

Writing Greek Exile in Australia: A Poem by Adrian Kazas

Vassilios Adrahtas¹

A Brief Introduction

This article aspires to bring together three subjects that seem rather unrelated to one another: exile, Australia and literature. Australia of course does have its own colonial history as a place of exile², while much literature has been inspired by the devastating experience of exile. However, I am not interested in colonial but post-colonial Australia, and I focus more on the literary portrayal of migration³ than that of exile. Furthermore, my frame of reference, so to speak, is Greek migration to Australia, and more specifically the literary self-reflection of this category of migration. While Greek migrants to Australia tend more to be expatriated than

exiled, and their literary production has long ago transcended the preoccupation with issues pertaining to the nostalgia of one's homeland⁴, there is a sort of ethno-cultural residue therein that continues to inform Greek-Australians' reception of multicultural Australia as a substantially different life-world (Lebens-Welt). The methodology I have employed to uncover the resilience of exile as an experience in Greek Australian literature is basically a hermeneutical one, which draws heavily on phenomenological insights and a history of religions (Religion-swissenschaftliche) perspective. Finally, the thesis I am attempting to substantiate is that the experience of exile—even when it is vague, subtle, or missing—hovers over Greek Australian literary texts as some kind of *sine qua non* in both their performance and appreciation⁵.

Undoubtedly, exile can be conceptualised as a geographical distancing, although distance should not be regarded as a necessary condition for experiencing exile. Exile can also be seen as a kind of cultural alienation, although culture tends to be part and parcel of one's self even when life's circumstances are most discouraging. More aptly perhaps exile could be associated with the

1 Vassilios Adrahtas has recently relocated his family to Sydney after a childhood in Bankstown and his adult years in Greece. He has a doctorate in Patristics from the National University of Athens and a further doctorate in Aboriginal Spirituality from the University of Sydney. He has lectured at the National University of Athens and the Hellenic Open University (Patras). He is editor of *Threskeiologia*, the Greek journal of religious studies.

2 It is perhaps worth mentioning that the first seven Greeks in Australia were sentenced to death for piracy, but eventually exiled to Australia in 1829. See George Kanarakis, *Greek Voices in Australia: A Tradition of Prose, Poetry and Drama* (Sydney: Australian National University Press, 1987), p. 11.

3 Throughout this article I have employed the term 'migration' rather than 'immigration', since the former includes the latter and points to a greater range of socio-historical processes. With regards to various aspects of Greek migration during the last 300 years, see Dimitris Tziouvas (ed.), *Greek Diaspora and Migration since 1700: Society, Politics and Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

4 For this thematic expansion of Greek Australian literature during the last few decades, see for instance Kostas Valetas, 'Greek Australian Literature', in *Aiolika Chronika*, 176, pp 67–76 (1999) [in Greek].

5 For a straightforward approach to Greek Australian literature in terms of exile consciousness, see Marie Caulis, *Une Littérature de l'Exil: Vasso Kalamara et Antigone Kefala, Deux Écrivains Grecs d'Australie* (Genève: Slatkine, 2001).

formation, perpetuation, and transformation of individual and collective identity, since both identity and exile raise the question of limits; of being within, beyond and without limits. While the latter option sounds unfeasible, and the former unbearable, the remaining one comes forth as most intriguing and challenging. But why should one find himself/herself beyond limits or, to put it more acutely, strive to be beyond limits? The cause might be external or internal, that is, being-beyond-limits might be enforced or optional—although the distinction between the two can be rather unclear at times—but in either case what is experienced is a fundamental loss. When being-beyond-limits is enforced the loss is traumatic, whereas when being-beyond-limits is optional loss becomes a repression that haunts any conscious achievement, which is simply acknowledged thanks to changes effected upon one's location, cultural integrity or identity performance. If migration is of particular significance to this loss,⁶ this is because migrants are bound to face the contradictions of life in so direct and intense a manner that their case becomes an exemplary witness to exile as a common human predicament⁷.

I have chosen to discuss the literary self-reflection of the experience of exile among Greek migrants to Australia by analysing a very specific piece of literature as a case study. In particular, I have chosen a poem, titled 'The Migrant's Saddlebag', by Adrian Kazas (born 1935).⁸ I decided to focus on a piece of poetry, since poetry has been by far the most representative means of literary expression amongst Greek

authors.⁹ As for Adrian Kazas, I thought it would be better to look into a poet who, although quite well-known in Greek Australian literary circles, is not one of the big names, so to speak. By choosing such a poet, my thesis would be all the more pertinent to the whole of Greek Australian literature; especially, when the poem itself does not address the issue of exile per se, but leads the reader unexpectedly to consider the idea of exile. Adrian Kazas came to Australia in 1959, having gone through the traumatic experience of the German Occupation of Greece (1941–1944) and the subsequent Civil War (1945–1949). He came to this land in search of a better life, disillusioned as he was with the socio-political developments in Greece during the 1950s. Socially sensitive and politically progressive, his poetry bears witness to a person who is both realistic and optimistic, and at the same time determined to criticise injustice and make no compromise on issues of human dignity. My hermeneutical approach to 'The Migrant's Saddlebag' does not get into aesthetic or stylistic matters, but rather considers the intentionality and meaning of the poem. In this sense it could be categorised as a content and structural analysis.

The Case Study (‘The Migrant’s Saddlebag’)

Το δισάκι του μετανάστη

*Όταν σταμάτησαν οι σεισμοί
και το έδαφος έγινε πάλι στέρεο
ο ίλιγγος υποχώρησε.
Ψάξαμε να βρούμε
τι είχε απομείνει γερό,
να συνάξουμε πάλι τα εργαλεία
περιττές ώρες...*

*Όσοι είχαμε καρδιά πελαργού
πήραμε το τριμμένο δισάκι
κι ένα κλαδί ελιάς για μαστούνι.
Πεζοπόροι δίπλα στα όνειρά μας*

6 I use 'original' not in the sense of initial, but fundamental. It should be clear that at this point I am metaphorically utilising the notion of 'the original sin'.

7 If this article has anything close to a distinctive theoretical bearing, I believe it to be the way in which it discusses exile; not so much as a socio-historical experience of dislocation, but as a sui generis phenomenon with deep existential and ontological implications.

8 Adrian Kazas, *Where the Winds Blow: Poems* (Sydney: 1994) [in Greek], p. 8.

9 See for instance Maria Irodotou, 'The Greek Novel in Australia', in *Aiolika Chronika* vol, 176: 86 (1999), [in Greek].

πάνω στο AURELIA και στο PATRIS,
γνήσιοι απόγονοι κι εμείς
φτάσαμε στο δικό μας Τάραντο.

Σαν φάγαμε ψωμί
ξαπλώσαμε στον ίσκιο της φλεξουόσα
και της ευκάλυπτου.
Αργότερα
αρχίσαμε ν' αδειάζουμε το δισάκι,
τρεις αλλαξιές εσώρουχα,
φωτογραφίες και θυμητάρια.

Σαράντα χρόνια αργότερα
τι έκπληξη!!!
Κανένας μας δεν είχε φανταστεί
το άμετρο βάρος των αποσκευών
που βάλουμε στο μικρό δισάκι
φεύγοντας
από ένα ρημαγμένο νοικοκυριό.

The Migrant's Saddlebag¹⁰

When the earthquakes were over
and the ground became solid again
the vertigo faded away.
We looked around to find
whatever had remained sound,
to gather the tools once more
and to set up a new household.

Then the reckoning started:
What we had lost,
what had been left
and what we could build.
Bitter coffees and empty nights,
cheap retsina,
redundant hours...

Those amongst us with a pelican's heart
took a worn-out saddlebag
and an olive branch as a walking stick.
Wayfarers along our dreams
on board AURELIA and PATRIS,
true descendants ourselves
we came to our own Taranta.

As soon as we tasted bread
we rested under the shade of the flexuosa
and the eucalyptus.

Later on
we started emptying the saddlebag,
three changes of underwear,
photos and reminiscences.
Forty years later
what a surprise!!!
None of us had imagined
the uncounted weight of luggage
we had put into this little saddlebag
flying away
from a ruined household.

Reading this poem, one at first gets the impression that it has nothing to do with exile. Indeed, both the theme of the poem and the words chosen to express it point to a quite different experience, namely, an experience of seeking. The poet—in an explicitly descriptive as well as narrative manner—makes clear what prompted him and many others to set off and seek a new and better life away from their home country, their own 'household'. Moreover, the very title of the poem reflects a rather romantic perspective, something that corresponds to the overall image that the verses build up as the poem goes on. However, at the second half of the fourth stanza this image suddenly breaks down, and eventually turns around in the final stanza of the poem. It is here that I perceive a covert reference to an experience of exile, which in sequence compels a totally different reading of the whole poem. More specifically, I think that 'The Migrant's Saddlebag' is structured on the basis of a dialectics between quest and exile or, if you prefer, between the fulfillment of 'dreams' and the 'uncounted weight' of 'reminiscences'.

For the poet his voyage or quest has been necessitated by some very specific circumstances, namely, the aftermath of the German Occupation of Greece and the Greek Civil War. These are the 'earthquakes' referred to at the opening of the poem¹¹. Objective reality,

10 The translation of the poem is my own, and to my knowledge it is the first time that any of Kazas' poems has been put into English.

11 The poet himself provides this information in the first footnote to his poem.

that is, objective social recession, becomes the context that frames and conditions human experience: possibilities are to be tested out within a certain backdrop, which in turn limits one's choices. Nevertheless, this framing and conditioning can function as a positive rather than a negative limitation; in other words, it never determines the outcome of human life. '[T]he ground bec[o]me[s] solid again' and 'the vertigo fade[s] away', thus allowing one to have control over one's own life and to move on. At least, this is how things present themselves. This sense of solidness and soundness is very important for the entire structuring of the poem, since it provides the foundation for exercising one's resilience and creativity, two features that will be fundamentally subverted at the end of the poem.

The human person cannot be conceived without a 'household', that is, a place of engagement, a space of everyday realisation, a *Mit-sein*. Even when all previous bonds have been fractured, one has to reinvent and recreate new bonds in order to be somewhere, to be someone. Termed differently, a 'household' signifies the field of identity, the limits and/or the potentiality of subjectivity. In 'The Migrant's Saddlebag' it is the potentiality rather than the limitation of subjectivity that is verified at the beginning: one is called upon to 'look around', to 'gather', and to 'set up' in an unmistakably active way. Recession and vicissitudes are to be transformed into 'tools'. At this point I am tempted again to utilise Martin Heidegger's insights. In particular, the aftermath of military occupation and civil war can be conceptualised as a *Zuhandenheit* (expediency) that can and should lead to a renewed *Handlichkeit* (handling). The poet's generation finds itself within an irrefutable field of *Besorgen*, full of unexpected *Zeuge* (means) that have to become the *Werkzeuge* (tools) of a new life-world¹².

The first stanza of the poem constitutes in itself a small dialectical unit: on the one hand the implied objective destruction, and on the other the overt

subjective will for creation. This dialectical structure is duplicated by the second stanza on a different level, the level of theory versus practice. Creative wilfulness is corroborated by a further heightening of subjectivity, as a purely rational element comes into play. Now it is time for 'reckoning', for a balanced estimation of pros and cons: 'What we had lost, / what had been left / and what we could build'. At the same time this sort of 'reckoning' is a questioning; not just an external inquiry into a given situation, but more profoundly an internal quest into one's own existential position. The poet seems to be interested in the personal capital that has been lost, has been left, and can be built upon. As soon as the 'earthquakes' ceased, one was bound to re-evaluate his/her positioning within the course of history, to realise the shift that had taken place, to account for it and to make use of it. In this sense, subjectivity is acknowledged as the self-reflection on one's personal history, a *theōria*, a noetic visualisation of the past and the future.

But *theōria* is inadequate, since it cannot lead creative will to fruitfulness on its own. As long as the poet remains captured, so to speak, in his self-reflection, his coffees are bitter, his nights empty, while his endless hours of 'cheap *retsina*' indulgence turn out to be 'redundant'. Something crucial and truly essential is missing. To be sure, the poet does not mention it *expressis verbis*, but what else can it be than *praxis*. The image of the Greek *kafeneio* and *taverna*, as places of a passive mood, lurk behind the wording of the poem. Eventually, these are the places that in many a case have extinguished the fire of determination, and ruled out the possibility of finding a new place in space and time, a new historical positioning. The poet counts himself amongst those who triumphantly made the step forward, amongst those who transcended reflective self-indulgence, and thus resolved the dialectical tension of their lives. In a quite romantic manner, the second stanza of 'The Migrant's Saddlebag' alludes to the psychological profile of the person that chooses another country as his/her new 'household'. This choice, however, comes with a price—and a high one indeed!

12 For Heidegger's terms used in this paragraph, I draw upon the influential *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006).

In the third stanza of the poem, the journey is finally realised; seeking shifts from theory to practice and thus takes on the character of migration. Undoubtedly, this is what is meant by the image of the pelican. The migrant is a sort of pelican, a pelican in heart. The same image also implies that the journey is going to be a long one, over many lands and seas, unknown before. In this exodus, there are two things that accompany the migrant: 'a worn-out saddlebag' and 'an olive branch', which stand symbolically for poverty and peace. This embellishment of the pelican-image reminds me of Jesus' injunction to his followers to go from town to town relying on nothing and announcing peace to everyone.¹³ Nevertheless, there is something more to all this, something that makes up for the migrant's want and simplicity. His/her questing migration is motivated and propelled by 'dreams', that is, by an imaginary future, a much-needed utopia, in order to fill in a topos that has been lost for ever. In light of this, the migrant joins the ranks of pioneers, innovators and revolutionaries, who throughout history break through the shortcomings of their own time, becoming thus pathfinders for their fellow humans.

Up to this point the poet has not yet revealed to us anything about the content of his saddlebag; neither do his dreams bear any distinctive mark. Is the saddlebag empty? Are those dreams just an impulsive drive to go on with the adventure of life? Suddenly two names come up: 'AURELIA' and 'PATRIS'. These are ship names, which cannot but denote only one destination: Australia. Aurelia at first and then Patris transported thousands of Greeks to their new 'household' down under. Now the poet's/migrant's 'dreams' can be identified—at least to a certain extent. In the old days Australia was seen as a land of opportunity, fortune and prosperity; a promised land, one could say. Furthermore, the unthinkable distance between Greece and Australia, as well as the exotic aura that surrounded the latter, created a mystery that enabled migrants to distance themselves even more from their old 'household'. It was

as if in Australia one could be whoever one wanted. But apart from that Greek migrants had a long history of voyaging and seeking, a history symbolised by Ulysses. In other words, whoever they might want to be, they could never cease being part and parcel of the old 'household'. Besides, the poet does portray them arriving at their destination, but the latter instead of being Ithaca is Taranta. Thus it seems that the dialectics we have detected so far within the construction of 'The Migrant's Saddlebag' are evident in the third stanza of the poem as well. The fulfilment of 'dreams' and the realisation of utopia are regarded implicitly as partial, and in a sense a dystopia can be discerned—the poet starts hinting at the subversion of his narrative.

The fourth stanza of the poem takes the shift from quest to migration a step further; migration is experienced as leading to a refuge, and the migrant transmutes into a refugee. Australia may not have been Ithaca, but it served the basic purpose of subsistence and survival. Moreover, it offered many a chance for relaxation, serenity, and healing. For the poet Greek migrants in Australia 'tasted bread', that is, he uses an expression which in his native language has connotations far beyond the mere satisfaction of life's needs. To 'taste bread' means to be blessed with life's abundance and/or to have a second chance in life. In light of this, one understands how 'tast[ing] bread' is linked with 'rest[ing] under the shade of the flexuosa and the eucalyptus'. In a sense it could be maintained that the poet utilises the ritualistic symbolisation of bread and the image of the canopy as something sacred in order to idealise Australia. More to the point, Australia is envisaged as a haven, a paradise that protects and fosters one's personhood. At this point the migrant's quest for a utopia seems to have been fulfilled thanks to the idyllic character of the Australian landscape but is that all there is to the story?

Dialectics continue their pervasive subversion of the poetic narrative, since the poet adds a suggestive '[I]ater on'. 'Later on' what? Here the contents of the saddlebag finally come into play: nothing special—at first sight—just trivial things one expects to find in the luggage of any migrant,

13 Mt., 10: pp. 9-13.

that is, 'three changes of underwear, / photos and reminiscences'. In the original Greek version of the poem 'reminiscences' (thymetaria) stands for items that remind one of something. Of course this is only the wording of the poem, since the intentionality therein is concerned with memory per se. More specifically, through the previous twenty-seven lines the poet has constructed his recollection through a repression, an absence, which for good or for ill cannot remain forever absent. Until the end of the fourth stanza 'The Migrant's Saddlebag' is read like a thoroughly self-conscious encounter with the past, but now the real past, the resistance of the past, haunts conscious subjectivity through an unconscious but at the same time irresistible objectivity. The migrant's thrust into the future, however necessary or vital, cannot write off the past. The latter is embodied within one's personhood and will sooner or later erupt; not to destroy the future, which by now has already become a present, but only to set limits to its illusions. Thus the presence of memory becomes a means of disillusionment, a sort of final judgement that reveals that migration has involved a repressed being-out-of-limits, being out of one's own limits of identity after all, exile, in Greek exoria, means to be without limits. But how is such an experience possible?

With the fifth and final stanza of the poem the implied or disguised dialectical tensions through which the poet has constructed his reflective narrative give way to a full-blown dialectical reflection. It took him 'forty years', not to achieve the awareness of the 'surprise' he is talking about, but to be prepared for its unanticipated rupture. At this point the wording of the poem takes on the contours of a revelation or an illumination that enables the poet/seeker/migrant/refugee to realise the underlying dynamics of his personal journey-story. Regardless of the substantial time-span required for this experiential maturation, time itself seems to be transcended within the density of the moment, the moment of 'surprise'. The poet's whole life as a migrant has eventually turned out to be a 'surprise': whatever he thought he knew about himself, whatever he believed about

his conscious choices, whatever he hoped in relation to his achievements, all of it has to be qualified, challenged, or even contested. His '[f]orty years' of living as a migrant/refugee have been based upon a presence and a transparency that were virtually an absence and a deception, respectively. His personal journey-story has always has another hidden side, an absence lurking in the very heart of his personhood and patiently awaiting the right moment to make an entry...

The 'little saddlebag' is used by the poet as a Pandora's Box, that is, as a symbol that refers to any occasion that subverts, disorganises and reshuffles in a decisive way the life capital accumulated through migration. As soon as the saddlebag is opened and its contents taken out, everything changes and nothing is the same again. Or, to be more precise, change itself is seen as a mere illusion and sameness is realised as ubiquitous. To be sure, such an experience cannot but be unimaginable, unforeseen and totally unexpected. The quest, the relocation, the discovery, all of them have been real, but have they been true as well? Could there be another level of reality that informs truth in a more fundamental way? I think that the poet is unequivocal: 'the uncounted weight of luggage', both as huge and as overlooked, claims its rightful place within the spectrum of human experience. The migrant may have the conviction of a 'flying away', or the awareness of his/her old 'household' being 'ruined', but ruins cannot be totally abandoned; one will always bear their marks within his/her memory. However, what is quite intriguing about the last lines of 'The Migrant's Saddlebag' is the poet's amazement over the way in which 'the uncounted weight of luggage' works. This 'weight' seems to have kept the migrant/refugee tied up with the place from which s/he had set off. It is as if the whole migration journey can be seen as a great chain that connects one's need to be 'other' with an anchor that is too heavy to be lifted, namely, the anchor of remaining 'same'. I believe that this is the culmination of the poem's dialectics: the acknowledgement of a paradox that lies deep inside the migrant's heart and informs him/her

that wherever s/he might be or whoever s/he might become there is always a side to his/her personhood that verifies the omnipresence of the condition of exile.

Concluding Remarks

Adrian Kazas' 'The Migrant's Saddlebag' is quite a challenging case study with regards to the literary record of the Greek experience of exile in Australia. This is basically due to the fact that his poem is extremely dialectical concerning the relation between its denotation and connotation. The former has nothing to do with exile; instead it refers to the rather romantic and individualistic motif of seeking. In particular, migration is depicted as a drive to acquire a place to be, a need for a viable belonging, a quest of identity. And as such, migration is eventually successful. On the other hand, however, migration bears something that belongs to the past, something that goes on being repressed and threatens to jeopardise the whole endeavour of relocation, recreation, and re-identification. This connotative side of the poem is very vaguely implied or hinted at throughout its verses, and only at the final stanza it becomes clear—so clear that one is compelled to read the poem again, this time in light of its ending. Thus the migrant's new place, new belonging, and new identity, although real, do not constitute the entirety of his/her personal truth. The old place, the old belonging, and the old identity, are equally at work, posing hence the problem of one's limitations with regards to one's limits of identity. The answer that the poet offers through 'The Migrant's Saddlebag' is that there is always a fundamental limit that the migrant can never transcend, regardless of any efforts s/he makes to overlook, ignore, forsake or repress it. And this is the limit of one's own origins, embedded as they are within a specific historical life-world; a limit that—consciously or not—brings forth the condition of exile. It is over against this limit that the migrant's life will always be suspended, always in-between.

The ancient Greeks, and more specifically the so-called Pre-Socratics, were the first to conceptualise and reflect philosophically

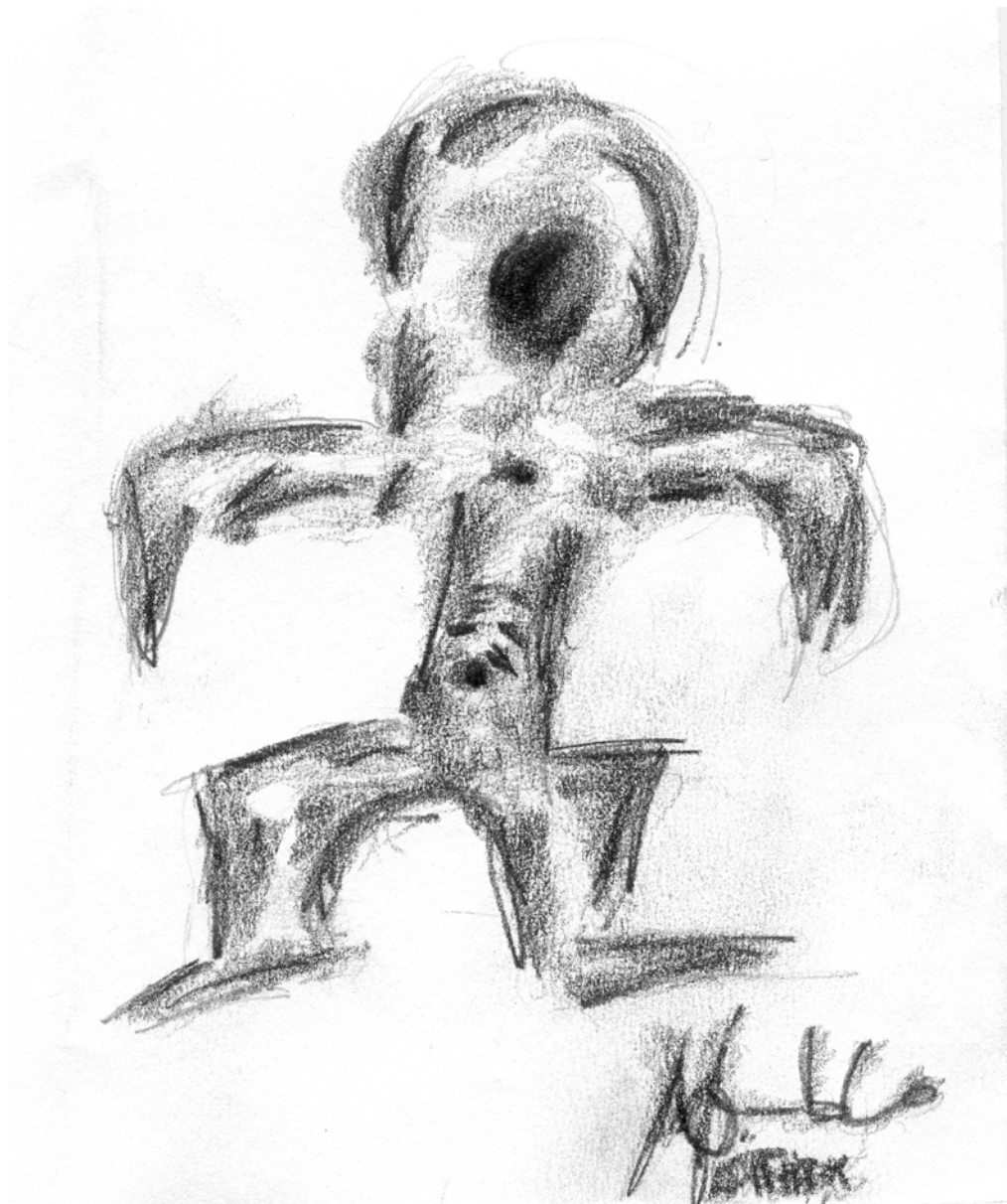
on the problem of Being (Einaí) versus Becoming (Gignesthai). And undoubtedly this age-old problem is far from being resolved: the 'disagreement' between Heraclitus and Parmenides seems to have taken on a new guise in the (post)modern discourse concerning the 'same' and the 'other'. On his part Adrian Kazas could be regarded as a poet that has attempted his own Greek and at the same time idiosyncratic comment on this great philosophical problem. Furthermore, it could be maintained that his personal experience of migration has provided him with a perspective that highlights the tensions, the ambiguities, and the paradoxes involved in the emergence and consolidation of migrant identity. In a way the migrant constitutes the type of individual who experiences both the urgency and the challenge that stem from the need to cope with the predicament of Being versus Becoming or the 'same' versus the 'other'. This becomes quite expected and reasonable, if one considers the fact that it is the migrant par excellence who has to find a way to retain his/her identity while becoming someone else. Of course, as long as the process of becoming is in effect, only otherness is perceivable; sameness, though potent, is absent. However, the potency of sameness will emerge in the long run, when the moment of 'surprise' finds a reflective consciousness mature enough to bear the truth. This is the truth of exile, negative at first, but later on positive, as it becomes the realistic point of reference that can put up with two irreconcilable identities.

I will conclude these remarks with a Religionswissenschaftliche comment on the elusive but pervasive presence/absence of the experience of exile in 'The Migrant's Saddlebag'. I said earlier that the dialectics inherent in the structure of the poem culminate at the end, when the revelation of exile as a negative experience casts the rather romantic contour of the poet's recollections into an almost tragic feeling about his whole life. Nevertheless, one has to concede that this negative presence of exile at the end of the poem presupposes and

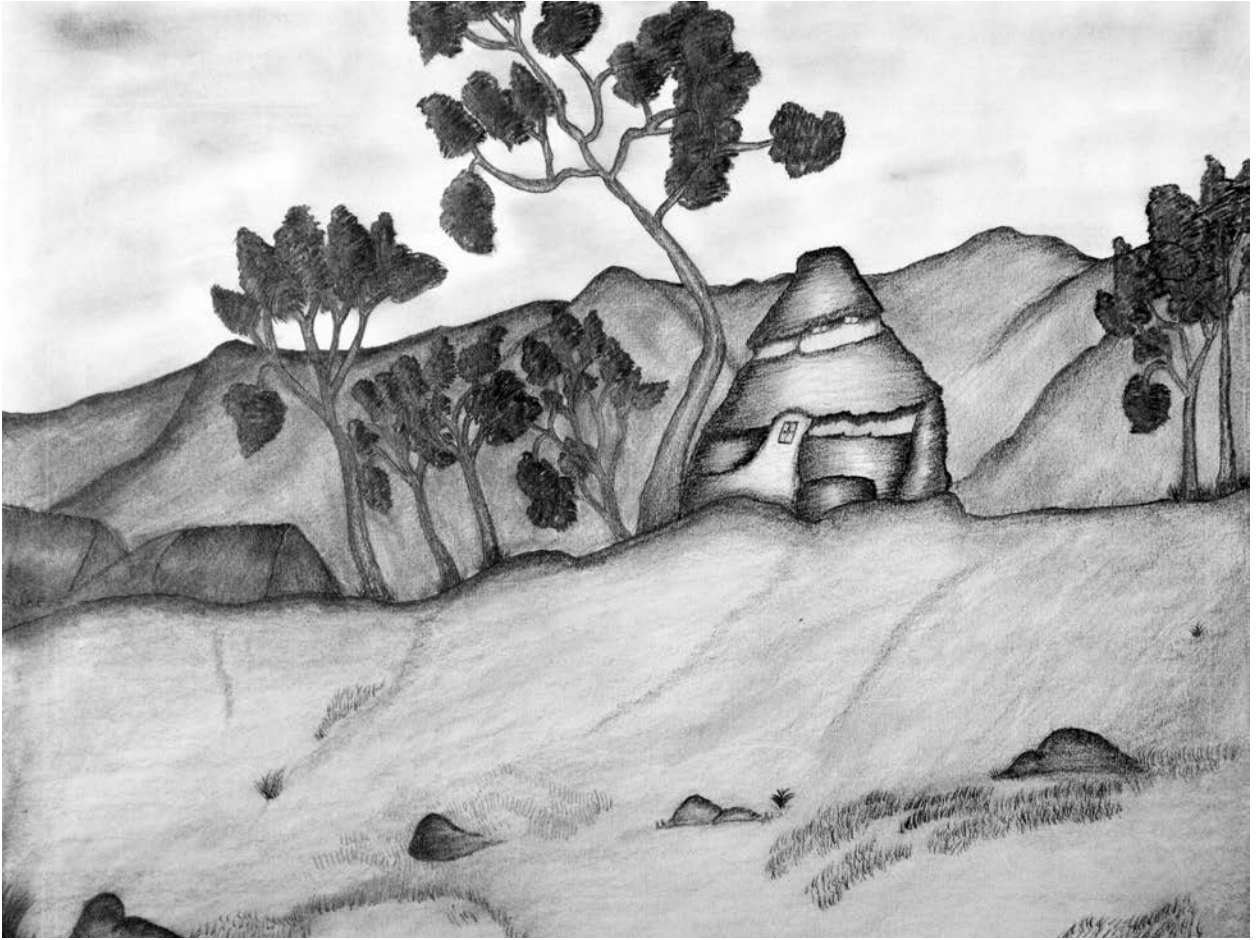
entails the performativity¹⁴ of the poem, that is, the negative feeling of exile is conceivable on the part of the poet only through the intentionality of his narrative, which in turn is pertinent and conducive to the phenomenon of exile per se. In other words, the poet might be 'surprise[d]' by the emergence of the negative feeling of exile, but he has done everything possible to encounter this feeling. At the end of 'The Migrant's Saddlebag' exile is a terrifying reality, but nonetheless a reality consciously sought after

by the poet. This I dare say is the dialectics par excellence of Adrian Kazas' poem, a dialectics that brings to the mind a classic dictum in the discipline of Religionswissenschaft, namely, the characterization of the Sacred as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. In conclusion, Adrian Kazas—probably unwittingly—has put forward the migrant's experience of exile as a human condition that exceeds any given individuality: exile will always remain the limit that paradoxically bestows meaning on any given, desired and, most of all, rejected limitations.

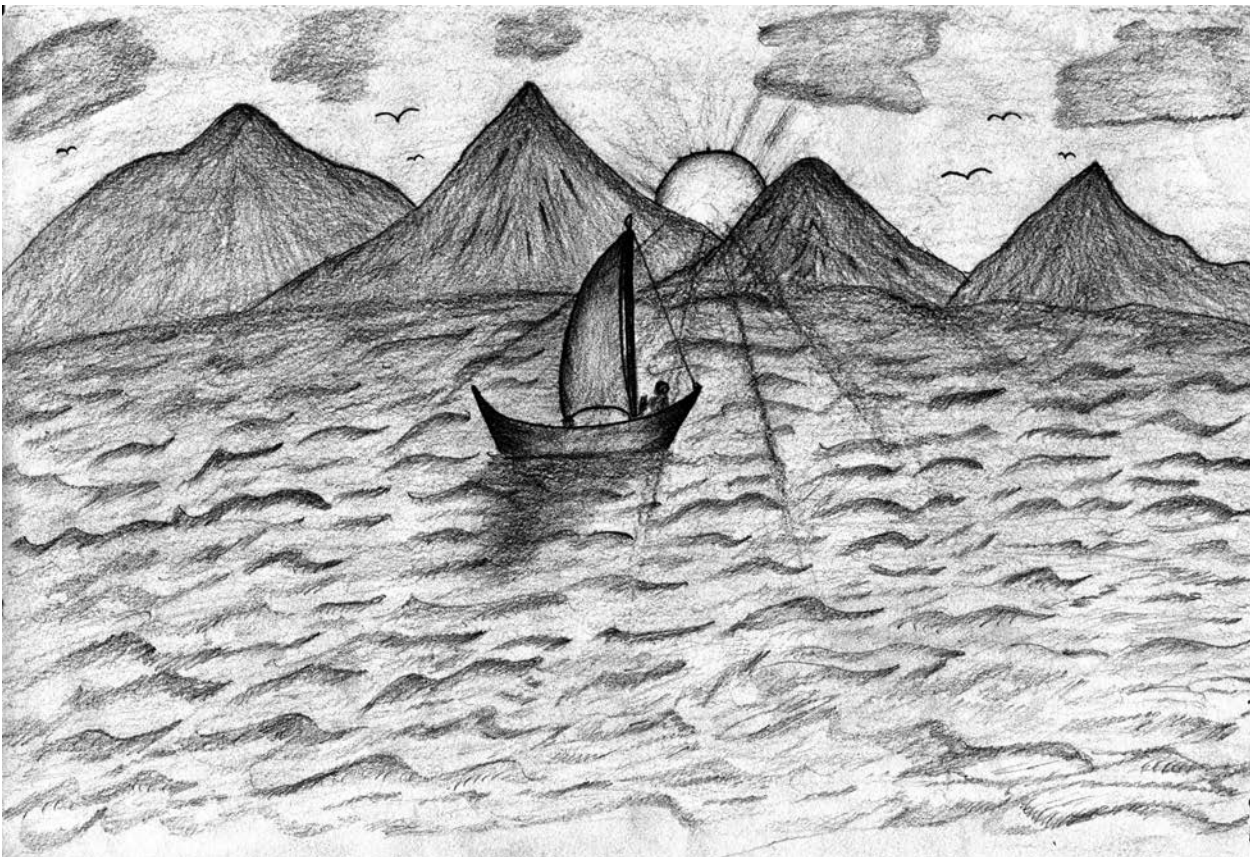
14 I draw upon the seminal anthropological insights of Judith Butler for the use of this term. For an introduction to her work, see for example Sara Salih, *Judith Butler* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002).



H, Alive, pencil on paper, 12x16cm



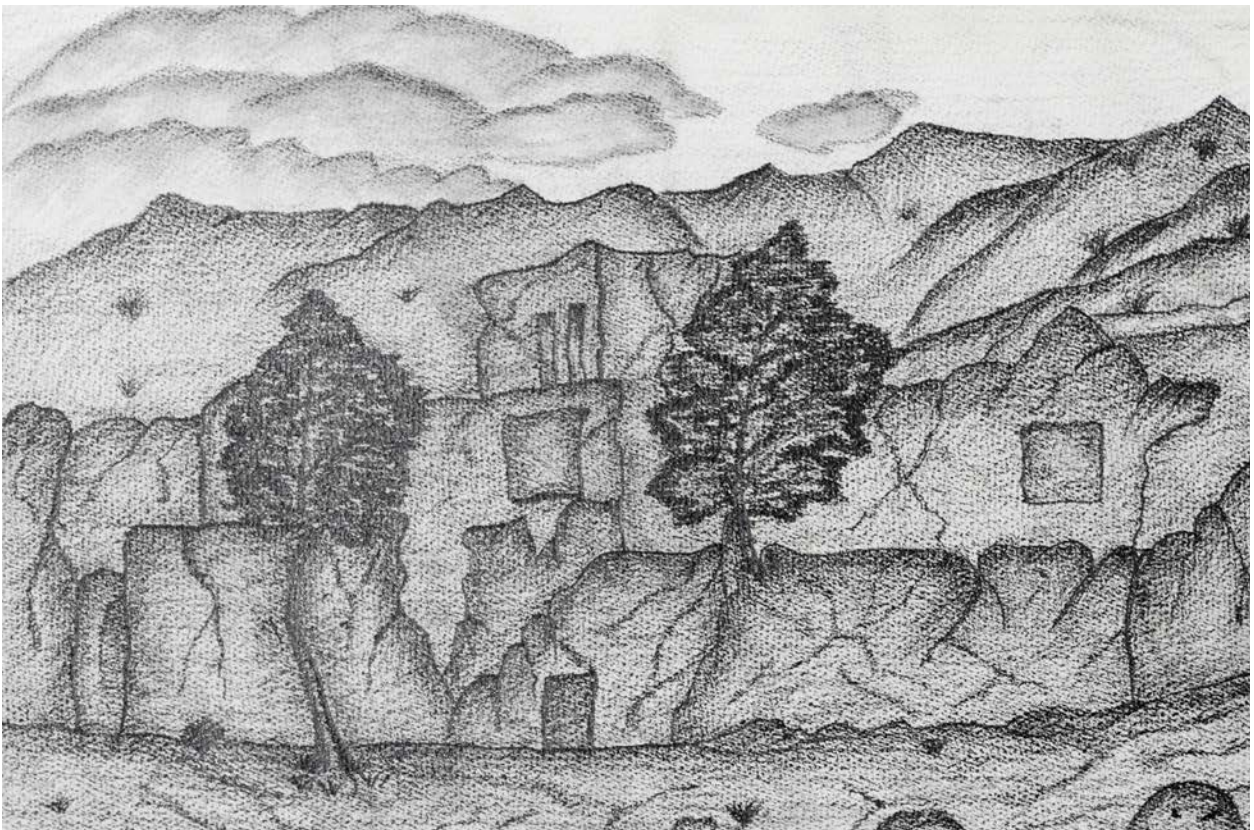
J, Landscape 1, pencil on paper, 35x29cm



J, Boat Journey, pencil on paper, 29x21cm



J, Landscape 2, pencil on paper, 29x21cm



J, Memory Drawing, pencil on paper, 41x29cm