How does a writer feel about his role in a political event he fictionalized, especially when he played a small part in real life but made a big name for himself thanks to the story? It’s an old question, but one that seems perpetually topical. The first time I got some kind of tentative answer was a quarter of a century ago, in the offices of Kedros, the prestigious Greek publishing house, where I had gone in the fall of 1977 to speak to one of Greece’s most important postwar novelists.

Meeting the man

Kedros’s offices were more like a bustling travel agency in high season rather than a place in which readers and editors were solemnly engaged in transforming poetry and prose from manuscript to book. I was reminded of where I was, however, by the large black-and-white photographs of the major leftist writers whose work Kedros published: Yannis Ritsos, Kostas Varnalis, and Stratis Tsirkas. Next to them were two important writers also published by the house, Menis Koumantareas and Dido Sotiriou.

As I was ushered into an empty office to wait for Tsirkas, I caught a glimpse of one of the grande dames of Greek publishing, Nana Kalianesi, who founded Kedros with her husband, Nikos, in 1954. Tall and imposing, she looked elegant, prim, and unruffled by the activity around her, like Maggie Smith’s Miss Jean Brodie. When Tsirkas arrived shortly thereafter, the hubbub died down momentarily, or rather swirled toward him. Everyone went to greet him, inquire about his health, exchange news, or just talk about business and the sales of his most recent novel, *Chameni Anoixi* (*Lost Spring*). His welcoming smile was as white and broad as that in his photograph on the wall.

By the time I had shaken his hand, however, I was feeling like an interloper. My primary interest was Tsirkas’s political activities in wartime Egypt, not his fiction, which made him famous and earned his portrait a place next to the literary giants, Ritsos and Varnalis, on Kedros’s walls. “I wanted to talk to you about the movement in the Middle East,” I said, choosing my words carefully. I was referring to the leftist uprising in the Greek armed forces stationed in Egypt during the Second World War.

The fact that I had called it a “movement” (*kinima*) rather than a mutiny (*antarsia*) signaled my sympathy with the rebels, and it automatically put me in a good light in Tsirkas’s eyes. But I was a little worried since I had referred directly to those events, and not to his *magnum opus*, the three-volume *Drifting Cities* (*Akyvernites Politeies*), which
was an account of the uprising and everything that had surrounded it experienced by the work’s fictional hero, Greek army officer Manos Simonides.

Tsirkas and his age

The *Drifting Cities* trilogy was published between 1960 and 1965 and finally established Tsirkas as a major literary figure following his earlier study on Cavafy (Ο Καβάφης και η εποχή του), which had been awarded the Greek State Prize in 1959. *Drifting Cities* was translated into French in 1971 and received the French Critics Prize that year for best foreign novel. An English translation published by Knopf was released in the United States in 1974; there is now a new translation published by Kedros. The work has also been translated into Spanish, Italian, Romanian, and Arabic.

In his published notes about writing it, *Ta Imerologia tis Trilogias* (Kedros, 1973), Tsirkas had described how the trilogy was a fictional account of the political struggle that unfolded in wartime Egypt among the exiled Greek government, the Greek and allied armed forces, and the large Greek communities in Alexandria and Cairo. The *kinima* was also an attempt to prevent the rightward lurch of the Greek government and was, for that reason, put down by the British. Tsirkas was directly involved in it, but tempers the semi-autobiographical account in the work by injecting his leftist hero with the self-reflective doubts and ambivalence that only occurred to Tsirkas after the event.

Did Tsirkas indirectly renounce the uprising by this fictional method? Were the work’s literary allusions perhaps a clue affirming that suspicion? The story’s structure recalls Lawrence Durrell’s *Alexandria Quartet* and the title, *Akyvernites Politeies*, which translates literally into “Ungovernable Cities,” is taken from the line, *Ierousalim, akyverniti politeia*, by George Seferis, who worked in the press office of the Greek government-in-exile during the war. Tsirkas’s trilogy begins in Jerusalem before moving on to Cairo and Alexandria, and, as many critics have noted, Tsirkas’s account of people’s lives against the background of war evokes the atmosphere of *War and Peace* and *The Red and the Black*. A work of literature then, and not a tribute to rebels of the left?

I wanted Tsirkas’s help in reconstructing the actual political struggles between left and right that culminated in the 1944 uprisings in the armed forces, assuming that he was prepared to talk about something he rarely spoke about in public. I wanted to know what Tsirkas had done before and during those events, and what he knew about them, as opposed to their recreation in fictional form, no matter how significant that was. To tell him that to his face, however, in the offices of his publishing house – which, incidentally, had never published titles in history or politics, but had made its name in literature – was more than a little intimidating.

“Don’t worry, he will talk to you,” Christos Alexiou had said to me a few weeks earlier when I told him of my plan to meet with Tsirkas. Alexiou taught Greek literature at Birmingham University in the English Midlands, and he had just finished berating historian Richard Clogg, who had come up from King’s College in London to talk to Alexiou’s seminar about the wartime events among the exiled Greeks. Clogg had described the uprising as a “mutiny.” Alexiou, who had been brought to Birmingham University by the great Marxist classicist, George Thompson, would have none of that. He launched into a blistering critique of Churchill’s policies toward Greece, pointing to
the British prime minister as the cause of the political polarization in the Greek community of wartime Egypt.

Polite but reserved, Alexiou’s students listened as they sat around the seminar table. They were all doing research on Greek writers, and, to them all, this political talk was of secondary importance. Even those studying Ritsos and Varnalis believed that the two writers’ work should be examined primarily through a literary prism. To invoke politics smacked of ideological exploitation. In Greece, the recently legalized Communist Party of Greece (KKE), short on support from poets and writers and not exactly liberal when it came to artistic creation, trumpeted Ritsos and Varnalis’s allegiance to it.

Naturally, Alexiou’s graduate students thought that delving into Tsirkas’s political past was a waste of energy since so much could be done on his literary work. They knew, of course, that there was no danger that the KKE was going to take up Tsirkas’s cause. In *Drifting Cities*, the hero suffers serious doubts about the struggle, and he has to be jolted back into politics by the unnamed “little man” (*to anthropaki*), a character that represents the embodiment of the Stalinist hack.

Tsirkas later admitted that he portrayed the “little man” so negatively in his initial drafts that he had to rewrite certain parts in a more positive light in order to make him more believable, to “round him off,” as E. M. Forster has said. Alas, the KKE was not amused, and its unofficial literary commissar, Markos Avgheris, blasted the first volume of *Drifting Cities, I leschi* (*The Club*) for defeatism and other literary deficiencies in the prominent left intellectual review, *Epitheorisi Technis*. This only meant that the non-Stalinist left embraced Tsirkas as its standard-bearer, so that the danger of political exploitation remained.

The novel as history

My trepidation mounted as we shook hands, but Alexiou turned out to be right. Upon hearing my request, Tsirkas’s gaze grew more intent. His handshake tightened momentarily and then relaxed as he raised his hand to my shoulder, motioning me to sit down. “Kafedaki, Yianni?” asked Kalianesi, putting her head round the open door. It would be the first of many *kafedakia*; the only difference would be that the others would be made by Tsirkas’s wife, Antigone, in their small apartment in Zografou.

Stratis Tsirkas was the pen name of Yannis Hadjiandreas, who was born in Alexandria in 1911 and died from complications of an eye operation in Athens in 1980, 2 1/2 years after what was the first of several meetings between us. In his early twenties, he became part of what was a vibrant literary life within the Greek community of Alexandria, open to the influences of the city’s European-oriented, cosmopolitan culture. In the 1930s, a group that included Tsirkas responded to the rise of fascism in Europe by joining other foreign residents who were in the process of building a peace movement that soon turned anti-fascist and Marxist in its orientation.

It was not very difficult to follow the path they did because of what was happening around them in British-controlled Egypt. Tsirkas and the others were radicalized because they were born into a colonial society and witnessed exploitation and oppression first-hand. They joined a group called the Movement for Egyptian National Liberation established by Henri Curiel (1914-1978), whose life-long devotion to the anti-imperialist
cause was documented in *Un homme á part*, a biography by Gilles Perrault (translated into English as *A man apart: The life of Henri Curiel*). But soon after this cosmopolitan group formed in 1943, the Greeks broke away because the left-wing movement in the Greek armed forces in Egypt was developing precipitously.

Tsirkas took his time in explaining why the Greeks had taken that decision. And he did not answer fully that day, but did so incrementally in the course of several follow-up conversations we had in his apartment, surrounded by his papers and books. He regretted that move away from Curiel’s multiethnic organization because it went against the internationalist solidarity he had learned in Egypt. He reminded me that his first poem was about the Egyptian peasantry, the *fellaheen*.

He added, however, that the arrival in Egypt of the government and a large part of the Greek political world and armed forces, in which there was a growing movement in support of the leftist EAM (*Ethniko Apeleftherotiko Metopo*, National Liberation Front), made for extraordinary circumstances. The progressive Greeks resident in Egypt felt they had to work as foot-soldiers in EAM’s struggle and, in so doing, sacrifice their ties with the local radical movement, which was a mixture of foreigners and Egyptians. As proof, he showed me original mimeographed broadsheets he helped produce that were used to spread the EAM line among Greek troops.

“But at some stage you ran into the *anthropaki*,” I ventured. No, said Tsirkas, the uprising was not directed by party hacks. Its leader, Yannis Sallas, was a communist, but not a Stalinist. He might have been an idealist, and, of course, the idea of a pro-EAM movement among Greek forces under British command in Egypt was risky, but it was principled, he said. The *anthropaki* character, he continued, refers to things that happened later, when party leaders tried to keep the revolutionary momentum going artificially in the late 1940s and 1950s, although the battles had already been lost. “That is why I stopped being an activist,” he added, “and went back to my writing.” “And that is why *Epitheorisi Technis* attacked you when *Leschi* came out,” I said, naturally. He nodded and smiled.

It was then that I realized that *Drifting Cities* is two stories in one. The first is the tale of a courageous and honorable attempt by members of the Greek armed forces to forestall the establishment of a postwar rightist government in Greece. The second is a story of the trials and tribulations of a political intellectual, whose foot-soldier role lasts only as long as it takes to come up against the simplistic, narrow-minded logic of the Machiavellian world of power politics. Tsirkas remained politicized, although he was forced out of politics.

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