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Literary tourism and the Shaping of Space and Identity in Victoria Hislop's novel *The Island*

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Abstract
The paper discusses the historical romantic novel *The Island* (2005) by contemporary British writer Victoria Hislop (b. 1959) in the context of literary tourism. Hislop set her novel on Crete, depicting the tragic and a long-time silenced part of Greek history connected with the leper colony on the island of Spinalonga in the years 1903 to 1957. Hislop's novel became an international bestseller and turned the island, together with the Elounda Gulf and town Agios Nikolaos, into one of the most popular tourist areas in Crete. Focusing on the effect of the novel on the place, the paper predominantly discusses the presentation of the setting from a perspective of literary tourism studies, addressing the psychological impact of a literary travel on the tourist-protagonist.

Key words
literary tourism; The Island*; historical romance; tourist gaze; Spinalonga*

Tourism has become a significant social and cultural phenomenon that is currently widely discussed across various disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, culture studies, or literature. While the majority of researchers focus on the role of markets, and generally on the economic side of the industry (Tribe and Mkono, 2017), literary tourism scholars foreground the actual experience of a different culture or place that significantly affects the lives of both fictional characters and tourists (Turner 1975, 1975, Jaimangal-Jones 2010). The vast impact of the spatial turn in humanities has turned literary tourism into one of the fastest growing fields of tourism studies, though the preoccupation with the place affecting literary production remains, conforming Nicola J. Watson's (2009) claim that the interdisciplinary study of literary tourism remains, "a blind spot" (4). Besides Walter Benjamin or Ronald Barthes, few researchers attempted to create a link between tourism and literature. While Watson (2009) admits that several critics have examined travel literature, be it Ian Ousby's exploration of the making of the Lake District (*The Englishman's England*, 1990) or James Buzard's research on the influence of Byron's poetry on the tourist experience (*The Beaten Track*, 1990), scholars have mostly focused on the impact of the place upon the writer (Watson 2009: 9). Watson's observation remains valid even in the second

decade of the 21st century, be it Charlie Mansfield, who provides a historical perspective on literary tourism, discussing the literary devices which make places more attractive to visitors (*Researching Literary Tourism*, 2015), or Ian Jenkins and Kartin Anna Lund, whose study *Literary Tourism: Theories, Practice and Case Studies* (2019) examines the current trends of development as well as their impact on the global market.

The rise of social media, e-books and audio books has further contributed to the dramatic changes of both the perception or consumption, as well as the construction and representation of tourist destinations. The crucial role of the screen is discussed by Sheela Agarwal and Gareth Shaw in their study *Heritage, Screen and Literary Tourism* (2017), which provides alternative critical perspectives on the heritage, screen mechanisms, and tourism, or by Marianna Sigala and Ulrike Gretzel, who focus on the role of technologies and social media in *Advances in Social Media for Travel, Tourism and Hospitality: New Perspectives, Practice and Cases* (2017). The importance of online presentations and virtual tourism has grown in the last year, where the growing role of social media are examined in connection with the COVID-19 epidemics, focusing on the recommendations and guidelines concerning travel (see, e.g., Shanaleigh Hebbard, *Tourism, Travel & Covid-19*, 2020, or Godwell Nhamo, Kaitano Dube, and David Chikodzu, *Counting the Cost of COVID-19 on the Global Tourism Industry*, 2020). Where possible the tourist advertisements highlighted the outdoor activities, be it structured walks or cycling routes.

1. Britain and the Tradition of Literary Tourism

As a British writer, Hislop has a great tradition of literary tourism to turn to. Santesso (2004) traces the roots of cultural and literary tourism to the 17th-century Britain, where the concept was introduced at the time in the form of the Grand Tour on which the social elite was granted audiences with important cultural figures: John Milton and Thomas Hobbes met Galileo, for instance, and James Boswell and Edward Gibbon visited Voltaire. These excursions thus primarily served educational rather than touristy purposes.

Early forms of cultural tourism were reflected in poetry, e.g., in John Denham's *Coopers Hill: A Poeme* (1642), where the traveller appropriates foreign cultural artefacts, usually by purchasing the objects of their interest. These early tourists did not travel to specifically adapted authors' houses or "historical simulacra" that would be ready for consumption (379–80). Harald Hendrix (2009) observes that this practice changed at the turn of the 19th century, when British romantic literary tourism was setting tone to this phenomenon for other European countries and reflected the relationship among readers, writers and fiction, and the rise of popular culture: "The invention of specific textual genres like the Homes and Haunts books, the construction of writers' houses as literary shrines, and the tourist transformation and development of entire regions according to their supposed literary representation explains the enormous popularity of such tourism" (13). The accessibility and educational aspect of such conduct was based

on Wordsworth's observation that a model of a landscape provided a "more substantial pleasure; for the sublime and beautiful region, with all its hidden treasures, and their bearings and relations to each other, was thereby comprehended and understood at once" (1873: 515).The impact of literary tourism on the presentation and perception of the United Kingdom and its role of setting values promoted by tourist guidebooks is currently a trending issue. The (imagined) geographies and literary associations of places of the Romantic and Victorian era have been analysed by Nicola J. Watson in her studies *The Literary Tourist: Readers and Places in Romantic and Victorian Britain* (2006) and *Literary Tourism and Nineteenth-Century Culture* (2009), or in Samantha Matthews's volume *Poetical Remains: Poets' Graves, Bodies, and Books in the Nineteenth Century* (2004). Daniel Weston focuses on current representations of landscape in *Contemporary Literary Landscapes: The Poetics of Experience* (2016), while LuAnn McCranken Fletcher have edited a representative volume *Literary Tourism and the British Isles: History, Imagination, and the Politics of Place* (2019), discussing the legacy of Wordsworth, the Brontë sisters or Shakespeare, as well as the significance of specific locations, such as the Limehouse, or the Western British-Irish Isles.

While it is not uncommon for the British writers to choose a foreign setting (see, e.g., Kim Devereux's *Rembrandt's Mirror* [2015], Rose Tremain's novels *Trespass* [2010], or *Gustav's Sonata* 2016]), none of them sought to affect or affected the idea of the place as significantly as Hislop's *Island*. For her novel, Hislop chose an unlikely literary location: the island of Spinalonga, a rocky and barren island with a moving history, situated in north-eastern Crete. Originally a part of the coast, in 1526, under Venetian occupation, it was carved out and marked as a strategic defence point. The Venetians also gave it its current name: Spinalonga. In 1715, the island became part of the Ottoman Empire, and after the last Turks left the island in 1903, the Greek government turned it into a leper colony.

As Walraven (2011) states in his study *Health and Poverty: Global Health Problems and Solutions*, in the first half of the 20th century, leprosy was stigmatised and understood in old Biblical terms, even though in 1873 Hendrik Armauer Hansen identified the germ causing leprosy and proved that the disease was neither hereditary nor a consequence of sin. In 1941, a sulfone drug in the form of injections was discovered. Because of the necessity of long-term administration, in the 1950s this method was replaced by dapsone pills. Unfortunately, the bacteria Mycobacterium leprae soon developed dapsone resistance. The first successful treatment was thus introduced as late as the 1970s (Walraven 2011: 98). Despite the available cures, leprosy was not the primary Greek concern during the Second World War (Spinalonga n.d.), as Greece struggled economically. Those diagnosed with leprosy were bereaved of their citizenship rights and property, and were deported to the Spinalonga Island (Warkentin 2017). The island's primary concern lay in the insufficient amount of drinking water and the inability to grow fresh food. In 1933, the colony counted 954 inhabitants. The situation improved after 1936, when a lawyer from Athens named Epaminondas Remoundakis was affected by leprosy and took legal steps to address the government. The colony was closed down in 1957, while the last inhabitant left the island in 1962 (Spinalonga n.d.). Currently, Spinalonga serves as an open-air museum (also featuring

a small museum of the island). Only certain parts of the island, however, are accessible. In 2019, the island was nominated to UNESCO to obtain World Heritage Site status. The Greek Ministry of Education provided €6 million for the maintenance of the island; still, the ticket price was raised from €2 to €8 due to the enormous number of tourists (Drakonakis 2017).

The island and its largely silenced history had been largely overlooked until the publication of Hislop's novel. Until then, the place and its atmosphere captured the attention of only a handful of writers and directors: it appears in Werner Herzog's experimental short film *Last Words* (1976) and the British television series *Who Pays the Ferryman?* (1977). It is also featured as a setting of Ali Smith's short story "The Touching of Wood" (in the collection *Free Love and Other Stories*, 1995) and John Ware's horror tale "Spinalonga" published in *13th Pan Book of Horror* (1972). As it becomes evident from the above-mentioned works, Spinalonga functioned mainly as a setting in non-mainstream production (an experimental movie and a horror story). *The Island* has become the first novel to employ Spinalonga as a subject matter, addressing not only the history of the leper colony but also Cretan culture and history.

Hislop's novel has sold over two million copies and has been translated into more than 20 languages. Its significant influence on the region is well manifested in the enthusiastic Greek reception of the screen adaptation. After refusing a Hollywood offer, Hislop accepted the proposal of the Greek broadcaster Mega to turn the novel into a mini-series and consequently served as a script consultant. Following the critical acclaim and commercial success of the book in Crete and the whole of Greece, the series *To Nisi* (The Island, 2010–11) became the most popular Greek television series of all time (Hislop n.d.).

Hislop relates how, at the time of writing the novel, she had no knowledge of the Greek language and therefore had done no serious research into the life on the island. As she recalls, "[e]verything about the island itself, the patients and the doctors came from my imagination as I sat at my desk back in England. Indeed, Manoli was the first European with leprosy that I had ever met" (Hislop 2011: 125). Not only was Manoli Foundoulakis the first person affected by leprosy whom Hislop met but he was also the last inhabitant of the island. While worried that he would find her story inaccurate, she was pleasantly surprised to hear that it was her novel and subsequent series that "lifted the stigma which had blighted his life for so many years" (Hislop 2011: 126). After their meeting, Foundoulakis agreed to become the chief advisor and consultant for the series. On the last day of shooting, Manoli finally felt "free from this curse". However, he passed away before the premiere (Drakonakis 2017).

In 2017, the cast and crew organised a gathering on the island to share memories of the shooting. What they especially appreciated was the sensitive approach of the series creators to the darker times of Greek history and the emphasis on, and celebration of, Cretan culture and heritage on the part of both the book and the series. Margarita Panousopoulou recalled that for her role she had to learn to use the traditional Cretan loom and praised the support of Victoria Hislop, who helped the cast shake off the emotional burden over a glass of raki (Drakonakis 2017). Another cast member, Anastasia Tsilimpou, was moved by the welcome the

crew received from the locals, whom she called "the sweetest kind of people on earth ... [who] were full of pride and honour by the fact that we came to work on their land" (Drakonakis 2017).

Once Spinalonga and the whole area of Elounda Bay became a much sought-after tourist attraction, other writers have used the island as their inspiration: in 2006, only one year after the publication of Hislop's novel, another British writer, Beryl Darby, finished the first part of her Cretan family saga *Yannis* based on the life story of a young man born in the village of Plaka, who is diagnosed with leprosy and exiled to Spinalonga. To day, the series consists of 23 volumes, following the history of one family from the year 1918 till present days. For this literary endeavour, Darby used the extra material which she had gathered for the first tourist guide of the island: *Spinalonga: The Leper Island* (1984); in 2013, she published an update entitled *Spinalonga: The Leper's Home*, highlighting the aspects of community and family rather than the disease. Furthermore, in 2012, Nike Azoros, Australian writer of Greek parentage, wrote *The Eagle of Spinalonga: Some People were Born to Soar, No Matter What*, and five years later, Greek writer Anna Giakoumaki published a historical drama *Spinalonga: The True Story* (2017), which is based on twelve years of research, providing a historically accurate portrait of the leper community.

2. *The Island* as a tourist novel

The rising popularity of literary tourism can be accounted for not only by the rise of mobility in general but also by current emphasis on the visual and sensual aspects of culture. The rise of social media and widely accessible technologies transformed the process of seeing and understanding of the visual in general (Howes 2006: 402). Literary tourism offers its readers not only the possibility to literally (and/or virtually) follow the steps of the author's life or their characters'; yet its major role is often left unnoticed: it is the more intimate and immediate perspective that provokes a much deeper emotional response in the traveller and rarely leaves them unmarked by the experience. Unlike more or less factual travel guides, fiction offers the reader a potentially transformative pre-reading of the space.

In literary texts, a change of location is rarely purely geographical. Following the tradition of quest narratives, in the coming of age novels or novels of initiation, the change of space and the otherness of the landscape serve primarily as a tool of emotional and ethical development of the protagonist. These effects are, however, not limited to fiction only, as Dean MacCannell observes: "Sightseeing is one of the most individualized, intimate, and effective ways we attempt to grasp and make sense of the world and our place in it. Sightseeing is psyche" (2013: 6). Facing the unknown, or the other, in nature, culture or community affects the seers and offers them a space to contemplate and negotiate their identity as the spatial dislocation separates them from their community and social structure.

This ethical potential of tourism, together with its rising affordability, turns many fiction books with travel motifs into bestsellers. Yet few of them leave such

a permanent mark on the place which they feature as Victoria Hislop's novel *The Island*. Set in London and Crete, it tells a story of a young British woman named Alexis Fielding who goes on a vacation to Crete to discover her family roots and history that significantly affects her identity and helps her find her inner peace and happiness.

Hislop's novel and its depiction of the tragic and long-time silenced part of Cretan history resonated with her readers, who suddenly wished to see the landscape and the island itself. The novel is therefore attractive and specific in the sense that it does not promote the author's home culture. Moreover, Spinalonga was not a birth or burial place of any famous writer, no cultural artefact of international value was created there and, before Hislop, no critically acclaimed work of art used it as the setting. What makes the place attractive for tourists is its history, which Hislop's emotional narrative provided with a human, touching dimension, enabling the readers to relate to the fate of the novel's characters. Still, despite its popularity as a tourist destination, Spinalonga does not showcase any "staged authenticity" (Urry 1995: 192), i.e., evidence of the leper colony existence in the form of theme park or performance, and as such, remains authentic. While Hislop's romance turned history into a relatable modern story, it is the reader who, with the help of the book, fills in the missing details.

The major part of the novel is devoted to the history of Spinalonga and its community in the years 1939 to 1957, unfolding the story of the protagonist's great-grandmother Eleni and her family, whose life was affected not only by leprosy, but also the German occupation of Crete during the Second World War. While the historical drama and everyday life in the village of Plaka are depicted with attention to details, there is no major character development. To emphasise the topicality and impact of history on the present, Hislop framed the retrospective narration of the historical events by a contemporary narrative set in London, where a young and relatable protagonist Alexis Fielding sets out on a journey of self-discovery and presents her experience from a tourist perspective. The novel's structure and the protagonist's quest correspond with the current metamodern trends of oscillation between seemingly conflicting concepts and ideologies, including mainly (though not exclusively) nationalism and globalism, conservatism and liberalism, and individualism and collectivism. Tourism, including literary tourism, serves as a means of self-discovery, reflecting the current desire for authenticity. As Franklin and Crang observe, "[t]he tourist and styles of tourist consumption are not only emblematic of many features of contemporary life, such as mobility, restlessness, the search for authenticity and escape, but they are increasingly central to ... the consumption of place and the anesthetisation of everyday life" (2001: 19). The quest for the genuine romance, together with motifs of escape, is one of the characteristic features of popular novels that often seek to revitalise the past and highlight the natural, romantic and the naïve, including Hislop's *The Island*.

While the depiction of the history of Plaka and Spinalonga occupies the majority of the novel, it is conceived as a story narrated to Alexis by a local family friend. It is therefore emotionally coloured and simplified so that the "outsider" can understand not the historical facts, but the impact history had on the lives of ordinary people. Despite her lack of knowledge of Greek, Hislop therefore

managed to produce a narrative that has an authentic feel. For the purpose of this study, the major attention is paid to Alexis and her changing understanding of place and history.

Hislop's novel opens like many romantic summer books: the twenty-five-year-old, intelligent and beautiful Alexis Fielding has just finished a degree in history and archaeology, finds a job in a museum and is about to get married. While her mother approves of the relationship, hoping for her daughter to have a secure future, Alexis has her doubts. Her fiancé is handsome, intelligent and financially secure, but she does not find him sufficiently sensitive, feeling that his prosperity, need for order and rationality are crushing her down.

Moreover, Alexis feels that she is losing touch with history and archaeology, as she suddenly cannot relate to events happening in ancient times: "[T]he bullock she had passed on the road earlier that day had considerably more reality and relevance to her life than the Minotaur at the centre of the legendary Cretan labyrinth ever could" (Hislop 2005: 6). Disregarding her job as secondary, she fully concentrates on her love life. Because she views her parents' relationship as an ideal, she hopes to be inspired by their story of true love; yet her mother Sophia is reluctant to talk about her past and keeps the family history a secret.

Determined to find out the truth about her ancestors that would help her decide on her future, Alexis Fielding flies to Crete with her fiancé, equipped with a letter to a close family-friend, who might hold the key to the secrets of the past. The beginning thus follows a formula of the majority of romantic or summer books: a young woman leaves her homeland to postpone and reconsider major decisions she is about to make, especially concerning her marriage, and sets out on the quest for love and meaning of her life.

Leaving her partner on a beach in Iraklion, she sets out alone on her journey to the north-east of Crete, to the village of Plaka, to visit her mother's old friend. Once she gets there, she notices a small rocky islet near Plaka's shore and decides to pay it a visit, as she recognises it as famous archaeological site. The first sight and impressions of Spinalonga are thus presented through the eyes of a tourist, or, as John Urry calls it, "tourist gaze," which is specific because of the expectations and intensity (Urry 2002: 1). This gaze further includes anticipation created by the media, or in the case of Hislop's protagonist, her previous study of history. Her depiction of the island is thus already reflecting the pre-knowledge and her gaze is intentional, searching for evidence and traces of the near history, especially that of the leper colony.

When she arrives at the island, she is overwhelmed by fear as she has never been alone in her life (that was a time when Spinalonga did not have a museum and was not full of tourists). As she admits, "[s]he had never been so entirely alone, had rarely been more than a few metres from the next human being and, except for her sleep, never out of touch with other people for more than an hour or so. Her dependency suddenly felt like a millstone" (Hislop 2005: 25). Her tourist gaze, therefore, serves also as a source of contrast between her comfortable and sheltered life and the fate of the inhabitants of Spinalonga.

As Urry claims, "[t]he tourist gaze is directed to features of landscape and townscape which separate them off everyday experience. Such aspects are viewed

because they are taken to be in some sense out of the ordinary ... with much greater sensitivity to visual elements" (2002: 3). Alexis takes in the overall atmosphere, as well as the ruins of houses, with much greater attention than the palace of Knossos or her home. She tries to put herself into the lepers' shoes, walking down the narrow streets, sensing the isolation and loneliness. According to Löfgren, we shall

> [v]iew vacationing as a cultural laboratory where people have been able to experiment with new aspects of identities, their social relations or their interactions with nature and also to use the important cultural skills of daydreaming and mindtraveling. Here is an arena in which fantasy has become an important social practice. (1999: 7)

Alexis projects into the space her own feelings of despair, frustration and limitation, reading her inner struggles into the landscape. Her metaphorically projection of her own struggles and the imagined suffering of the colony inhabitants, turns her into a spectator of the historical tragedy and brings her a sense of catharsis and freedom. The place and Alexis's reading of the place make her realise that the island was not inhabited by fictional characters but real people, confirming MacCannell's remark that "[m]odern Man is losing his attachments to the work bench, the neighbourhood, the town, the family, which he once called 'his own' but, at the same time, he is developing an interest in the 'real lives' of others" (2013: 91). The ordinariness of everyday life and overall dissatisfaction, which in Alexis's case comprises a job she cannot find joy in, her family she knows nothing of, and a fiancé whom she does not love, is substituted by her interest in the lives of the lepers, making her feel almost like in a dream. She moves through the colony "spellbound. It was like sleepwalking. This was not a dream and yet there was something entirely unreal about it" (Hislop 2005: 27). Still, the barren island serves Alexis as a tool for getting in touch with reality. As MacCannell observes, all tourists embark on an ideal(istic) "universal quest for authentic experience" (2013: 146) that requires another place or other times. When Alexis immerses from her dreamy meditation on the "real lives" of the lepers, she in fact contemplates her own situation, eventually realising that being alone does not necessarily imply being lonely, and is determined to end her engagement.

Moreover, her heightened sensibility towards her personal issues in connection with her intent tourist gaze enables her to set aside her preconceived notions of history and tune to the human and more ordinary aspects of the lives in the colony, thus avoiding the danger Walter Benjamin warned against in his famous essay "On the Concept of History", where he claims that history is always written by those with "empathy with the victor" (2003: 406), forgetting "the anonymous toil" (2003: 392) of their contemporaries. Instead, Alexis rightly interprets the fortress, narrow streets and dilapidated houses as embodiments of suffering, pain, prejudice, or, in Benjamin's words: "There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (2003: 392). Employing her knowledge of history, Alexis even recognises traces of everyday life that, to her surprise, does not differ from any other Cretan village. She suddenly realises that what lies in front of her is not only a sad deserted space, once occupied by the

fate-afflicted lepers, but an image of people cast from the society largely because of ignorance and prejudice:

> If their existence had been entirely abject, why would have there been three cafés? Why was there a building that could only have been a town hall? She sensed melancholy, but she also saw signs of normality. It was these that had taken her by surprise. This tiny island had been a community, not just a place to come and die – that much was clear from the remains of the infrastructure. (Hislop 2005: 28)

Her approach and willingness to spend a longer time on the island than other tourists make her special in the eyes of the owner of a small bar in Plaka where Alexis comes for dinner. Other tourists spend on Spinalonga approximately half an hour and are usually disappointed; he thought that the majority only came of out "ghoulish curiosity" (Hislop 2005: 31), expecting "[b]odies" or [a]bandoned crutches" (Hislop 2005: 31). Hislop criticises the consumption tourists, whose expectations concerning the former leper colony are not met. The sensation-driven groups cannot appreciate the natural beauty of the island or seek signs of normality, as normality is not what they are after. At the turn of the 21st century, visits to places such as cemeteries, battlefields and sites of natural disasters or genocides is referred to as "dark tourism", with a documented rise of tourist interest in locations associated with the macabre (Lennon and Foley 2000: 3). With the global availability and accessibility of videos and images, Urry observes a tendency to visit a specific place only once. Such tourists are then called "collectors of gazes" (1995: 138) as the initial gaze counts the most. Spinalonga (unlike amusement parts or heritage centres) failed to provide such tourists with any real and sensational artefacts, as they found it lacking any attempt at "staged authenticity" (Urry 1995: 192). Even though many tourist attractions include media guides, costume staging, relics or exhibitions, Spinalonga remains authentic as, except for the dilapidated buildings, there is no direct evidence of the suffering of the lepers available for consumption.

While the dark tourists seek new, different sights and traces of the macabre, the romantic tourists, including Alexis, use their gaze to seek analogies between their emotional state of mind and the space. The following day, she is looking at the island "already with nostalgia" (Hislop 2005: 43). Nostalgia is, as Hewison claims, felt "most strongly at a time of discontent, anxiety or disappointment" (1987: 45). For Alexis, the island has become a romantic embodiment of her newly found sense of freedom and independence, reminding her of her resolution to live alone, which, however, may not be final, as she admits to her mother's life-long friend Fotini. Alexis is primarily interested in the history of her family not to explore her cultural roots and heritage but because she finds her parents' marriage so perfect and idyllic that she hopes to find a universal recipe on how to choose the right partner and recognise him as such.

Her romantic feelings for the island are shattered the moment Fotini reveals to her the life story of her great-grandparents:

> "Your great-grandmother lived on that island ... [s]he was a leper." She didn't expect the words to sound quite so blunt, quite so heartless, and she saw straight away that they had made Alexis wince. "A *leper*?" Alexis asked in a voice that was almost choked with shock. She was repelled by this thought even though she knew her reaction was probably irrational ... she was horrified to hear that her own flesh and blood had been leprous ... she felt strangely disgusted. (Hislop 2005: 43–44)

Her reaction, though not unusual, demonstrates that Alexis, despite her historical pre-knowledge, was just a romantic tourist who did not seek knowledge or understanding of the history or landscape, but rather interpreted the place as a spatial analogy for her insecurities and dreams. As Dennis Judd and Susan Fainstein observe, "the undeniable purpose of leisure is to escape from life's unpleasantness" (1999: 269). Yet now, Alexis has to face the emotional and what is more, personal aspects of family history closely linked to her symbol of freedom.

Fotini seems to understand Alexis's reaction that does not differ from the majority, "it was a natural response for someone whose knowledge of leprosy came from Old Testament stories and the image of a bell-swinging sufferer crying, 'Unclean! Unclean!'" (Hislop 2005: 44). When Alexis turns to the island again, her gaze is altered. Initially there was no specific motivation on her part to visit the island, she only took the trip because she heard it was a famous archaeological site and she needed to pass her time. Yet, after listening to Fotini's narrative, the island has become an inseparable part of her personal history:

> Alexis continued to gaze at the little island across the shimmering water. Her visit there yesterday had seemed so full of conflicting images: the remains of elegant Italianate villas, gardens and even shops, and overshadowing them with the spectre of a disease which she had seen portrayed in epic films as a living death. (Hislop 2005: 44)

Her new, more complex gaze is based largely on other media, in her case, a film on leprosy, she once saw. She is thus reading her media-based image onto a landscape that, however, did not produce such intense emotions, until her family history became involved in the picture.

After Fotini explains to her the nature of the disease and its forms, Alexis feels ashamed of her reactions; yet she cannot recover from the shock. Despite the fact that she earned a university degree, has a job and a fiancé, her coming of age process is yet to be completed. Her knowledge of the world has so far been significantly limited as she has led a very sheltered life: "[T]he only darkness in Alexis's life had been the vague shadow of her mother's hidden past. It had been nothing more than a question mark, nothing that had kept her awake at night: She had not seen disease, let alone death" (Hislop 2005: 52).

The last missing part of Fotini's narrative, the one Alexis was originally after, is the life story of her mother Sophia whose father shot his wife after he had found out she had been cheating on him with his own brother. The child was then brought up by her aunt Eleni, who was cured of leprosy, and her husband, the

colony's former doctor, unaware of her foster parents' own tragic histories. Only after she was eighteen and considered studying abroad did her step-parents reveal the family background. Overcome by shame and disgust, Sophia escaped to London to forget the past, especially the "disfiguring disease, an immoral mother and murderer for a father. She was utterly repulsed" (Hislop 2005: 457). Settling and marrying in London, Sophia was determined to keep the history hidden from her children to save them from the shame and repulsion she had to suffer.

When Fotini finishes her narrative and Alexis eventually accepts her cultural heritage and family history as part of her identity, her mother Sophia joins them to finally reconcile with the past. She viewed her family history through Fotini and Alexis's eyes as a staged drama, with her ancestors as actors: "Her daughter had made her look at these ancestors of hers as though they were characters in a drama. At last, she saw not humiliation but heroism, not perfidy but passion, not leprosy but love" (Hislop 2005: 472). Similarly to her daughter, Sophia had to leave her home to adopt a new outlook on her past and present, and hear the history narrated as a story so that she could overcome her trauma. As she grew up on Crete, a simple view of the landscape was not stimulating enough, as it was not perceived as other, or different, from home. What she needed was a dramatization of her past which she could imagine and interpret as a tragedy, leading her, as the observer, to catharsis.

3. Conclusive remarks: The influence of the common reader-oriented book on the present and future of Spinalonga

The process of revelation of Spinalonga through Alexis's eyes corresponds with that of a visitor. At the beginning, an informed tourist gaze is offered together with the geographical description of the island, including its history. Then the readers, together with Alexis have to face their prejudice and/or ignorance concerning the nature and development of leprosy. Only then is the humanized and romanticized story of the lepers as human beings provided, together with the description of their everyday fears and frustrations. In order not to discourage the readers, Hislop does not depict any macabre or upsetting details of the disease but concentrates rather on the social and more general hardships, especially of an emotional character, and foregrounds the common and pleasant aspects of the life on Spinalonga.

Hislop does not primarily present tourism as a form of relaxation and escape, but as a transformative, identity-formation tool. While the island and its moving history have a major impact on the mental development of the protagonist, the book itself, despite its mixed reception, proved to be even more influential when it comes to the present and future of the island, critically addressing the romanticising of the life in the leper colony. Maurice Born, ethnologist and the co-author and translator of *Vies et morts d'un Crétois lépreux* (Lives and deaths of a Cretan Leper), written together with a leprosy survivor Epaminondas Remoundakis, claims that "the story of Spinalonga is story of a massive lie" (Warkentin 2017). After the colony was closed down, the government burned all the files and the

survivors did not speak of their experience. Born observed that Spinalonga and this part of Cretan history were reopened only because of Hislop's romanticised and sentimental vision of Spinalonga and the tourist potential it offered. As Maurice Born has observed, "[t]he state, seeking to erase the stain on their reputation, wanted to destroy all evidence of the leper colony. But then ... they realised that the tourists were coming with the specific purpose of visiting the colony" (Warkentin 2017).

Hislop's bestseller significantly raised the level of tourism in the area, yet it (fortunately) did not leave a major negative impact on the villages neighbouring Spinalonga, as due to their layout, the streets are too narrow for traffic or additional tourist attractions. As Hislop comments, the small village of Plaka, from where the lepers were shipped to the island, remains timeless, as "any village lucky enough to have been spared the ravages of tourism" (Hislop 2005: 48). The centre of tourist attention is thus limited to the island itself and the towns Elounda and Agios Nikolaos.

The rise of sensational and literary tourism in the area further contributed to the preservation of the traditional Cretan culture and provided a source of funding for increased maintenance care. The Spinalonga Island attracts over 300,000 visitors per year and is currently the second most popular historical site in Crete (after Knossos); in 2017, it was nominated for a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The ministry submitted Spinalonga's final nomination in February 2019, including a management plan for the site (Greece's Spinalonga 2018). Hislop's novel opened the discussions about the silenced parts of Cretan history, inspired other adaptations of the historical events, and helped to save the island from turning into an abandoned ruin. Similarly to Alexis and her mother, who finally accepted their family history due to its romanticised staged narration, the Cretans and their government broke the silence about leprosy and its historical legacy.

Though *The Island* is a historical popular romance, its approach to history and place turned out to have a significant cultural impact on the island of Crete. Focusing on the effect of a text on a place, rather than on the influence of a place on a writer, and combining the aspects of tourism and literary studies, it can be said that the interdisciplinary approach demonstrates the benefits of both fields and highlights the shared ground of both disciplines, providing new and diverse interpretative possibilities. Within the context of popular genres, Hislop adopted more reflective and sensitive approach to the place and its history than is the custom in popular novels and successfully managed to create a link between her readers (potential tourists) and the place. The novel does not feature tourism and travel as pure entertainment or escape, but predominantly as a means of self-development. The depiction of landscape and the experience of the place is therefore portrayed as emotionally and culturally marked while, at the same time, remaining geographically and ethnographically accurate. Blending geography, history and coming-of-age narrative Hislop's novel exemplifies the potential of tourist fiction and its current impact on only on its wide readership but, perhaps more importantly, on the featured cultural space.

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