

Amanda MICHALOPOULOU

## Genius Loci

I come from a family that never travelled. My parents used to say there was no money for luxury. Still, deep down, I knew there were other ways to see the world.

It so happened that I wrote my first novel in Wiepersdorf, a baroque castle in East Germany, during a six-month writers' residency. I was in my late twenties and had just left my job as a journalist to immerse myself in a novelist's life. I didn't know that by doing so I fully and unconditionally succumbed to the Ivory Tower Syndrome, this mythical and sociological evaluation of writers as misfits. Wiepersdorf, although flat, was my "Magic Mountain," a sanatorium for writers who needed the blanket and the thermometer of words. We didn't have doctors as in the Thomas Mann novel, but we had chefs and waiters with impeccable white uniforms. It was like living on a movie set.

The Berlin Wall had already fallen, but the linguistic one remained standing. Most of the other writers spoke either German or Russian. I didn't speak those languages, so I wrote in seclusion, in complete alienation, which became later symbolic for what the writing stands for, at least for me: escaping to an unknown place, surrounded by unknown people, strange situations, foreign languages, in order to invent a language of my own in a room on my own.

Ever since, one of the first things I do in writers' residencies is to prepare the new room like a bird would prepare a nest. I need the ceremony, the little decorative details, the new beginning to appreciate distance—not only distance from Greece, but from everything I conceive as my own, including identity, this cemented construction which makes authors write the same book again and again and again. Not a single book of mine was exclusively written in Athens, the place I call home. Even the most Athenian pages had to be written from a distance that illustrates what James Joyce would call "indifferent sympathy." A safe distance, that is, between owning an experience and transforming it into something new.

To give an example of how this works in fiction for me, here's a paragraph from my novel "God's Wife," where the Wife of God, seriously depressed in Paradise, proposes to her divine husband to travel back to the real world as tourists. They start with China and the protagonist has a sort of revelation, strolling in unknown territory. Here's what happens:

*WE ENDED UP STROLLING along a path in a park swarming with people. He led the way; I followed. Dragon kites slashed the skies. Over the grass, under the trees, children chased after each other. The sun pierced through the clouds to lave their hair.*

*"Good Lord," I whispered.*

*He gave me a curious glance. I could barely contain myself: Look at the sun, the clouds! Look at the people: lambent outlines, pulsing veins, rippling muscles. Look at their animal vitality—how*

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*they hug, how they eat. How they huddle in a corner talking to each other. Look, look! Some walk alone, hands plunged deep in their pockets; others snap pictures. Look at the groundskeeper over there, at the long, slow swish of his broom. Look at that man smoking—it's been years since I last saw someone smoking. Where is that gaggle of people headed in such haste? Schoolboys—I know that gait well. There's a woman holding an umbrella to shield her face from the sun. Do you see that lot with the beers over there? Soon, they'll be completely drunk. Most of all, I enjoy the girls walking in pairs. You can almost feel the buoyancy, the vigor of their limbs. Sweat, like dew, at their napes.*

This was written during a Shanghai Writers Association Residency, and it would be inconceivable for me to write it elsewhere. The same happened with my Kafka novel, a book where a reincarnation of Kafka walks around different European cities. I visited each and every one of them, following the steps of Franz Kafka. I could probably find the same information in books, but there is no substitute for the real thing, this expedition of sorts at the heart of what the book asks the writer to do. And a book always says, *Go and see for yourself. Find genius loci*. Kafka would strongly disagree. He wrote America without moving from his chair. On the other hand, many of the writers who inspired me travelled extensively: Lafcadio Hearn, Joseph Conrad, the one and only Clarice Lispector.

In this sense it feels strange that Leigh Marshall kindly reads my words while I am in Greece for a family emergency. But this takes us back to pure fiction, doesn't it? I pretend to be there with you, like a character would in the world of the novel, and I long to be there with you in the same way readers dream of being immersed in a novel's world, while reading it. Displacement is frustrating but it says so much about unfulfilled desires, or better yet, the desire to be in two places simultaneously—which I believe I somehow managed today.