

Revisiting Hydra Post-Chernobyl

by David Solway (September 2015)

Revisiting the Greek island Hydra, after the passage of more years than it's good for me to count, not from choice but because the use of my friend Chris McLinton's house enables me to repair the vast trench in my budget caused by three days in Athens. Emotionally, it is unwise for me to be here. I recognize too many aging faces, pass too many houses in which I was young, happy, productive and unfaithful. Every path I saunter down takes me deep into some region of my past when I knew that I was immortal and poetically privileged, and gives me the disorienting sensation of living stratigraphically, on two different time levels at once. Which means that I am not only in Greece but in some miasmatic internal realm of which the island is merely the external configuration.

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The visit to my personal house of horrors has begun. I was in a rather shaky frame of mind when I returned from supper last night, the sense of being stalked by that old melodramatic villain, Time, very heavy on me. Yannis the waiter remembered me, as I did him—we spoke in a friendly way—but I was aghast. The years have left him portly, shambling, with a scooped-out face like the inside of a clamshell. The donkeyboy, now a donkeyman, passed down Kalopigadhi Street, so gleamingly bald that he looked like he had been scalped. Later I saw the village idiot, who was the most uncanny sight of all because in face and form he had not aged a day, only he sported a little mustache like a grey epaulette. How must I look to them who knew me way back when? A Prufrockian caricature?

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The last time I was here, I was struck by some initially mysterious ailment. Couldn't budge from the house, could hardly manage the stairs. Finally mustered the strength to visit the hospital. Dr. Salek, a Jordanian expatriate, administered a blood test. The results next day revealed that I was suffering from microanemia. The question was why. Dr. Salek was concerned about the

possibility of tuberculosis and administered the Tyne. Another possibility was what he called "psychological problems." He felt I was deeply troubled by something—he was, of course, absolutely right, I am always deeply troubled by something and even when I'm not I find something to be deeply troubled about—and this may account for the rucksack of symptoms I lug about with me wherever I happen to go. But the third possibility, which the good doctor approached with evident reluctance, was the most interesting: radioactive poisoning. It was only then that I made the connection between the mysterious "grip" that was going round the island—general symptoms were sore throat, vomiting and diarrhea—and the radioactive cloud that passed over here after the Chernobyl meltdown. It seemed I might have absorbed a small amount of this radioactivity, not in sufficient quantities to cause thyroid disorders, but enough to produce the symptoms in question. A few days later, I learned that the results of the Tyne test were negative, as I expected. Dr. Salek prescribed an expectorant to alleviate the cough and get rid of the phlegm, or as he quaintly expressed it, "I help the calf and put out the flame."

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Long walk out to Vlichos. Had a glimmer of an insight into the irrational basis of art. Each moment is so exquisitely beautiful that the artist feels compelled to back up God's uncertain memory and record the event in which uniqueness inheres: the cat that walked into the donkey's leg, the elderly man with the rose sprocketed behind his ear, the sun glittering on a spider's web, the butterfly sipping from your wineglass. But the effort stands defeated in its inception, for who records the event of the recorded event? Who remembers who remembers? If God recovered his memory, we could dispense with poetry. A second insight follows on the first to soften the hybris implicit in it. It is not only art that compensates for that Exalted Alzheimer's but the human imagination itself. In this respect every man and woman is an artist. The artist simply makes a vocation out of it.

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Conversation with Angelos who operates the cigarette shop. The talk quickly turns political. The civil war, he says, is still being fought to this day, inflected in the language of Greek politics and in the divisions and animosities that continue to fester within and between families. "We can forgive the Germans

and the Italians," he declares, "because they are merely children. But the Greeks? Impossible."

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Watched part of the soccer game on the cafeneion TV last night in the company of an Hydriot named Evri, who spent eleven years in Montreal. He is the only Greek I have ever met who loves the Canadian winter—clean, unbacterial, he said. His children's asthma and his wife's complaining forced him to return to Greece. (And there is little green to be found on the islands, he sighs wistfully, and besides nobody is ever on time in this country.) He developed a strange neck ailment this morning, which bothers him so much he cannot turn his head to follow the soccer ball on the TV screen. He was here, too, during the Chernobyl disaster.

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Visited Les Bryson, who was my neighbour in Kamini when I lived there what seems like a lifetime ago. He is one of the foreign presbyters of Hydra, having arrived maybe thirty years ago from England and spent an entire quarter-century living in a small green-shuttered house on a promontory just above the sea. He has not stirred from his niche in the rockside and yet life with its predictable trials and disruptions has come to him: a Greek marriage which ended in divorce after two years—his daughter is now eighteen and visits occasionally; and more recently an Australian marriage, also ending in separation. He churns out his novel every year, so he must have written a veritable library shelf of books by now, but none, so far as I know, published. He still dives every day in the cove near the port for octopus, keeps chickens, reads, and concentrates hugely on first and last things. He has not even bothered to learn Greek. He has affixed a tiny blackboard to his door, on which is chalked the inscription: DO NOT DISTURB. The middle of nowhere is obviously a busy place.

Our conversation turned mainly on the subject of death. There is no other subject, according to Les—all of life, every moment of it, is either an evasion of or a preparation for the only truly significant event there is. That is why, he contends, he has not missed anything by living out of the way in that white loculus in the rock, hardly even visiting the town of Hydra itself only ten minutes distance by foot. He has chosen this hermit's life, he says, because he

knows "you can't beat the rap, you can only savour every moment of the sentence." He has a horror of "the Lie," which is what life in the world is all about. "Die as many little deaths as you like," he says, "but save the big one for the end." When I broach the subject of the radioactive cloud, still much on my mind even after the lapse of time, he merely smiles and says, Eeyore-like, "My point exactly. Luck is always tough. Trips are always bad. May as well be prepared."

Vivian the painter, now in his sixties and also a longtime resident of the island, totters by already deep in his cups. Les comments appreciatively on something Vivian said yesterday about "the dilemma of posture." Living in an obscure corner of the world strips one of the need to put on airs or mount exhibitions of self, he muses—which may explain, it occurs to me, why Vivian's paintings are as unknown as my host's novels.

I don't know quite what to make of Les as he delivers his testament. Much of what he says strikes me as a kitchen roll of shopworn platitudes uttered by a guru-like figure transmitting the lotus-lore of the East—yet every now and then real insights startle through his lengthy deposition, and there is a massive calm about him which is truly impressive, even daunting. When I left he was remarking on England's mediocre performance in soccer tournaments—the English team suffers from *the dilemma of posture*, trotting out on the field flourishing its weaponry and getting whipped by lowly Portugal. America, take heed.

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Reading the late James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover*, the most impressive long poem to appear in English since Eliot's *Four Quartets* and the perfect *vade mecum* for anyone traveling in this country. His verse still strikes me as often obscure, involuted, elliptical, jammed with too many abstruse references. But his gift is immense: his handling of narrative continuity, his technical mastery, and his skillful blend of the formal/philosophical voice with generous helpings of idiomatic speech, yields an apparently effortless verse *ré-moulade*. His description of tourists snapping photos of one another is utterly brilliant.

Who are these thousands entering the dark

Ark of the moment, two by two?

Hurriedly, as by some hazard paired, some pausing
On the bridge for a last picture. Touching, strange,
If either is the word, this need of theirs
To be forever smiling, holding still
For the other, the companion focusing
Through tiny frames of anxiousness.

I will have to borrow a modified version of the last line for my own work. Merrill is like an all-purpose chef, equally at home with *haute cuisine* and the trick dexterities of fast food. Probably the most considerable poet of our time.

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I now spend a part of every morning at Tasso's cafe on the port watching the world's exhibition. The star attraction is the flamboyant *garçon* Jimmy, who, with his thin, brown frame, his shrewd appraising tilt of the head, and his teaspoon lower lip, clearly has gypsy blood in him. He is the closest human equivalent to the perpetual motion machine I have ever seen, always dancing, running, jumping, flapping his wide-sleeved arms, gyrating his wrists in a burlesque of Indian hieratic gestures. Every dish he carries out is a "Special" something or other and he proudly exclaims that he provides "turbo-service" to his fortunate clientele. Truly a consummate actor or the inhabitant of a still enchanted world. And he dresses the part as well, wearing a white panama hat, white-rimmed sunglasses, purple bowtie, a cream *fanella* or rough vest stitched with blue and gold orphreys, and a broad mulberry cummerbund. He keeps up a constant patter in Greek, English, Italian, French and German, and deploys a vast range of accents with polyglottal efferverscence, as if they were little languages in themselves. In English, for example, he modulates seamlessly from BBC to Cockney to Strine to Bajun.

I don't think he is putting on a performance so much as expressing the spirit of a man for whom life is nothing if it is not showmanship. He is like an atavism from a world passing out of existence, bearing witness to something inconsolably fugitive, a life enhanced and volatile. People are shocked, incredulous, amused, but only one person has so far taken exception to him—an elderly Brit who is

obviously a little cracked and sits and talks under his breath to himself in a perpetual monologue that is the parodic obverse of Jimmy's extravagant soliloquy. "He's a bloody nuisance," mutters the skeptic, "never shuts up." And then in a loud voice as Jimmy cakewalks by: "DON'T YOU EVER SIMMER DOWN?" A moment of silence as Jimmy disappears indoors expounding something in what seems to be Arabic. The cracked Brit suddenly shouts to no one in particular, "Sit down, George, have a drink," then lapses into silence again as Jimmy reappears balancing a tray and chanting the Orthodox liturgy.

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No more Radio Moscow to while away the empty hours with, thank the Lord. Chris and Smaro arrived last night and immediately the house was filled with music, laughter, talk and vital human presence. After several weeks of general solitude, it was like being transported into another dimension: Chris with his vast reading, prodigious narrative flow and wonderful talent for improvisation; Smaro, thrice-married, in her middle fifties, humorous, ebullient, sexy, infinitely good-natured. She instantly assumed a maiden's duties and began pampering me, turning the mattress I had bunked on into a proper bed with sheets and pillow case, served exotic herbal teas, sang and chattered uninterruptedly, and Greeked me out of my morbid self-preoccupation.

Chris began reminiscing about the Athenian literati (with particular reference to James Merrill who had owned a house on the slopes of Lycabettus and whom Chris would run into at parties from time to time) and his various escapades with taxi drivers and landlords and colleagues at Athens College where he teaches. Expounding on the subject of Greek self-confidence, which can only be described as legendary, he explains: "They ask a boy his name. 'Takis,' he says. 'Bravo,' they reply. In what other country do you get marks for knowing your name?" Since he is a teacher, he knows whereof he speaks. "In school the categories that correspond to our Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor, etc., are: Angelic, Wonderful, Marvellous, and if you fail everything and are caught cheating, Room for Improvement."

Chris has lived in Greece for almost thirty-five years. A shy kid who grew up in Timmins, Ontario, he has put on the mantle of Greek authority and flair. He is, of course, entirely fluent in the language. "The more one tries to speak the language," he explains, "and to engage people directly and without timidity,

that is, the 'idity' you acquire in Timmins, the more one discovers the kindness and nobility and dignity so often hidden by the tourist's obliviousness. True, as elsewhere, many are a dead loss. The Greek sense of entitlement and privilege, of election, is indeed a wonder to behold, though it may not always serve them in good stead. But the number of thoughtful and generous people one encounters here is staggering. Don't let the arrogance fool you. It's just that here every second person you meet is a deposed king or a future prime minister."

As he speaks, I remember the restaurateur in Glyfada who led me into the kitchen where he kept a translation of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and confided, when I reacted with conspicuous surprise, "I teach Theology on the side." And the hotel clerk in Athens who discoursed eloquently on Joyce and Eliot when I returned late one night from a literary party. And the street vendor in Piraeus who wanted 1500 drachmas for an alarm clock but, after a dish of smelt and several bottles of cold beer had materialized on his cluttered table as a conversational aid, insisted on giving me the clock for free. And the taxi driver, who had returned to this job after many years spent abroad in the merchant marine, leaning back and reciting a line from Seferis: *Opou kai na taxidepso I Elladha me plegoni*. (Wherever I may travel Greece wounds me.) Never at Tim Horton's. Or rather, Timmins Horton's.

We spent the evening discussing the Chernobyl affair, as if it were some sort of meridian we had crossed and nothing could be the same afterward. We recalled Chris' almond tree that had begun to secrete a strange, white, glue-like substance, and many of the remnant trees on the island—there were (and are) so few to begin with—had also deteriorated. We remembered Chris' friend Michaelis who turned up one evening and mentioned that he was out of sorts—sore throat, nausea, the runs, painful fits of coughing. We recalled dining at a restaurant whose owner's young son had also developed a sore throat and broken out in a skin rash that made him look like the almond tree.

We go out now to the same restaurant, operated by the same grown-up young boy, for a meal of tuner salad, lice leaves and veal tutlets, but don't quite manage to recover our spirits. There is no doubt that we are confronting something frightening and alien. A cloud has passed over our lives. We are post-Chernobyl people, which means we are curiously back in the medieval period with our bubonic reactors and invisible, ubiquitous plagues: nuclear accidents, food poisonings, terrorist attacks (of which Greece has already experienced isolated

instances) and who knows what else—but the world has changed now, after Chernobyl.

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Walked past my first house on Kalopigadhi which Marianne Cohen let me have rent-free during my first visit to the island. I can still recall the then occupant, the American painter Kay Johnson, a loud, aggressive and temperamental woman, refusing adamantly to leave. She pretended not to have received Marianne's telegram that preceded my arrival. This forced me to seek refuge with a kindly and superbly developed Swiss girl named Heidi—what else?—who lived just across the way. The week it took for the stubborn lodger to depart was one of the most idyllic I have ever spent and it was with some dismay that I discovered the house was finally available after the resident ghost drove Kay from the portals. I lived amicably with that ghost, a tiny, shrivelled old man with a long beard and a strange, oscillating transparency about him, for the next three months, burning incense faithfully under the open trap door of the attic where he bivouacked. Treat a ghost decently and it will reciprocate—a lesson I have never forgotten. As I learned when I met her again several years later on the island, Kay had considered incense a needless expenditure and insisted on keeping the trap door shut, a great mistake for an artist to make.

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Cash running low. Recall the anecdote of T.S. Eliot as a convalescing bank clerk, toting up his picayune expenses on the shores of Lake Geneva. But let this not trouble me unduly. What's money anyway but the poor man's substitute for wealth?

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Stopped to have a word with Captain Kremos, who was already an elderly man when I knew him in the early days on Hydra. But even then he had an eye for the ladies and an unassailable, pontifical air about him which both amazed and half-intimidated me. I can still recall the time he made a pass at my girl and turned on me with a kind of moral outrage when I intervened. Never have I seen anyone so indignant and self-justified. "You should not be here," he expostulated, "you should be having a coffee somewhere." Now he is confined to a chair, bleary-eyed and unfocused, watching the colourful pageant of the quick as they pass to and

fro on the *limani* in front of his dry goods shop. Dry goods indeed. He remembered me, more or less. "I am old," he said, "useless and old. Life is na-a-a-theeng. We are in transit." Tears come easy to me today.

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Grabbed a ride on a fishing *varca*. This gave me a chance to view the southern and eastern coasts of an island which looks as if it had been sliced clean in half with one massive blade stroke, almost like a loaf with a hard red-brown crust. The entire coast is in fact iron-bound and now made me think of a petrified dragon with its life burning secretly in its dark interior, utterly oblivious to the small, busy, scurrying creatures scattered along its surface. It has a kind of grandeur, but it is something alien-isolated, compelling, and yes, threatening.

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I have noticed a very tall, very bald, very thin man who arrived recently on the island. Whenever I saw him on the port, he was sitting in some café or restaurant, staring rigidly at his plate. I never saw him eating. I never saw him reading a paper. I never saw him talking to anyone. Just a silent, emaciated presence, the symbolic destination of the Jimmys of this world, the fulfillment of Les' world-view, looking as if he'd just been through a severe bout of Chemo. I can't help but regard him as some kind of omen, or as an emissary from the future. I see him from the deck of the ferry as I leave the island, probably for the last time.

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The Cloud

Throats swell up like melons,

noses sniffle, eyes tear,

everyone's got the runs.

You can hear this geiger

past, if you listen hard.

We know it's not the grip

but no one speaks a word

except "tough luck," "bad trip."

This gentle island's speared

in the gut. Neptune's tines

lift it from the sea, sheared

of cleansing iodines.

Today I'm well enough

to leave, but don't. I freeze

in my tracks, bringing half

of these infirmities.

Truth is prior to fact.

Fact is merely symbol

translated into act.

I came this way. That's all.

David Solway is a Canadian poet and essayist. His forthcoming volume of poetry, *Installations*, will be released this fall from Signal Editions. A partly autobiographical prose manifesto, *Reflections on Music, Poetry and Politics*, is slated for later this year with Anstruther Press. A CD of his original songs, *Blood Guitar and Other Tales*, appeared last summer. Solway's current projects include work on a second CD with his pianist wife Janice and writing for the major American political sites such as *PJ Media*, *FrontPage Magazine*, *American Thinker* and *WorldNetDaily*.

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