

ESTUDIOS NEOGRIEGOS

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COLIN THUBRON'S *JOURNEY INTO CYPRUS*;
OR A BRITISH TRAVELLER'S LITERARY (RE)CREATION
OF A NEW IDENTITY FOR GREEK-CYPRIOTS

Eroulla Demetriou
José Ruiz Mas
Universidad de Jaén

RESUMEN

En el relato de viajes *Journey into Cyprus* (1975) el viajero británico Colin Thubron (1939), niega todo posible sentimiento de europeísmo a Chipre. Presenta la isla como un conglomerado de culturas y civilizaciones (helénica, fenicia, otomana, egipcia, italiana, etc), hecho éste que sin duda proporciona singularidad al país. Sin embargo, a pesar de la gran mayoría de población griega de la isla, el elemento helénico queda reducido al máximo y la herencia británica prácticamente silenciada. Según el viajero británico, Chipre es más levantina que griega y más bizantina que francesa (Lusignan) o veneciana, más oriental que occidental y más asiática que europea. Intentamos aportar una explicación a ello basada en la sutil simpatía del autor británico por la causa turco-chipriota.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Chipre, Colin Thubron. *Journey into Cyprus*. Literatura de viajes en lengua inglesa. Europeísmo.

ABSTRACT

Throughout his travel account *Journey into Cyprus* (1975) Colin Thubron (1939) insists on the negation of a pro-European feeling for Cyprus. He presents the island as a conglomerate of cultures and civilizations (Hellenic, Phoenician, Ottoman, Egyptian, Italian, etc.), a fact that has provided the country with its uniqueness. However, despite the wide majority of the Greek population, the Hellenic element is minimised and the British inheritance virtually annulled. According to the British traveller, Cyprus is more Levantine than Greek, and more Byzantine than Lusignan or Venetian, more eastern than western, and more Asian than European. We endeavour to explain why the British author has assumed this stance, basing our opinions on his subtle support for the Turkish-Cypriot cause.

KEY WORDS: Cyprus. Colin Thubron. *Journey into Cyprus*. English travel literature. Europeism.

The Englishman Colin Gerald Dryden Thubron, CBE (London 1939),¹ a distant relative of the English writer John Dryden and a direct descendant of Samuel Morse

¹ Little criticism -apart from book reviews- has been published on Thubron's literary work, as he is a living and still highly productive writer. We have nevertheless found some internet web pages dedicated to him and to his fiction and travel accounts. His novels are not so widely recognised, but his travel books are, to the extent that he is considered to be one of today's leading and most successful Anglo-American travel writers, together with Bill Bryson, Bruce Chatwin, William Dalrymple, Patrick Leigh Fermor, Norman Lewis, Jan Morris, Eric Newby and Paul Theroux. Thubron's travel and fictional production has received the attention of numerous reviewers from the 1980s onwards. Alas, his *Journey into Cyprus* was first published in 1975. For information on reviews written and published on Thubron's books, see Cengage (2006).

(inventor of the code), is an awarded professional and prolific traveller and novelist who had already travelled in the Middle East (*Mirror to Damascus*, 1967; *The Hills of Adonis: A Quest in Lebanon*, 1968; *Jerusalem*, 1969) before he travelled to Cyprus in 1972. In later years, he has published travel accounts on Russia, China and Asia, Siberia, etc, and novels with a clear travel element every two or three years, until 2006, when he published his latest travel book, *Shadows of the Silk Road*. He has been awarded several international prizes both for his travel books and his novels². He started his career in publishing and in 1965 became a freelance documentary filmmaker and writer for the BBC. He himself describes his travel books as «spring[ing] from curiosity about worlds which [his] generation has found threatening: China, Russia, Islam (and perhaps from a desire to humanise and understand them)» (Thursfield 2003, 3). He also affirms that « [his] writing swings between the two genres» (3), that is, between travel literature and fiction.

Journey into Cyprus (1975) is³, according to Lewis (2002, 1), Thubron's first mature travel book, the one in which he found his voice. It is the account of a six-hundred-mile trek on foot through the island barely one year and a half before the Turkish invasion of 1974, during the spring and summer of 1972. In his book Thubron intertwines personal anecdotes with the history of the island (emphasising the capacity of the Cypriot culture to survive through centuries of foreign invasions) and the development of myth, mainly that of Aphrodite. By being both erudite and accessible the English writer is sure to cover the two main types of travel reader. First, it caters for those who enjoy a more learned approach to the travel phenomenon and hope to use the book as a substitute for a guidebook, as it provides the reader and would-be visitor in Cyprus with the amount of information needed to benefit from a *de facto* journey. Secondly, it is also for those «armchair travellers» who enjoy a more anecdotal and popular approach to the journey where the human element is more evident. The fact that the book is based on a walking journey throughout most regions of the country invariably gives the writer an undeniable credibility, both as regards the local inhabitants and the readers at home. Thubron's slow account of his journey, his personal impressions, his character and route descriptions as well as the transcriptions of conversations held with inhabitants of the island from different walks of life are realistic, perfectly credible and evidently honest. Thubron is aware of the advantages of walking when a travel

² To date Thubron has been granted the following international literary prizes: the PEN/Macmillan Silver Pen Award (1985), the Hawthorn Prize (1988), the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award (1988), the Royal Scottish Geographical Society Mungo Park Medal (2000), the Royal Society for Asian Affairs Lawrence of Arabia Medal (2001) and the Society of Authors Travel Award (2008) (Thursfield 2003).

³ Although Thubron's *Journey into Cyprus* was originally published in London by William Heinemann Ltd in 1975, we have consulted (and therefore quote from) the 1986 Penguin edition.

writer wishes to capture the population's spirit to the full and to reach its most inner soul. Thus he states it in his book:

(...) Walking has its compensations. Because it shows trust, it is the surest way to reach a people's heart. In these remote villages the hiker is an almost unknown phenomenon, and his eccentricity momentarily places him on a level with the poorest, and excites a mingled curiosity and concern. And another subtler factor is at work: so slowly does he travel that the country takes on larger proportions; a man walking among the ruins of the past finds himself knit to the ancient scale of time and distance. (1986, 177)

Thubron includes generous and poetic descriptions of characters, places, architecture and landscape, with a special interest in botany. His style is both erudite and accessible and the book often transpires how conscientiously he has done his homework and prepared himself well for the journey: for example, he proves to have prepared a thoroughly well-planned itinerary and to be an accomplished linguist (he seems to have learnt Greek and addressed his interlocutors in this language, as well as speaking a little Turkish). He also proves to be a studious and learned historian, evidence of which are his knowledgeable accounts of mythology, architecture, art and the history of Cyprus together with its nearby lands.

Thubron his journey « is to be a journey through time as well as space » (1). It is to be a faithful description of a mixture of his adventures in Cyprus and as well as a collection of historical and cultural passages and explanations of his own write which complement the visit of towns, villages, valleys, rivers, monasteries, farms, mosques, shrines, mountain tracks, Byzantine churches, archaeological sites, etc. Most adventures are centred on his conversations with the local inhabitants and his search for a good place to camp when in the mild open air of the Cypriot spring and his willingness to accept the charity of peasants, shepherds and monks to provide him with food and accommodation. Throughout Thubron's journey the humble folk of the island prove to be extremely hospitable to him, in spite of his being English.

In chapter I, «The Goddess from the Sea», Thubron begins by introducing Cyprus to his English-speaking reader as part of the Levant and therefore part of «these half Asiatic lands» (1). This English traveller at no time acknowledges any possible cultural or political relationship of the island of Cyprus to Europe or any special feeling of Eyropeism. Cyprus is to him «where Asia touched Europe» (7). He also declares the island to be an «eastern Midditerranean land» (7). Indeed, according to him, «this land [is] moored between Asia and Europe» (9). In Chapter 6 he believes the medieval Cypriots' collective personality to have been a blend of oriental and Hellenic traits where their Byzantine identity still prevailed:

The Cypriots, I rather think, were natural members of this dazzling hybrid, Byzantium.

They, like it, lay midway between the classical and the oriental. Their softness and conservatism were not Hellenic. To them the character of the Greek mainland was unsympathetically masculine, and all through mediaeval years the Cypriot nobles continued to send their sons for education to Constantinople, which they felt to be their mother-city. (102)

Thubron's loitering among the Neolithic ruins of Khirokitia incites him to theorize on Cypriot identity. He seems to reach two conclusions. On the one hand, that Cypriots are the result of the mingling of bloods of different races, namely western powers (Mycenaeans, Romans and Crusaders) and eastern powers (Egyptians, Phoenicians and Turks) and that his journey was therefore partly to be, in his own words, «a burrowing upwards through these alien strata, as through the layers of a rich and gigantic cake» (5). However, he omits mentioning the British presence and influence on the ex-colony. He also attends a country wedding and its celebration, which he describes with gusto (its food, its «eastern-tinted music», its dances, clothes, symbolism, guests and human types) (14-16).

In Chapter 2 («Tombs and Twilight») Thubron continues with his walking journey through Paphos, with a view of the Troodos Mountains in the distance, in the region of Akamas. Paphiots, he says, believe themselves to be more honest and more intelligent than their fellow Cypriots (18). These positive traits, according to him, are generally attributed to the fact that their blood is mixed with the Turks' (18). Once again Thubron philosophises on the identity of the Cypriots: they are a mixture of two races, the Mycenaean Greeks and the Semitic Phoenicians. «Other nations -Egyptians, Assyrians, Persians-», he says, «governed the land yet never touched its soul» (19). Once again, he omits the role of the British in the formation of the Cypriot identity. According to him, the Cypriots' conservatism is explained by the fact that, though Greeks, they did not benefit from the influence of Ionian and Dorian cultures and therefore remained Mycenaean and Achaean stock. Their ancient thirst for orientalism was fulfilled by their close contact with eastern culture (22). The only British legacy during their 82-year occupation is referred to while in his lodgings in Paphos, run by a Greek hotel owner called Antis. Thubron does not appreciate the cooking qualities of the hotelier, who has a high regard for his own cuisine; therefore, Thubron is forced to accept chips. «That is the legacy of the British occupation», he adds, having «conquered the remotest hamlets of the Troodos and Kyrenia mountains» (28).

Thubron visits the palace of Vouni, among many Turkish villages of the nearby valleys, and explains its relationship with Queen Philocyprus and its use by the Persian king of Marion to keep a watchful eye on the neighbouring Greek city of Soli (58), but admits that it is after all a palace without history (58). He arrives at Soli, «a very Greek city», a symbol-city of the struggle of the Greek Cypriots against Persian rulers during the fifth and fourth centuries BC. This was a time when the

Greekness of the island was at stake, under the influence of Semitic people such as the Phoenicians. It was a time when Solis was therefore in danger of becoming an oriental city. The traveller then wonders: «For to whom, precisely, did the Cypriots belong -to the East or to the West?» (59). The Hellenistic «Aphrodite of Soli» kept in the Cyprus Museum has become the trademark of all things Cypriot. In spite of being called «The Cyprian» or «The Cyprus-born», according to Thubron, Aphrodite's oriental origins are still evident, as she was worshipped by prostitutes, to the extent that «Cyprian» in English remains a synonym for «lewd» (61-62).

In the whereabouts of Episkopi Thubron sees the promontory of Curium rise. This gives him the opportunity to narrate its history and its spoliation by Di Cesnola⁴, «who was not so much an archaeologist as a systematic plunderer» (152-53). He makes the point of reminding us that the treasures discovered by the Italo-American consul from thousands of pilfered graves «were not only Greek, but Phoenician, Egyptian, Assyrian and Chaldean» (153).

In Chapter 10 («The Orchard Coast») Thubron heads for Kyrenia and the Kyrenia mountains, full of resonances of Mount Komos with Kyparissovouno, St Hilarion and Trypa Vouno, Buffavento, Pentadactylos (165). He compares the Kyrenian ridge, which is more Gothic, to the Troodos Mountains, which is considered to be more Byzantine (165). Once in Kyrenia, he highlights its charming water's edge, full of history, its castle belonging to different successive rulers, Byzantines, Crusaders, Lusignans, and Venetians, but which was never stormed, as it always capitulated all its surrenders, its Venetian mansions turned into restaurants, its fishing harbour, its Lusignan lighthouse, its English residents' villas, the paradise of retired civil servants escaping income tax Mid the cold (166-67).

In Chapter 14 («The Greek Heart») Thubron once again philosophises about the Cypriot identity. The so called Great Age of Cyprus, that is, the Lusignan Age, he says, did not leave any deep mark on Cypriot identity. According to the author, «it died exotically in a soil which could not nourish it» (218). He believes that its identity owes its being to two different ages, both of them Greek: the Mycenaean age, later followed by the Achaeans, which Hellenized the island, and the Byzantine age, which Christianised it. Finally he heads for Salamis' Royal Necropolis, describes its tombs and relates them to Homer's times and customs, but he does not fail to remind us readers that «the feel of the East -Assyria, Phoenicia, Egypt- is never far» (228).

Throughout his travel account *Journey into Cyprus* (1975) Colin Thubron insists on the negation of a pro-European feeling for Cyprus. He presents the island as a conglomerate of cultures and civilizations (Hellenic, Phoenician, Ottoman,

⁴ For more information on Di Cesnola and his archaeological exploits in Cyprus, see Demetriou and Ruiz Mas (2004).

Egyptian, Italian, etc), a fact that has provided the country with its uniqueness. However, despite the wide majority of the Greek population, the Hellenic element is minimised. According to the English writer, Cyprus is more Levantine than Greek, more Byzantine than Lusignan or Venetian, more eastern than western, more Asian than European. Never in the whole book is the country's European identity clearly affirmed, as for him the Lusignan or Venetian influences have remained confined within the aristocratic and royal minority and have therefore hardly permeated the lay population of Cyprus. The oriental/Levantine/Byzantine identity that Thubron seems to be granting to Cypriots benefits the Turkish-Cypriot claim to partition on the grounds that Cyprus is not after all as Hellenic as Greek-Cypriots claim their country to be. Thubron, let us not forget, is British, and from his conversations with the Greek-Cypriots who are old enough to remember the British occupation, he occasionally notices a slight feeling of resentment towards the ex-metropolis for having sided the Turks during the Greeks' struggle for *enosis* first and for independence later (37-38, 39, 53, 153). Thubron laments that the British are sometimes blamed by the Greek-Cypriots for the rivalry between both Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots as it was the British who «granted the Turkish minority too large a share in the affairs of the island» (53), and used the Turks against their War of Liberation and as auxiliary police -including the torturing of Greek-Cypriot EOKA members in prison camps (38)-, two facts which effectively stopped the two Cypriot ethnic and religious communities from continuing on friendly terms. In spite of the 82-year British occupation of Cyprus, the author hardly mentions anything that the ex-colony may have inherited from her metropolis, apart from chips, perhaps with the intention of exonerating Britain from any type of future fate of the isle, whatever this might be. Furthermore, he seems to openly favour the Turkish cause by declaring to like Turkish-Cypriots twice in the book (78, 135), something which he never does when mentioning the Greek-Cypriots. These are the reasons which we believe could lay behind the fact that Thubron's travel account seems to be denying any possible European (mainly Hellenic) identity of Cyprus in the 1970s.

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