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Chapter Two

Openness and Light in the Dialogue between the North and the South: Selected Poems by Contemporary Irish and Greek Poets

Joanna Kruczkowska

Surrounded by sea waters and heavily tried by history, the Irish and the Greeks have had the experience of living on the border of openness and enclosure, light and darkness, both in the physical and the metaphorical sense. Literature in both countries has always abounded with epiphanies; in modern Ireland, marked by the spirit of Joyce and Yeats, epiphanies come famously explicit in the poetry of Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon, while in Greece in the work of George Seferis and Odysseus Elytis. The crux of an epiphany resides in the light: the ancient Greek *επιφάνεια* meant “a revelation, coming to light” and was connected with the appearance of a deity. But in Modern Greek that crux lies also in the surface: *επιφάνεια* [epifania] means “surface” or “appearance” and is antonymous to the “inside,” “depth” and “essence,” however paradoxical it may sound. For the Irish, surface and openness is often embodied in the sea and the land; for the Greeks it would be the open sea as opposed to the land enclosed by the mountains. The opposite depth resides underground; for some Irish writers also in the bog or wells, for some Greeks in the sea bottom or cisterns. They also define these oppositions in terms of absence and deficiency – obviously, mainly of (drinking) water or light. Poets in both countries frequently choose their vantage points either high on a cliff or close to the ground, gaining insight respectively into the universe and the future on the one hand, and into autobiography and the past on the other. Such perspectives appear e.g. in Heaney’s “Bogland” and “Personal Helicon” and Seferis’s *Mythistorema*. I will focus on two Irish poems [p. 18] which quote from Seferis in order to see how their dialogue with the original relates to the above-mentioned dichotomies.

In *District and Circle* (2006) Heaney continues the series of conversations with fellow poets who have passed away. In exquisite company – including that of the two best Modern Greek poets, Cavafy and Seferis – he treads the border of openness and enclosure, of light and darkness. They all trespass the line of this world and the other world in an attempt to confront, comprehend, or come to terms with both their historical and immediate political predicament on the one hand, and the

general human condition on the other. The land of natural light and openness, most manifest in Seferis's poem "On Aspalathoi" to which Heaney refers, is constantly overshadowed (in all three poems) by the darkness of the underworld. The elucidation of the background of Heaney's poem "To George Seferis in the Underworld" (*District* 20-21) reveals and triggers a great deal of contextual association.

This short dialogue with the Greek poet, framed in the temporal and cultural context, is yet another of Heaney's expeditions leading apparently into foreign cultures but actually conducted in order to explore his native ground. Seferis in "On Aspalathoi" (*Collected* 223) alludes to the recent history of Greece, namely the so-called junta or the rule of the Colonels in the late 1960s and early 1970s, while Heaney juxtaposes it with his first-hand Northern Irish experience.

When Seferis travels to Cape Sounion in the spring of 1971, it is covered with yellow shrub (gorse, caltrop or aspalathoi), which reminds him of the two traditions on which his country rests: antiquity and Christianity. The presence of the plant brings forth two related associations. The first one, associated with antiquity, is a scene of Greek mythology quoted after Plato's *Republic*: the one where the cruel tyrant Ardiaios is being dragged through thorny aspalathoi before ending up in Tartarus. Laying bare the workings of power, it evokes the spirit and the letter of the regime then in power in Greece; by the "letter" I mean the last line of Seferis's poem which encodes, by means of alliteration, the acronyms of the names of two junta leaders, Papadopoulos and Pattakos. This descent into myth and into the darkness of the underworld happens in the land of light and openness, as I have mentioned: the speaker stands on Cape Sounion on a sunny day overlooking the open sea.

The second association, possibly linked with the premonition of Seferis's own death the same year, is the Feast of the Annunciation. Paradoxically this important holiday of the Orthodox Church falls in the time of Lent, reminding the faithful that the mystery of the Incarnation is inseparable from the mystery of the Passion. Frequently represented by [p. 19] artists as a revelation in a shaft of light, the Annunciation unexpressedly links in the poem with the Passion symbolized by means of the thorns, i.e. also with the darkness that covered the earth at the moment of Christ's death, and the darkness of Tartarus. Seferis seems to combine the pain of his nation's suffering with the hope for its resurrection – the day of the Annunciation, 25 March, is the Greek Independence Day.

These two associations are separated by a one-word line. In Greek (Seferis, *Βήμα*) it reads *γαλήνη* [galini], which in the translation of the poem is already interpreted as "peace"¹ – in fact it can mean "the waveless sea" (which the speaker can see before his eyes) and more generally, "calm" in the context of nature, scenery, one's mind or character. Only by extension does it evoke peace as a political phenomenon, which in Greek is denoted by a different term, *ειρήνη* [irini]. This

¹ Heaney uses Keeley's translation. Peter Levi translates it as "tranquility" (Barlow 61).

single word stands out in a prominent place of the poem, at the turning point from one frame of reference to the other; yet it is preceded by the “aspalathoi showing their huge thorns ready,”² and succeeded by Ardiaios’ torture. Brief, the peace is surrounded by thorns, that is, endangered, if ever possible.

Another trope that confirms this precariousness is an allusion in the very placename, i.e. Cape Sounion: the setting of another Greek myth. At this exact point, the furthest southern exposure of the Attica Peninsula, Aegeus, King of Athens was waiting for his son Theseus to return from his expedition against the Minotaur. The open sea stretching before Aegeus’s eyes, the sea literally open to his hope and longing, becomes the symbol of his dark despair and the place of his death when he spots the black sails of the incoming ship that Theseus forgot to change. Thus the openness and light of the surface becomes the enclosure and darkness of the depth, a process that can be detected in all the poems under discussion. The hope for a positive turnout gets frustrated again. Yet for Heaney and Seferis the descent into the dark also provides a foretaste of revenge for the injustices of history.

The time of Seferis’s travel to Sounion, 1971, the exact 150th anniversary of Greek independence, converges with the climax of the Northern Irish conflict. The first line of “On Aspalathoi” paraphrases a [p. 20] Greek independence folk song.³ Placing these references in the Irish framework extends their meaning. The allusion to the Greeks’ painful but successful struggle to shed the Turkish occupation “annunciates” another struggle, one against the reign of the Colonels, and yet another, the personal struggle of the Northern Irish poet years later.

In “To George Seferis in the Underworld” Heaney juxtaposes the Greek references with his own experience. Similarly to Seferis, he invokes two of the traditions on which his own homeland rests, his inner split stemming from these traditions and his linguistic background, i.e. the Ulster dialect and Anglo-Saxon. Language in Ireland has been an issue of history and politics, and Heaney has been conceiving of it in these terms ever since his first collections of poems (most evident in the “linguistic” poems such as “Anahorish” or “Traditions”) and essays (“Mossbawn”) through to his recent translation of *Beowulf*. Anglo-Saxon stands for one of the conquests, while Ulster Scots should stand for another. Yet the two are somehow domesticated, the former as the root language of his learning, the latter as a dialect of his *locale*. The Ulster dialect thus functions similarly to the Irish language, since it was this particular variety, not Irish, that the Heaneys spoke at home. In this

² In Keeley’s translation it does not sound so clear: “aspalathoi with their huge thorns . . . already out” (Seferis, *Collected* 223); Levi’s translation is more faithful, though it uses “gorse” instead of “aspalathoi”: “gorse / with big needles ready” (Barlow 61).

³ This information comes from The Education Research Centre of Greece website. I have discovered that the song includes the homophone of a term for “campaign troops” (σεφέρι [seferi]), bringing up the pun on the poet’s name.

respect it reminds one of Longley's practice in a similar context, when he comments on the Northern conflict in the framework of ancient Greek history, myth, literature and landscape.

Using the word *seggans*, which in Ulster Scots designates a species of wild iris, Heaney explores its onomatopoeic potential or even projects his feelings about the two traditions – Ulster Scots and Anglo-Saxon – onto the word itself:

And for me a chance to test the edge
of *seggans*, dialect blade
hoar and harder and more hand-to-hand
than what is common usage nowadays:
sedge – marshmallow, rubber-dagger stuff.

The origin of the word “sedge” is the Anglo-Saxon *secg*; the connotation is further confirmed by the kenning-like similes “marshmallow” and “rubber-dagger,” and also by the Old English etymology of “marsh” and “mallow.” Similarly to Seferis (consciously or not, since his encoding of the dictators' names in the last line has been lost in translation), Heaney [p. 21] ciphers his message in Ulster Scots, whose edge he tests against the English one. Both poets engage in a guerilla war: Heaney in hand-to-hand combat, turning his native proximate power of the dialect against the widespread official language, the “common usage” (in the first version of the poem he “smuggles [*seggans*] back in / like a dialect blade”⁴), while Seferis some decades earlier executes the so-called “Turn” in Greek literature, sealing with his poetic excellence the literary application of the demotic language.

To understand it, one has to realize that, just like in Ireland, the language in Greece fell prey to history and politics. After Greece regained its independence, the language issue divided the nation into the supporters of the demotic speech, influenced by the centuries of Turkish occupation, and those in favor of the purist, stilted version based on ancient Greek, *katharevousa*. *Katharevousa* was used by the dictatorship, and hence demotic Greek came to be perceived in terms of the political opposition.

The language issue is further developed by the epigraph to Heaney's poem. In this short excerpt Roderick Beaton recalls the trip to Sounion: “The men began arguing about the spiky bushes that were in brilliant yellow bloom on the slope: were they caltrop or gorse? . . . ‘That reminds me of something,’ said George. ‘I don't know.’” Looking at their surroundings that spring of 1971, Seferis came up with the ancient term for the plant used by Plato (*aspalathoi*).⁵ By extension, Seferis's translators follow the same “encoding” line, avoiding the English terms of

⁴ Published in *Times Literary Supplement* 5268 (2004) – Barlow 58-59.

⁵ The actual Greek word is still in use; the shrub is used in Greece for fencing.

similar plants, “gorse” or “caltrop,” in favour of the literal Greek “aspalathoi.” Heaney makes this sort of linguistic preference one of the keys and a starting point for his own story:

That greeny stuff about your feet
is asphodel and rightly so,
but why do I think *seggans*?

It seems worthwhile to indulge a while in botany. Gorse, (bog) asphodel, and sedge are all characteristic of Irish and Greek landscapes; of the lily family (asphodel) or resembling irises (*seggans*), sword-like, with common names such as “King’s spear” (asphodel), “daggers,” “Jacob’s sword” (*seggans*); derived from the root meaning “sword” (sedge and *seggans* – Grieve); thorny bushes (aspalathoi and gorse); associated with [p. 22] death (asphodel, *seggans*, aspalathoi). Gorse and asphodel have already been explored in this context by other Irish poets, namely Derek Mahon quoting Seferis’s *Mythistorema* in “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford,” and Michael Longley, whose *Gorse Fires* opens with an imaginary transport of the speaker to Greece while his body remains in the West of Ireland: “from the high ground of Carrigskeewaun / I watch Lesbos rising among the islands” (“Sea Shanty,” *Gorse Fires* 1). As Longley mentions in one of the interviews (*Metre* 18-19), he perceives “ancient Greece in terms of Ireland and . . . the Greek landscape in terms of the Irish landscape,” while he has “often thought that that [“his part of Mayo”] . . . looks like Greece [especially like “sandy and remote Ithaca”]. Or Greece looks like a dust-bowl version of Ireland.” In his “translations” from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Longley incorporates Irish landscapes and place names, over which looms the spectre of the Ulster conflict. His perspective at Carrigskeewaun recalls that of Mahon thinking of different Greek isles, Paros and Naxos, in Achill, a different corner of Co. Mayo (Mahon, “Achill” 156), and that of Seferis; all three poets look out at the sea contemplating the light.

Yet all of these poets also look down, shifting the long view to a close-up in darkness: Seferis looks about his feet at Sounion and comes up with aspalathoi; Heaney looks about Seferis’s feet in Hades and comes up with asphodels and *seggans*; Mahon looks down in deserted places and comes up with asphodels and fungi; while Longley observes “a bog meadow full of bog-asphodels.” In “Butchers” Longley uses an Ulster Scots word in the description of Odysseus’s slaughter of the suitors, and by doing so transports the frame of the Greek myth to Belfast and its surroundings, then controlled by the Protestant gang Shankill Butchers. Longley engages in a parallel linguistic practice to that of Heaney, probing the potential of Ulster Scots in a foreign context to report on the

current state of affairs in his own land (even more obvious examples of this practice are “The Vision of Theoclymenus” or “Phemios and Medon” written almost entirely in Ullans).⁶

Longley’s variations upon Homeric themes relate to Heaney’s poem also via Sounion. The first mention of the place name appears in the *Odyssey*, when Poseidon condemns Odysseus to exile and hinders his return to Ithaca. Heaney in his poem pictures Poseidon in terms of the light, the air and water, connecting these elements with the otherworld and Seferis’s open poetic and political position, which he seems to challenge.

Seferis’s reference to Poseidon’s temple at Sounion, anonymous and elusive, closes his description of the place: “In the distance the ancient [p. 23] columns, strings of a harp still vibrating...” The next part opens with *γαλήνη* (“peace”). Heaney’s description sounds as follows:

And [I think] of a spring day
in your days of ‘71: Poseidon
making waves in sea and air
around Cape Sounion, its very name
all ozone-breeze and cavern-boom,
too utterly this-wordly, George, for you
intent upon an otherwordly scene
somewhere just beyond
the summit ridge, the cutting edge
of not remembering.

The bloody light. To hell with it.
Close eyes and concentrate.

The god’s juggle with the elements evokes the scenes of his wrath against Odysseus; by means of such a description Heaney seems to put Seferis in Odysseus’s shoes. Indeed, Seferis has always felt like an outcast: he and his family fell prey to the greatest tragedy of the Greek nation in the 20th century, i.e. their expulsion from Asia Minor in 1922. The “otherwordly scene” triggers a chain of associations. First and foremost, it refers to Seferis’s images of the afterlife in “On Aspalathoi;” next, to the Greek poet’s impending death; and last but not least, to his poetry and stance during the dictatorship, which some regarded as passive. The “not remembering” may thus signify the Lethe River in the netherworld, which seems to be confirmed by Heaney at the outset of the next stanza (“To hell with it.”); yet this oblivion reappears in the political context in another stanza that follows, referring to the “much contested silence” of the Greek poet. The above-quoted fragment of Heaney’s poem would seem to suggest that the light, the air, space and openness bear for the author negative connotations – if it wasn’t for the ironic tone of his references to Seferis.

⁶ Tom Paulin could also be discussed at length in this context.

Already in the opening stanza he uses an off-hand, casual tone that belittles the grave circumstances (“that greeny stuff”) and questions their obviousness, simultaneously imposing the Irish framework (“but why do I think *seggans*?”). He seems not only to pass judgement on Seferis’s position, both political and poetic, but also to condemn it by spotting asphodels at his feet, i.e. placing him in the Asphodel Meadows. This specific region of Hades was purposed for lower souls of indifferent life value, judged neither good nor bad; although it was also home to despairing heroes. An even stronger statement emerges in the title of [p. 24] Heaney’s poem, “To George Seferis in the Underworld,” a mirror to one of the preceding poems, “To Mike Joyce in Heaven” (*District* 8-10); and despite a slightly different address, hell comes in the third stanza (“To hell with it”) veiled as a colloquial collocation in a sort of blasphemous context. Yet Heaney himself seems to be of two minds about the Greek poet’s stance: he continues to ironize about his neutrality, but towards the end becomes his brother-in-arms. This ambiguity reveals much about his own dilemmas and actions in the time of the Northern Irish conflict.

Heaney mocks the airy-fairy aura surrounding Seferis on that day at Sounion, the aura he untowardly calls “too utterly this-wordly” for the Greek poet intent “somewhere *just* beyond,” as if Seferis was hesitating whether to cross that frontier or not, whether to escape from reality or stay and suffer it. By restoring literal meaning to words and collocations in the opening line of the next stanza (“bloody” and “to hell with it”), Heaney ironically distances himself from the whole scene narrated by the Greek poet. I have called this context “sort of blasphemous” since the light, usually associated with the divine, and here additionally “consecrated” by the literal meaning of “bloody,” i.e. the reference to the Passion, is being cursed and sent to hell.⁷ This line also relates to what I have mentioned at the beginning: it sounds like a denial of the epiphany. Tracing back Seferis’s train of thoughts, his elimination of the Christian theme (Passion) in favour of antiquity:

Not crown of thorns, not sceptre reed
or Herod’s court, but ha!
You had it! A harrowing, yes, in hell,”

Heaney comments on Seferis’s choices with ironic exclamations, only to conclude, after the Plato story, with a didactic statement: “As was only right / for a tyrant,” as if he had just wrapped up a fable with a moral. This might divulge his opinion on Seferis’s practice: here is a poet who, instead of an open critique of the regime, engages in simple-minded truths, masquerading as myths on top of that. Yet Heaney seems to demystify that artlessness and makes a reservation:

⁷ Though of course one remembers Christ’s own descent to hell after death, which generally goes with the ambiguity of Heaney’s poem (the line could then be interpreted in terms of a Manichaean struggle).

. . . But still, for you, maybe
too much i' the right, too black and white,
if still your chance to strike [p. 25]
against his ilk,
a last word meant to break
your much contested silence,

where Seferis re-emerges as an oversensitive Hamlet irresolute about his revenge. With the “much contested silence” Heaney strikes an even more accusative note than in the first version of his poem, where he called that silence “elected.”

In fact, the situation is far more complex. First of all, poetry for Seferis was “an act of confidence,” as he famously said in his Nobel presentation speech (Nobel). In “On Aspalathoi” he sounds more irresolute about hope than about revenge, bracketing his *γαλήνη* in thorns. Second, rather than the fable, his story has more to do with the laws of Greek tragedy, which, starting with blasphemy, going through punishment and revenge should end up in katharsis. Third, there may be a shorter distance between Christianity and antiquity for Seferis that Heaney seems to sense: quite a number of Greeks believe in the continuity of the ancient religion in the Christian one; Seferis was one of them, claiming that the principle of that blend of beliefs lies in the specifics of the Greek light.⁸ “On Aspalathoi,” his “last word,” was published posthumously; yet Seferis broke his silence two years earlier, in 1969, with his historic broadcast on the BBC, a straightforward statement against the dictatorship. Two years before, in 1967, the Colonels seized power; and for those two years he would not publish any new work, in protest against the regime and censorship. Heaney, on the other hand, believed that in the same period in Northern Ireland (the outset of the conflict) “the writers did not feel the need to address themselves to the specific questions of politics because they assumed that the subtleties and tolerances of their art were precisely what they had to contribute to the coarseness and intolerance of the public life” (Heaney, “Place” 128) although open statements in *North* or *Field Work* followed; earlier, his moving South was interpreted in opposite terms, as an escapist move.

Now, forty years after the publication of “Digging,” Heaney draws the eponymous circle with his pen “snug as a gun.” In his description of Seferis’s last act, he smuggles in a word that combines Anglo-Saxon and Scots: “ilk,” i.e. “type,” also used in the Scottish phrase “of that ilk” (“of the place”), not only heralding his preoccupations with language and place [p. 26] in the next stanza, but also aligning himself with the Greek poet in “striking against” the enemy. His declaration of war sounds far more decisive:

⁸ “An idea becomes an object with surprising ease. It seems to become all but physically incarnated in the web of the sun” (Seferis, “Letter”).

. . . for me a chance to test the edge
of *seggans*, dialect blade
hoar and harder and more hand-to-hand
than what is common usage nowadays:
sedge – marshmallow, rubber-dagger stuff.

The sharp elements patently denote weapons – yet strangely enough, they also echo the “cutting edge / of not remembering” ascribed earlier to Seferis’s non-action. This seems to be double-edged “stuff;” one can sense a certain unease despite this open declaration; this is “just” “testing,” a story that gives Seferis “a *chance* to strike” and Heaney “a *chance* to test” his linguistic weapon. Additionally, here is the revelation of another fact of etymology, which I have already mentioned: “sedge” and “*seggans*” have a common root, the Anglo-Saxon *secg*, meaning “sword” or “spear.” Double-edged stuff indeed; the whole fight seems as much external as it is internal, and it is no longer clear where the enemy stands.

I would risk the statement that despite the ironic tone of the whole poem, it discloses the hesitations characteristic of Heaney’s own stance towards the conflict in Ulster. Just as Seferis was digging in Hades, so Heaney has been digging in many places, searching for the truth, not “epiphaneia,” on the surface, in “the bloody light” of the events, but “ha! / You had it!.” in darkness – which was perceived by some as an evasion of that same truth.

Another poet who refers straightforwardly to Seferis in the same context is Mahon in “A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford” (89). He introduces it with an epigraph from the last poem of Seferis’s cycle *Mythistorema*: “Let them not forget us, the weak souls among the asphodels.” As I have mentioned, the weak souls were the ones whose life was judged neutral; Mahon devotes the whole poem to the unknown dead, victims of totalitarian regimes, natural disasters, technological progress, civil wars, expropriations, all of whom he perceives – by means of that epigraph – in terms of ordinary human beings. The poem is wrapped in darkness; the only light, symbolic of the source of life or hope, is accessible via the keyhole to which they are crowding as if for breath or hope:

A thousand mushrooms crowd to a keyhole.
This is the one star in their firmament
Or frames a star within a star. . .

[p. 27] In the *Odyssey* these souls flutter round heroes like bats, blind creatures able to live only in the dark; they pester them like parasites, and so they appear in Mahon’s poems in the form of fungi. They feed on memories, remnants or expectations. Theirs is the desolate land of silent, incessant decay “dim in a twilight,” in the midst of which these “magi, moonmen / Powdery prisoners of the old regime” nagged by nightmares and insomnia pine for discovery by history, for

memory, company and “deliverance.” These dreams seem to be revealed by the invasive, destructive light of a chance passer-by:

only the ghost of a scream
At the flashbulb firing squad we wake them with
Shows there is life yet in their feverish forms. . .

We clearly see that it is not only darkness that is opposed to light in this world on the border of life and death, but that the very light has an equivocal function as a life-giving and a life-taking principle, even though the latter results from deprivation: the prisoner gets killed by the sudden liberation. The speaker, with his technical devices, intrudes upon their intimacy, just as modern visitors trouble the peace of historical sites of massive death he mentions in the poem. And yet these half-alive forms offer their average lives and their suffering in return for the light, begging him: “You with your light meter and relaxed itinerary, / Let not our naive labours have been in vain!” In Seferis’s poem they offered something that seems precious since it is unattainable for the living: *γαλήνη* (“Μυθιστόρημα ΚΔ’,” *Ποιήματα* 71) – yet another time the sort of calm I discussed in reference to “On Aspalathoi” (here translated as “serenity”).

Here end the works of the sea, the works of love.
Those who will some day live here where we end –
should the blood happen to darken in their memory and overflow –
let them not forget us, the weak souls among the asphodels,
let them turn the heads of the victims towards Erebus:

We who had nothing will school them in serenity.
(Seferis, *Mythistorema* 24, *Collected* 28)

They also long for memory, even though in the fourth poem of this series, Seferis ends his comment on the death of his voyage companions with “No one remembers them. Justice” (Seferis, *Mythistorema* 24, *Collected* 7). Both Mahon’s and Seferis’s souls live at the border of two worlds; but while Mahon’s souls claim they had “their lives to live” and tend to choke and suicidally push their way to the source of light, chasing their dream to [p. 28] be reincarnated (as subjects of photography, research, chronicle), Seferis’s souls, having reached the end of the sea (like himself at Sounion) and of the sea voyage, claim they “had nothing” in life and yet claim to possess the knowledge of inner harmony, which they want to pass to future generations. This calm seems hard-gained or dubious – this is Seferis’s *shantih* closing the cycle of poems about turbulent voyages, absence and loss – yet the protagonists’ composed manner, balanced tone, and the presence of death rituals which Mahon’s souls have been denied all stand in quite a striking contrast to the frantic panic filling the void space in Co. Wexford. Mahon’s souls are displaced to the rubbish heap and

look back; Seferis's souls are in their element and look forward. The former want to be remembered; the latter also want to teach.

Asphodel Meadows were revealed to Odysseus on his descent to Hades for Tiresias's prophecy concerning his going home. Seferis, Heaney and Mahon set out on their personal *Odysseys* either in search of their home ground, or on the contrary, from their native islands they set off for abroad to gain distance in relation to home. One of the clues to the usage of Seferis's texts by the two Irish poets – both in terms of similarity and difference with respect to the original – may lie in the Greek poet's understanding of tradition and of the very word *γαλήνη*. In such comparative analyses one cannot disregard essential differences between the countries, obviously. Yet it was not only Joyce who set the action of *Ulysses* in Dublin; it was also Seferis who once said that “the Irish are the Greeks of the North” (qtd. in “New Aer Lingus”).

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