

## ***Literature's Refuge: Rewriting the Mediterranean Borderscape***

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In *Literature's Refuge: Rewriting the Mediterranean Borderscape* (2025), William Stroebel explores a largely neglected literary geography of refugee and diasporic narratives in the Greek- and Turkish-speaking borderlands, which was shaped by the decline of the Ottoman Empire, forced displacement, and modern border-making between Europe and the Middle East. Stroebel closely reads the positionality of these narratives that found no secure place within either Greek or Turkish literary borderscapes and were left orphaned by nationalist canons, as he aims to carve out a space where their historical and philological latitude can be reclaimed on what he terms a “cultural carpet” (Stroebel 2025, 7). Drawing on examples ranging from the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries, Stroebel traces out the collective survival and horizontal solidarity of displaced literatures whose circulation and reception can unsettle and decentralize the mainstream’s authoritative control over cultural, linguistic, and literary production at the intersection of Greek and Turkish philology.

The fragmented literary aftermath of Greek-Turkish interactions during and after the Ottoman imperial period, particularly through the Greco-Turkish Population Exchange of 1923, has historically been beset by ideological and institutional mechanisms. *Literature's Refuge* reveals how these mechanisms attempt to prune textual borders into rigid national silos and how such fragments, in turn, try to survive this attempt. Approaching its material through the lens of book history, *Literature's Refuge* privileges the physical materiality of books as circulated objects over purely textual analysis. This methodological orientation allows Stroebel to successfully foreground the role of various “textual handlers” —including editors, copyists, translators, and readers—in shaping the circulation of texts across time and space, while crystallizing literary belonging as the book’s central concern.

*Literature's Refuge* comprises five main chapters that converge around a relational, cross-temporal approach to heritages not only of displaced communities but also of their displaced literary and cultural canons. Throughout these chapters, Stroebel revises David Damrosch’s concept of “scriptworld” to reconfigure the expansion of the Hellenic literary borderscape and to delve deeper into the authoritative force on the textual production and placement. While reaping



an equal footing for acclaimed and forgotten voices—the latter of which often lack a place in the official literary canons—Stroebel draws on Greek and Turkish texts written in various forms and scripts, including the Greek, Ottoman, and Latin.

The opening chapter welcomes a close reading of an uncharted codex, *Tuḥfe-i Şānī be Zebān-ı Yūnānī* (*The Gift of Şānī in the Greek Tongue*), a seventeenth-century Islamic devotional poetic guide written in Ottoman-script Greek tongue by the Greek-speaking Muslim author Şānī in Ioannina. The chapter, on the one hand, reclaims Şānī’s dexterity in the *politikos* verse form as well as his deliberate endeavor to interlace Islamic theology with Greek Orthodox terminology, to unsettle the slant that Greekness constitutes a culturally purified identity devoid of Turkic or Islamic elements. On the other hand, it encourages readers to reconsider how Şānī’s codex is on the brink of fading into obscurity within the dusty pages of history while also withstanding it by courtesy of external interventions, such as an appendix added by its copyist, Hasan Bey Osman Zade, over a century later. Through Stroebel’s attentive treatment of the codex, the chapter opens up an understanding where textual circulation can genuinely serve as a willful, intergenerational dialogue in expanding the radius of belonging the text holds.

Whereas Şānī’s codex occupies a marginal and precarious position within the Hellenic literary tradition, the second chapter embodies that figures such as Constantine P. Cavafy (1863–1933) exemplify, in the opposite way, the global visibility achieved by certain Greek-language poets from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. Accommodating Stroebel’s ultimate goal of embracing both peripheral and central voices with impartiality and in juxtaposition, the second chapter foregrounds Cavafy’s nonconformist publishing practices across unconsolidated material and institutional boundaries in a geographically volatile environment of Alexandria, Athens, and Istanbul, both before and after his lifetime. The reader might be engrossed in that the plurality of Cavafy’s identities—queer Cavafy, political Cavafy, Hellenic Cavafy—shaped both the fluidity of his corpus and his deliberate resistance to the fixed and printed book form, as he participated in the publishing dynamics as an active circulator of his own writing by distributing his handwritten poems among persons and journals. Throughout the chapter, Stroebel featly elaborates on how Cavafy’s self-directed efforts of dissemination rendered his corpus slippery by virtue of its perpetual movement across multiple geographies, book forms, and circles of readers (75). Stroebel’s deft and detailed elaboration lays bare that Cavafy’s attempts challenged and complicated Greek print networks and publishing practices of his time. In this sense, Stroebel’s evaluation of the enduring presence of Cavafy’s poems, despite the lack of publications during his life, recalls to the mind that the subsequent interventions of multiple “textual handlers” continually rewrite Cavafy’s corpus and unsettle the very conditions of literary consolidation, particularly after the poet’s decease.

The polyphonic network of these textual handlers, however, is sporadically disguised by nationalist historiographies whose purpose, as argued in the book, is to bind “individual to nation, and nation to state” for a monolithic state narrative (121). Bringing this network into sharper relief in the third chapter, Stroebel thoroughly exposes how the authoritative truth of the historiography is a curated artefact through wreathing two acknowledged testimonial fictions, which are Stratis

Doukas's (1895-1983) *H ιστορία ενός αιχμαλώτου* (*A Captive's Story*) and Halide Edib Adıvar's (1884-1964) *Ateşten Gömlek* (*Shirt of Flame*), both related to the Greco-Turkish War and the subsequent Exchange. He dexterously unspools the diachrony of martial witnessing by illustrating linguistic orientations in *H ιστορία ενός αιχμαλώτου*'s and *Ateşten Gömlek*'s handovers on the basis of evolving political climates. However, a critical reader might notice a certain asymmetry in Stroebel's effort to shed light on the pluralistic voices of the texts' protagonists, Kazakoglou and Peyami, seriatim. While he incisively endows the "celebratory" timbre with the secular Kemalist narrative of the aforesaid war's victory over time, he approaches to the "mournful" Greek narrative of loss with comparatively less skepticism, neglecting the potency of mourning itself as a weaponized force in nationalistic unification.

Thoroughly discussed so far, in the fervent geopolitical climate of the post-Exchange Mediterranean, the state-driven homogenization of the Greco-Turkish borderscape spilled over from the displacement of bodies to the displacement of living literatures. Given that the circulation of the print apparatus, susceptible to moving across borders, was beneath the radar of vanishing, the fourth chapter hosts handmade and handwritten codices from the oeuvre of a refugee priest-poet, Agathangelos, who belonged to the Karamanlı Christians from central Anatolia, engaged in the Greek-script Turkish writing, and were, like many other refugees, deported from Cappadocia after the Exchange. Initially routing from the bereft traces of the Greek-Orthodox textual objects within the Karamanlı print before and after the 1920s, Stroebel establishes his promising argument on the transformative power of bookmaking as an act of craftsmanship on a codex, exemplifying a border-crossing stroll resistant to the literary gatekeeping set by the Greek media over Agathangelos's handmade manuscripts, *Monte Cristo in Marseille* and *Theodora*, both dating 1939 and moving overseas between Turkey, Greece, and the United States. Accordingly, his rigorous analysis on the material afterlife of Agathangelos's oeuvre across various scripts and languages succeeds in inviting readers to critically reflect on whether refugee stories can be revitalized, rather than sealed within archival loss, through their (re)assembly, (re)writing and mobility.

Altering the course from the Turkish and Greek mainland of the early twentieth century to the partitioned geography of contemporary Cyprus, the final and fifth chapter tops off how the Exchange policy sets the *locus classicus* of the ideological and institutional violence directed against linguistic and literary autonomy to this very day. Throughout the chapter, Stroebel performs a codicological analysis of *Sınırdışı Saatler* (*Σηνηρηδη Σαατλερ*) (*The Deported Hours*), which is Cypriot Mehmet Yaşın's (1958–) 2003 novel in limbo, written in alphabetic multiformity, and resisting a clear classification—neither wholly fiction nor poetic prayerbook, translation nor original, handwritten nor printed. Read through this unruly resistance, a deliberately authorial blueprint emerges that works to revive intricate scriptworlds and to unfix contemporary geographic and linguistic borders beyond Greece and Turkey during the twenty-first century. Additionally, this discussion draws attention to the climactic labor a reader must undertake to engage with the text, including an apprenticeship-like immersion in meaning-making across multiple alphabets, languages, and cultures, without neglecting productive forms of textual engagement.

Taken together, *Literature's Refuge* offers a compelling philological reorientation of how textual history might be written from the margins without reinscribing marginality as absence or lack. It strongly addresses critical scholars and interested readerships of comparative literature, Mediterranean studies, and refugee and diasporic narratives. However, the density of codicological detail might challenge readers less familiar with the field of book history, and the ethical ambition to “make place for the displaced” necessarily brings into view the imbalanced advancement of Greek and Turkish philological traditions, as well as the need for further comparative literary scholarship to expand this niche (xvii). By placing canonical and forgotten texts, scripts, and dialects on equal footing, *Literature's Refuge* diligently encourages readers willing to acquaint themselves with peripheral stories to participate in an ongoing and collective work of reassembly that unsettles nationalist borders of literary belonging, as pluralistic caretakers of a shared past across the Mediterranean and beyond. In this regard, the book's ability to gather texts within a common threshold, where strict temporal boundaries from the early modern Ottoman period to the modern day recede, deserves particular admiration.

Stroebel's rich archival work and heedful close reading deftly bind the past and present of texts from the eastern Mediterranean borderscape, bestowing the responsibility of the literary and cultural heritage on wider textual networks, including readers. Howbeit, a limitation is palpable in his navigation of the liminal space between Greek and Turkish philological traditions, which at times places a greater analytical weight on Greek-oriented materials in discussions of the Greco-Turkish Population Exchange's literary aftereffects. What unfolds on the other side of the border? Even as Stroebel offers dexterous readings of Adivar's testimonial fiction and Yaşın's multilayered Cypriot narrative, this tension ultimately paves the way for an extension of the fieldwork *Literature's Refuge* initiates, particularly along the Turkish Mediterranean border. *Literature's Refuge* is generous in its engaging emphasis on refugeeship; however, this emphasis might gesture toward a potential risk of framing textual mobility primarily through the standpoint of loss and precarity. Attending more closely to how textual circulation and intervention might also function as productive and relational forces shaping wider literary terrains instead of merely rescuing displaced texts could further expand the comparative horizon that this eloquently written book so compellingly opens.

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## Bibliography

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