.

## OIME – Road – Syngrou Avenue – Modernité

Syngrou Avenue, the wide and straight thoroughfare connecting Athens with Phaleron, though begun in 1898, was not completed until Eleftherios Venizelos was prime minister (1928-1932). The Avenue passed by several refugee settlements of 1922, ones that became big neighborhoods of Athens, such as Neos Kosmos (Dourgouti), Agios Sostis, Nea Smyrne, and Tzitzifies. The road construction proceeded in parallel with the earthworks necessary for connecting the sea suburbs with electricity and water, resulting in an upgrading of the residents' standard of living.

### a. Seferis (established poetry) and the Sea

In 1929, George (Giorgos ) Theotokas wrote about the recently completed Syngrou Avenue:

Immediately after the Destruction, cars started multiplying at an extraordinary rate... The capital, whose population had virtually doubled, was changing day by day... Speed and the postwar noises were taking over, destroying the idyllic *naiveté* and humble poetry of Old Athens. Only the Parthenon remained unchanged on its pedestal, except nobody gave it a second look amidst this overall readjustment of the rhythm of living... <sup>3</sup>

All of it made an impression on our voracious youth: the straight line of asphalt, the sensation of speed, of flight, the unbounded sea a few minutes away. It was all brand new, a new style of living, a new era.

Day and night, Syngrou Avenue conveys towards the shore of Phaleron, the newly born and as yet unexpressed rhythms of a potent lyricism that is seeking potent poets. An aesthetics is being spontaneously formed in the very air that we breathe.<sup>4</sup>

Heeding his call, George Seferis leaves us three additional poems that relate to the Avenue<sup>5</sup>: *Syngrou Avenue* (1930), dedicated to Giorgos Theotokas “who discovered it”, *Syngrou Avenue II* (1935), and *A Word about Summer* (1936).

In the first, the erotic desire is clearly stated and instigates *The Movement Toward the Sea* as an inner imperative “when you let your thought and your heart become one”.

Seferis writes:

Around 1930, however, things change. What defines the quest of the young is a kind of island mentality. The horizon broadens. The dusty side streets and rooms are left behind. The Aegean with its islands, the mythology of the sea, travelling in no matter which direction, are what moves [them] and what they are endeavoring to express.<sup>6</sup>

In Tziovas, who, in his book on the generation of the 30's, analyzes the Aegean as a "nation-scape", we read:

Representing a synthesis of a topography and an aesthetics, the mythology of the Aegean is a metaphor for what was at stake for the generation of the '30s, its aspiration to be Greek and to be modern... Correlatively, the Aegean is not merely represented as a landscape but is also invented as a place.<sup>7</sup>

*The Movement Toward the Sea* is the first poem written by Seferis in free verse – as if the liberating power of the route, the desire for the sea, had freed writing from the regularity of rhyme, establishing in its place the flow of inner rhythm, the personal "idiorhythm" which Seferis' poetry has borne ever since.

*Syngrou Avenue, 1930*

*When the smile  
breathing beside you conquers you, tries to submit and  
doesn't consent*

*when the dizziness that remains from your wandering  
among books moves from your mind to the pepper  
trees on either side*

*when you leave the petrified ship traveling with broke  
rigging towards the depths  
the arch with gold decoration  
the columns whose burden makes them more narrow*

*when you leave behind you the bodies deliberately carved  
for counting and for hoarding riches  
the soul that, whatever you do, doesn't match your own soul  
the toll you pay  
that small feminine face in the cradle shining in the sun*

*when you let your heart and your thought become one  
with the blackish river that stretches, stiffens and goes away:*

*Break Ariadne's thread and look!  
The blue body of the mermaid.*

*(translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard)*

The avenue: the pepper trees to the left and right, the sea at the end of the road, the blue body of the mermaid. Syngrou Avenue as a forward thrust, a thrust that leaves behind the Daze of the internal world of Books, the past (pillars, fossilized boat) the world chasing after profits. An erotic thrust by the body “a smile” breathing nearby, a thrust towards freedom.

At the poem’s conclusion, this union of heart and thought with the “blackish river that stretches, stiffens and goes away,” is their union with the straight road, the asphalt of Syngrou stretching forward, which latter leads the body and propels it onward. The thread of Ariadne snaps — the journey in the Labyrinth, life metaphorically as the cumbersome and slow finding of the way, is overcome by the perfectly straight line of the connection to the sea, a physical desire as sturdy as a taut rope.

In the first part of Seferis’ second poem (*Syngrou Avenue II*, 1935) the Avenue and everything it entails symbolically and as a physical aesthetics, instead of being an imperative, is now in the past tense. In the second part, there follows the satirical description of a political dream, which description is bitterly ironic about royalty. The poem was written only days after the fabricated referendum of Georgios Kondylis’ dictatorial regime which reinstated the king as head of state of the Greek democracy. Thus, the idea of freedom and forward movement evoked by Syngrou Avenue, is here canceled out by the political reality of the times.

The poem starts with the road as a bridge with two coves and two summits; the first verse renders visual the connections, the road’s two endpoints, the first of these being the place of departure, the city center of Athens including the summit of the Acropolis, and the second being the point of arrival, the sea bay, and those two are mysteriously redoubled as if the summit were also to be found at the end, and the sea bay at the beginning. Here, stated in as many words, Syngrou Avenue clearly resolves into the anticipation of the view of the sea and the beckoning of the unknown which the sea entails. The sea awaits “adorned with boats and ships” and, in it, “the body of the mermaid naked”, which I read as a feminine incarnation of the sea or as an erotic embodiment of the desire for the sea on the horizon of the gaze:

### Syngrou Avenue II

The avenue of Syngrou, the bridge with two coves and two summits,  
which tested us and we tested it, abandoning the prudent texts,  
till we found the sea, full of sorrow and tenderness, peaceful, pale blue,  
written in islands, adorned with boats and ships;  
the avenue of Syngrou wide and secret, hiding and delaying then suddenly revealing  
the body of the mermaid naked, with hair unbraided to the skyline  
with rosy skin, immersed slightly in the wine colored water, her chest  
upturned and reddish at the tips as the sun was starting to set;  
the road with the tame pepper trees, yet the road who provided us training



for leaving at some point friends, lovers and music  
to set out without knowing where the road may take you

25-11-1935

(translated by Konstantinos Matsoukas)

The third poem is written in the fall of 1936. Here, autumn seems to stand for the Metaxas dictatorship which had just come into power. Syngrou Avenue continues to be the desire for the sea and for a freedom cancelled out.

#### A word for summer

We've returned to autumn again; summer,  
like an exercise book we're tired of writing in, remains  
full of deletions, abstract designs,  
question marks in the margin; we've returned  
to the season of eyes gazing  
into the mirror under the electric light  
closed lips and people strangers  
in rooms in streets under the pepper-trees  
while the headlights of cars massacre  
thousands of pale masks.  
We've returned; we always set out to return  
to solitude, a fistful of earth, to the empty hands.  
And yet I used to love Syngrou Avenue  
the double rise and fall of the great road  
bringing us out miraculously to the sea  
the eternal sea, to cleanse us of our sins;

....

Autumn, 1936

(translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard.)

On the one hand, the present – autumn – estranges people who turn away to their reflections in the mirror, or who even look at each other through mirrors, in rooms or in the streets under the pepper trees. And on the other, Syngrou Avenue and the “miraculous” joy of the movement toward the sea, “the road’s twofold cradling”, are symbolized in a summertime which has been and is now gone (“I once loved”).

## b. Rembetika songs (underground poetry) and the Sea

The poetic discourse of the intelligentsia (which we have just read) about Syngrou Avenue overshadows the contemporary discourse of the margin, which relishes the sea physically without any of the spirit's dilemmas. Adjoining Syngrou Avenue, the initial bare space is gradually crowded by refugee settlements from Asia Minor such as Tzitzifies and Nea Smyrni.

As we have already read, the twofold cradling of the large road leading to the sea “miraculously” absolves the bourgeois poet and intellectual “from sin” – here the presence of guilt is acknowledged, in that the sea is for washing away the evil which one bears within.

By contrast, the object of Markos Vamvakaris' desire is right in the water, wearing a bathing suit and rising up like a dove. We again come across the implication of summer which, in Seferis, encompasses the miraculous. Here, though, the miracle takes place in the summertime body of the beloved: wily Mario, little dove, you justly supplant the heavy blue mermaid of the finicky bourgeois poet of Asia Minor stock.

*In Phaleron where you bathe*<sup>8</sup>, 1937

(Verse – Music – Performed by: Markos Vamvakaris)

In Phaleron where you bathe  
you turn and you dovetail  
Soon as I saw you in your bathing suit  
wily Mario, I was en route

In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the fate of that road that conveys everyone, whether rich or poor, to the sea, continues to be that of transporting crowds on a sensual outing, going for a swim in summer, feasting on *kalamari*, whitebait, and seafood, and listening to music by the sea. An inexpensive hedonism for everyman is on offer by the combination of the weather, the season, the sea and its beaches.

Postwar, in the seaside settlement of Tzitzifies, one after the other entertainment venues appear of various descriptions – some are open-air, or in enclosed courtyards like the “Phalirikon”, and some are sheltered, like the “Kalamatianos”. There, for a minority clientele originally consisting of marginals and for well-to-do Athenian society later on, the rembetika forms of music are performed by important musicians and, in the course of time, by popular singers.

*Kolonaki, Tzitzifies<sup>9</sup>, 1948*

(Verse – Music – Performed by: Markos Vamvakaris)

Starting out from Kolonaki  
coming down to Tzitzifies  
where the chords of bouzoukaki  
while the time away in sweetness

Here come luxury cars  
ladies famous and aristocratic  
dandies, businessmen and stars  
beauties fine and charismatic

All who pine for the sea  
come our music to imbibe  
our bohemian tunes and voices  
spreading beauty far and wide

With the arrival to Tzitzifies of Kolonaki, a rich and aristocratic neighborhood in the center of Athens, starting in the '50s, the profile of Syngrou Avenue changes, with the enclosed entertainment venues gradually outnumbering the open-air ones.<sup>10</sup>

*Trambarifas<sup>11</sup>, 1951*

(Verse: Alecos Sakellarios and Christos Yannakopoulos, Music by Michalis Soyoul)

Hey, Manolis Tramparifa  
Put the double tariff,  
padding pull straight  
on the Syngrou Avenue.  
Tonight the girl wants to go to the sea  
and I never spoiled her a favor

All day work  
fatigue and standing  
and the heat, what a damage,  
it makes you fainting.  
Tonight that I have exploded from heat  
I like cool night and vagrancy.

Seafood bars  
 beers and calamari,  
 guitars, tambourines and violins  
 and lying on the beach.  
 Tonight that there is full money in pocket  
 Dudes will plow the Phaleron

The song *Trambarifas* (1951) by Sakellarios-Yannakopoulos was composed at a time when the “high-class rebetiko” (“*archontorempetiko*”) was flourishing, at the beginning of the ’50s, and it refers to a taxi driver who would drive down Syngrou Avenue to the Phaliron districts near the sea in order to have plenty of fun and joy via food, music, drinks, and lying on the beach. This image was also well established by the Greek film making industry of the ’50s and ’60s.

During the remainder of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the enclosed venues grew in size and numbers along with others which were sex-focused, like the strip clubs that are still in evidence today. After the ’70s, the transsexual sex trade inaugurated a new period of marginal street entertainment which continues to the present, though it now targets a wealthy audience. The history of public entertainment in Greece, and its topography in the Greek urban center, and more particularly in the streets of Athens, has yet to be written. Incidentally, the mythology of the sea and of summertime hedonism for all is by now well established in Greek film making.

## Epilogue -Finish/Noose

Making one more leap, we’ll continue the seaward descent all the way to the finishing line. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in lieu of the thrust toward openness, enclosed “culture centers” are springing up like the new pepper trees by the roadside. (Witness the “*Stegi Grammaton kai Technon*” – the Onassis Cultural Centre – and the new multiplex cinemas along Syngrou Avenue)<sup>12</sup>.

At the end of the thoroughfare, the embankment filling of Phaleron Bay (1970’s) and the Olympic constructions (2000’s) have eradicated some of the sea. Nonetheless, as one rides straight down Syngrou, the sea is always there, glimmering ahead and inviting. Even so, the end of the road is capped by a recent fill creating a large expanse of land, and Tzitzifies is now at quite some distance from the water.

The Taekwondo stadium, shopping malls and multiplex cinemas now occupy what used to be the seafront of Tzitzifies. In the last two years the National Library as well as the National Lyric Stage have been situated on this plot of land. They were founded by the private foundation of Stavros Niarchos.

A great arterial noose is tied up around the end of the road.

The sea as a view or as desire is set apart from the sea as a physical experience of catharsis and pleasure.

Noose and Land, in place of the open Sea. Is it a metropolitan management in the 21<sup>st</sup> century towards privatization, or the psychoanalytic disavowal of the body and of desire? The latter is a symbolic answer to be found at the beginning. As we have seen in Plutarch's story about the Mysteries and the Descent towards the sea, the cities of Athens and Pireus together are seen as a body with an upper and a lower part. The lower part, the part which hosts the bodily needs and their metabolistic functions, together with sexuality and desire, had to be sacrificed for the sake of the upper part, the Athenian centre.

Let's read Pausanias on Acropolis again, and we will find another version of this sacrifice:

To the right of the monumental gateway (*Propylea*) there is the temple of *Apteros Niki* (Wingless Victory). From this location one has an unobstructed view of the sea, and it is said that this is where Aigeus leapt from and killed himself... Seeing the boat return bearing black sails, Aigeus, thinking his son dead, threw himself off to his death.

Pausanias I, XXII,4

Ever since the mythical beginning of the founding of Athens, the Aegean, which the generation of the '30s reinvented as a kind of "nationscape", encompasses erotic desire alongside death and mourning, a mourning at the outset of Theseus' journey (to Crete) and mourning at the end with the inadvertent death of Aegeus, whose fall christens the sea with his name. Every Greek sea has a dead personality in it who falls from on high, whether it be an Icarus or Elli or Aegeus. Mythically, the fate of the desire for heights is sealed with death in the sea. Besides exerting the attraction of the physical joy of summer, the sea is also dark, impermeable, dangerous. The sea encompasses the desire for the impossible.

As early as 1935, Seferis refers to Syngrou Avenue and its summer in the past tense – as a paradise deprived of physical joy and political freedom. Such is the rhetorical practice of the grouchy poet who continually sinks heavily into his past. Seferis seems to have lost the sea and the road to it, even while they were in front of him.

Conversely, even the buried beach today can merely be a call to its rediscovery even further away. The Athenian's involvement in sea-related leisure is beginning to be serviced by the new Attica highway which now leads to the side of Cape Sounion, the point of Pausanias' arrival, the sentinel of Athens at the sea, or more far away to the islands from the port of Lavrion. The sea front recedes in terms of kilometers, but it is out there if one can drive to it, being particularly close for any resident of the northern suburbs.

As for the poor and the migrants, they will continue to find the seaside to be a place for free recreation and sea-bathing by riding down Syngrou Avenue in the crowded buses. They only need to take a turn and continue eastward in order to get to the beaches of Palaion Phaleron, as used to be the practice back in 1931:

In *Leisure Hours* (*Ωρες Αργίας*) Theotokas, exhausted after a day's work, passes by Sina Street and writes:

Phaleron and off we go! The young ticket collectors called out at the top of Sina Street.

And further down:

Phaleron and off we go! What joy! Everything is possible! Everything is possible! An irrepressible sense of well-being flooded through me all at once, pulling me forcefully towards the realization of my most ambitious schemes. I felt I had alighted on the wings of I know not what magical bird, redeemed from the weight, the paltriness, the pettiness of daily life, setting out on a journey through the land of my dreams. I longed for everything suddenly and felt that I was able to have it. It seemed as if the universe was my property through and through, the visible and the invisible, since I was capable of everything. All I needed to do was reach out and I could enjoy anything whatsoever that crossed my mind. There was no boundary any more between the world of hopes and dreams and actual life. There was nothing beyond my reach... Everything was plausible, the most irrational, the most incomprehensible, the most impossible things. Everything, even happiness.<sup>13</sup>

## Images



Figure 1. Aerial image of Attica, Greece. (Courtesy of Google Earth)

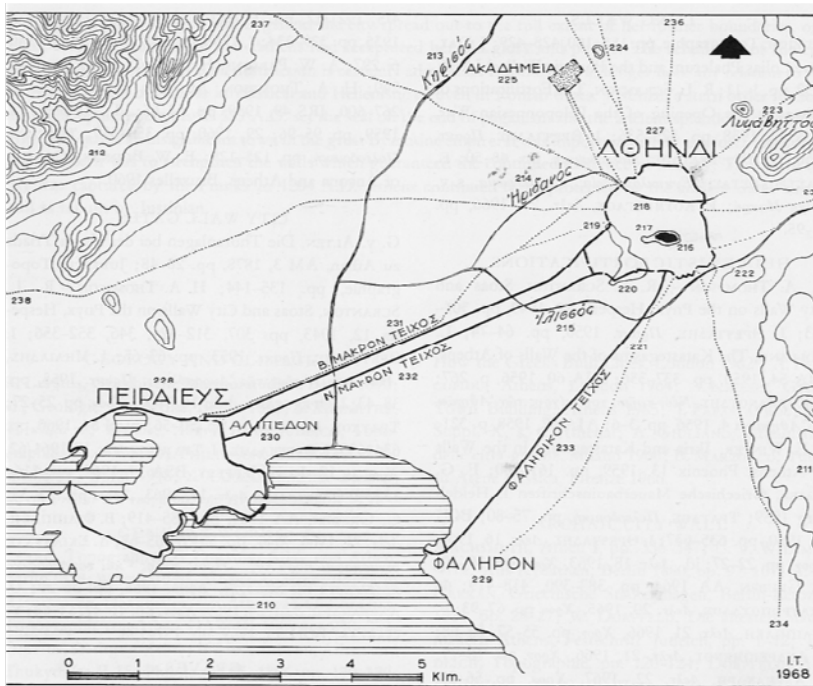


Figure 2. The Long Walls of Athens. [image 17 from John Travlos, *Η Πολεοδομική Εξέλιξις των Αθηνών*, Athens, Kapon Editions, 1993 (1960)]



Figure 3. The ancient Itonian gates of Athens. (Ernst Curtius and Johann August Kaupert, *Karten von Attika: Karten*, Berlin, 1895-1903)



Figure 4. Giannis Papaioannou (1913-72) playing bouzouki. (<http://www.iconsday.com> )



Figure 5. View of Syngrou Avenue from the 1950's. (Courtesy of [briefingnews.gr](https://www.briefingnews.gr), <https://www.briefingnews.gr/ellada/poia-einai-i-adeia-leoforos-tis-athinas#sthash.3KeAvneY.dpbs>).





Figure 6. The Kalamatianos' group, 1948. (Courtesy of Matt Barrett's Greece Travel Guide, <http://www.greecetravel.com/music/rembetika/lyrics/index.htm>)



Figure 7. Aerial view of the seafront of Tzitzifies. (Courtesy of Google Earth)

## Notes

- 1 The same battle between the two gods for the city of Athena are also depicted on the Parthenon itself. Erechtheion Temple is the built narration of the myth.
- 2 *Dusk at Tzitzifies*, Youtube Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-rpCikqbqk> .
- 3 Theotokas Giorgos, *Argo*, 1930.
- 4 Fotini Margariti reads the above as follows: “*By means of the trick of Syngrou Avenue, the ‘30s generation is attempting to introduce modernism into the greek world of ideas.*” On the basis of the third poem in Seferis’ Autumn 1936, *A word about Summer*, which refers to the Avenue, Margariti speaks about the impasse of modernism and the victory of the ancient greek past: “*These verses by Seferis affirm, among other things, the entrapment of that generation in the ideology of ancient ruins. The flight forward, as it is symbolized by the robust Syngrou Avenue of G. Theotokas in 1929, remains, finally, unrealized.*”
- 5 “*...It must have been, if my memory serves me, a spring afternoon in the ‘40s. We were conversing at the house of a foreigner who wished to know, fairly wryly, what new thing our generation contributed to the world of letters (...) Syngrou Avenue, I replied.*”, G. Seferis, *Epoches* magazine 1967.
- 6 Seferis Giorgos, *Dokimes*, vol. A, “Notes for a talk to the children”, 167-168, Athens: Ikaros, 1974, as quoted by Tziouvas D.
- 7 Tziouvas Dimitris, *The Myth of the Generation of the Thirties: Modernity, Greekness and Cultural Ideology*, 364, Athens: Polis, 2011.
- 8 *In Phaleron where you bathe*, Youtube Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HicYfxfgP-c> .
- 9 *Kolonaki, Tzitzifies*, Youtube Link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LFNoylBk\\_Gw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LFNoylBk_Gw) .
- 10 Starting with Triana, by Vassilis Cheilas, which featured Papaioannou and Chiotis.
- 11 *Trambarifas*, Youtube Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cYKE7N-xY-8> .
- 12 Tina Mandilara, “From tramp, to lady. The new face of Syngrou Avenue”, last modified 12/11/2010 <http://www.protothema.gr/bigfish/article/?aid=90363> .
- 13 Theotokas Giorgos, *Ωρες Αργίας, (Hours of Leisure)*, p.16 and p.32-33, Athens: Estia Editions, 1931. Mourning and Melancholy have recently been taken into account as the features of Modern Greece. See: Tzirtzilakis Giorgos, *Υπο-νεωτερικότητα και εργασία του πένθους*, Athens: Kastaniotis Editions, 2014. Vassilis Lambropoulos, “*Left Melancholy in the Greek Poetry Generation of the 2000s after the Crisis of Revolution and Representation*”, In the *JMGS, The Journal of Modern Greek Studies, Occasional Papers*, Edited by Neni Panourgia, 2016.

## About the Author

Phoebe Giannisi (phoebeGiannisi.net), born in Athens, is an architect and a poet. Her work investigates the connections of poetics with body and place. She is the author of six books of poetry, including *Homerica* (*Ομηρικά*, Athens : 2009, forthcoming in English, translated by Brian Sneed, World Poetry Books, 2017). She holds a PhD in Classics from Lyon II-Lumière, published as *Récits des Voies. Chant et cheminement en Grèce archaïque* (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 2006.) She is also the co-author of *Classical Greek Architecture: The Construction of the Modern*, (Paris: Flammarion, 2004). In 2010 she was co-curator for the Greek Pavilion of the 12th International Architecture Exhibition of Venice. In October 2016, she presented her performance *Nomos-The Land Song* in New York. A 2015–2016 Humanities Fellow of Columbia University, Giannisi is an Associate Professor at the University of Thessaly.