Writing the Greek Revolution: Harry Mark Petrakis’s *The Hour of the Bell*

David Roessel
Harry Mark Petrakis, described by Alexander Karanikas as “America’s leading author of Greek descent” (316), began working on The Hour of the Bell: A novel of the 1821 Greek War of Independence against the Turks in the fall of 1972, one year after the 150th anniversary of the Greek War of Independence. During the four years of composition, he kept a journal that focused mainly on the writing of the book; that journal was first published in 1983 and then republished in 2012 as Journal of a Novel. By publishing both volumes, Petrakis intended to let the public not only read the novel, but also see into the process of its composition. In the Greek American novels, Karanikas claimed that “for Petrakis, the Greek experience serves as a major source of formal structure, plot, character development, and thematic unity. Much of the dramatic tension turns upon the Greekness of this or that personage” (316). The tension that Petrakis creates between The Hour of the Bell and Journal of a Novel turns, to a large degree, on his own position as a Greek American writing about a central event in the history of Greece for an audience that is not, for the most part, of Greek descent. Petrakis’s desire to capture the authentic spirit, which he views as embodied in the work of Kazantzakis, creates a dilemma between his sources and his narrative.

By 1972, Petrakis had established a reputation as a chronicler of the Greek American experience with novels such as A Dream of Kings and Lion in My Heart, and the immigrant experience would remain the most important and potent source of his writing. But after he finished the volume In the Land of Morning, he gave the following account of his first meeting with his new editor in Journal of a Novel:

During that salubrious evening we discussed a series of novels I had contemplated writing. I spoke of a book I had been interested in for years, a novel on the Greek War of Independence. As with most people who were not historians or of Greek descent, Sandy [Richardson] knew little about the epic struggle that took place between 1821 and 1830 and that freed Greece from 400 years of bondage to the Turks. He remembered vaguely the involvement of Lord Byron in the Greek cause. (Journal 2)
In the journal, as part of the rationale for the project, Petrakis states: “To my knowledge there has never been a major novel in English written on that conflict” (Journal 10). He then adds the following comment:

But by the time of my meeting with Sandy Richardson, I had lived long enough to understand that a darkness as well as a divinity existed in all human beings irrespective of nationality or race. I suspected that any effort to write a novel about the conflict would produce revelations for me that might scar the gilded, untarnished legends of childhood. Perhaps that apprehension had been among the reasons for the delay. No one longs to lose his myths. (Journal 3)

The author seems to have set himself two somewhat conflicting narrative goals. On the one hand, he wanted to offer the public a book on the Greek Revolution because, as he himself said, “few people besides the Greeks know anything about that struggle” (Journal 10). In an interview, he repeated that his goal was to combat the fact that, in the United States, “most people are notoriously uninformed about this War of Independence” (“Song” 115). Greeks in Greece, of course, were informed, so he realized that he had to write the book in English in order to increase awareness (“Song” 116). On the other hand, however, he wanted to engage with, and challenge, the myths that he had grown up with about the Greek Revolution and its heroes. Peter Bien, using a distinction made by George Orwell, called Petrakis’s refusal “to label all Greeks ‘good’ and all Turks ‘bad’” brave, and called the sequel to The Hour of the Bell, The Shepherd of Shadows, “patriotic but not nationalistic” (xi). Patriotism here is the celebration of the Greek spirit and the culture and places which give it life; nationalism is the desire for power over others. When Greek American readers objected that he had been too hard on the Greeks and too easy on the Turks, he responded that “it signaled to me that I had achieved my intention of remaining fair. There is no humanity in war” (Journal 218).

Petrakis’s perception that there is no humanity in war is also found in the journal in relation to the war in Vietnam, a conflict that figured prominently in his previous novel In the Land of Morning. It should not be surprising that Vietnam seeps into the historical novel that Petrakis wrote as he watched contemporary events unfold on television. On December 23, 1972, he writes that “the war overshadows everything these days,” adding that “the war today makes me understand something of the pain of the war” (Journal 20, 21). In the entry for February 13, 1973, Petrakis notes:

Today the P.O.W.’s started home from Hanoi. The TV cameras invaded the homes of their families, showing the faces of wives, parents, children when the faces of their loved ones flashed across the screen..... Even though I resent the intrusion—I feel like a voyeur—perhaps the years when we shared nothing but the grief and anguish make it mandatory now that we share the joy of those few who gain some happiness from that dreadful war. (Journal 37)

And, on April 30, 1975, as he nears completion of The Hour of the Bell, he records:

Saigon surrendered today. The war in Vietnam is over after almost thirty-five years, a senseless calamity that our own ignorance and arrogance prolonged. Now, on the eve of the 200th anniversary of our own revolution, we must accept the responsibility of having tried to thwart the aspirations of another people. After 150 billion dollars expended and 55,000 thousand Americans lives lost, their revolution has triumphed. And tomorrow I return to my own bloody revolution. (198)

In the next months, Petrakis would write his account of the siege of Tripolitza by the Greeks in 1822 with “the massacre and its aftermath” (Journal 212). A further complication for Petrakis, then, is looking at the Greek War of Independence through
Vietnam, and the question of who now represents the Ottoman empire. Some of the
myths of his youth that Petrakis must lose in writing this story are American myths. He
started a book about the Greek Revolution just after the 150th anniversary of that
struggle, but, while he anticipated the 200th anniversary of the American revolution, he
distinguished between “our own revolution” and “my own bloody revolution.” It could
be argued that the act of writing The Hour of the Bell was a personal rebellion that
complicates the narrative.

8 The importance of the Vietnam War in the composition of The Hour of the Bell is
enhanced by comparison to two other contemporary events connected to Greece that
occurred during the writing of the novel. On August 4, 1974, he remarks that he “was
captured by the tragic coincidence that he is writing about Greek-Turkish battles in a
time when Greek and Turkish blood is being spilled again on Cyprus.” He then notes
that the “Junta fell” and for a while there was jubilation, which “turned to frustration”
as the “agony of Cyprus continued” (Journal 123, 124). Yet, these events in the Greek
world do not have the same resonance in the journal as Vietnam. When exactly
Petrakis decided to end the book with the Greek capture of Tripolitza and the
subsequent massacre of the Turks is not clear, but it seems relevant that he asserts that
this will be the book’s conclusion on May 12, 1975, two weeks after the fall of Saigon.

9 A successful historical novel entails a lot of research and, for the most part, must get
the history right. In the journal, Petrakis comments that “dealing with the American
Civil War provides a writer with a mass of material, diaries, memoirs. There is so much
less available material on the Greek War for Independence. Still that was the war I
chose and I must fill the canvas with the drama of events and the heroism of
individuals” (128). While it may be true that there is more primary material for the
American Civil War, there is hardly the dearth of material for the Greek War of
Independence that Petrakis appears to suggest. No artist, of course, wants to start work
on a canvas that has most of its elements already filled in, but his comment does raise
questions about what sources he did use in the composition of his novel. The journal
does not provide a great deal of guidance on that point, a point that will be returned to
later.

10 In the journal, Petrakis says that “If I had chosen a smaller canvas, perhaps telling the
story of a single family or concentrating on one phase of the revolution, I might be
finished by now. But I am sure that I would not feel nearly as elated as I am with the
canvas I have assembled” (86). In fact, while The Hour of the Bell concerns itself only with
the first years of the War of Independence, from 1820 to 1822, the journal makes clear
that Petrakis had completed the book even if, like The Iliad, it does not reach the end of
the conflict. The entry for August 9, 1974, at 10:55 pm, declares: “I am finished!” (216).
In a later passage in the journal, however, he comments that the character of the scribe
Xanthos “will be an important guide if I ever write a sequel to this book” (214). And in
an interview after the publication of the novel, he states that he had “deliberately left
the stories unfinished in The Hour of the Bell because I plan to return to them” (“Song”
114). The Shepherds of Shadows, the sequel which takes many of the same characters to
the start of 1826, was published in 2008, 32 years later. Petrakis had waited for 25 years
between A Dream of Kings, the first part of the story of the Greek American Manolis
Matsoukas, and the continuation of his story in Ghost of the Sun; in fact, he returned to
the Matsoukas story in between writing about the Greek revolution. And in The
Shepherds of Shadows, once again, while the narrative reaches the desired conclusion, it
does not extend the story to the end of the war. Petrakis left, deliberately or not, the stories of the characters unfinished. For Petrakis, finishing a novel about the Greek Revolution does not mean completing the history of the conflict in either *The Hour of the Bell* or *The Shepherds of Shadows*. The reader, of course, knows that the Greek Revolution was successful, and, just to be sure of that, Petrakis provides a "Calendar of the Greek War of Independence" at the start of both novels that extends to 1833 and the arrival of King Otto.

*The Hour of the Bell* shows events in Greece through a variety of characters, a village priest, a Klephtic leader and his band, a ship captain, a monk modeled on Papaflessas, a clan on Crete, and the Greek leader Kolokotronis. Petrakis refers to his compositional technique as a patchwork quilt, “arranging the patches in patterns without sewing them into place, so they might be moved around to make a better design” (*Journal* 18, see also 36). This seems a good analogy, as the connections between the patches are stitched together by a chronological timeframe, such as “Spring 1821.” While some of the main characters encounter one another over the course of the two novels, there is no attempt by Petrakis to tie the patches together with strong threads.

But, when the patches are laid out beside each other in the completed text, the eye does make out a cohesive whole that gives us a sense of the war if not a complete account of it. And with this structure, one can, as Petrakis later did in *The Shepherds of Shadows*, add more patches to the quilt to augment the picture but still not “finish” the story of the Revolution. There is no central character in the patchwork quilt, but one character stands out for comment. The scribe Xanthos, from the island of Zakynthos, joins the cause on the side of Kolokotronis and provides an eyewitness account of the revolution as it happens, just as Petrakis himself was able to watch the war in Vietnam on television. It is clear in the journal that Petrakis comes to identify with Xanthos and he is something of an alter ego. Xanthos, an alter ego for the ancient Greek writers Xenophon and Thucydides, is also an eyewitness of the events they recount. At one point in the journal, Petrakis notes:

> Most of my days are now spent reading and making notes, writing trial pages in an effort to develop Xanthos, assimilating the writing of Xenophon, Plutarch, and Thucydides. I have not yet unraveled the scribe’s character or his relationship to other characters…. There must be in the hundred odd-pages of two chapters dealing with Xanthos’ development of his vision. (154)

Near the end of the journal, Petrakis states that Xanthos “has become in so many ways the character that I feel closest to” (214). Xanthos learns exactly the same lesson that Petrakis himself had learned:

> The actual experience of war changes him. Through witnessing and sharing suffering and death, he develops a greater humanity. At the same time he comes to understand the capricious, unpredictable elements and cross-purposes of the revolution, reflected in the captains and chieftains…. His tragic vision will lead him to understand that in any war there is cruelty and inhumanity on both sides. (*Journal* 154-55)

The insertion of a historian into a historical novel is an intriguing complication and makes us ponder what actual histories are used to construct the views of this fictional historian of the Greek revolution. The journal provides many titles that the author read during the composition of the book—books on the American Civil War, *War and Peace*, Kazantzakis’ works, even Edmund Wilson’s history of socialism *To the Finland Station*. There are not as many references to books about the War of Independence, as noted
above, although this by no means suggests that Petrakis did not use them. At one point in the journal, Petrakis says that “I am working along in the book, reading more again in Gordon, Finlay, Howe, trying to pick up threads to link the sections” (148). Thomas Gordon, George Finlay, and Samuel Gridley Howe were all philhellenic volunteers in Greece who wrote histories in English of the struggle that they had observed firsthand. The idea for the character of Xanthos also stemmed, in part, from the authors of the books about the Greek Revolution that Petrakis had. This may help explain why Petrakis made Xanthos a Greek from Zante (Zakynthos), so that, like the three foreigners, he had some distance from the conflict and could be an observer as well as a participant. But Xanthos, like Petrakis, whose family came from Crete, was by birth and upbringing Greek.

15 Of the three philhellenic historians mentioned in the journal, only one was an American who had written about the Greek Revolution for an American audience, which was the task that Petrakis had set for himself. Samuel Gridley Howe, the great American philhellene, who served as a physician for the Greek forces and as a leader in the American relief effort in Greece starting in 1827, was also the first director of an American school for the blind and a prominent abolitionist. Howe is the hero of the James Greenleaf Whittier poem titled simply “The Hero.”

16 Howe’s volume, An Historical Sketch of the Greek Revolution, was published in 1828, so his narrative, like the fiction of Petrakis, did not get to the end of the struggle and the creation of the Greek state. The two philhellenic British historians, Gordon and Finlay, continued their narratives to that point, and in Finlay’s case, beyond. It might seem odd that Howe calls his book a “historical sketch” as the text runs to 450 pages. In his preface, Howe explains his use of the term “Sketch:”

The Author had hoped leisurely to digest the mass of historical information concerning the revolution, which he had collected during his three year’s service to Greece, to combine with it statistical accounts, remarks on soil, climate, productions, and geographical and commercial advantages of the country; with observations on the religion, language, manners and customs, virtues and vices, of the modern Greeks in such a way as to form a volume that should contain both interesting, and useful knowledge (v).

But Howe thought it was more important that he dedicate his efforts to relief work: “Necessity therefore obliges him to throw his book before the American public without claiming for it the name of history; it is what it professes to be, merely a Sketch. The information may be depended upon, but it is not all that is wanting” (v).

18 It is worth noting that two of the most prominent attempts, indeed arguably the most prominent, to acquaint the American public with the Greek War of Independence, written in different centuries and about a hundred and fifty years apart, are self-described as a “sketch” and a “patchwork quilt.” The narrative of the Greek revolution has had difficulty being viewed as a complete picture by those whose stated aims were to make it known to the American public.

19 Petrakis had a genuine American model for his Xanthos. Why does he avoid mention of Howe except for one brief entry in the journal? One reason seems to be that Petrakis wants his American readers to witness the struggles of the Greeks and their accomplishments independent of foreign advocates, and this may be one reason The Hour of the Bell ends before the arrival of either Byron or Howe. Byron gets significant attention in the Shepherds of Shadows, but Howe just gets a single mention on page 253 as one of the “generous souls from around the world coming to assist us.” There may be
another reason why Petrakis did not want to call too much attention to Howe and his
text.

For Petrakis leans heavily on Howe’s book, especially for the physical descriptions of
Greek leaders. Howe provided the following description of Kolokotronis:

He is about fifty years of age: he has bulky, clumsy figure; to which is united by a
brawny bull neck, an immense shaggy head; with a face strongly, but coarsely
marked; indicating cunning, presumption, and dogged resolution; which are in fact
attributes of his character. Enjoying a high reputation for courage, he seemed to
think any demonstration of it unnecessary; and there is hardly an instance of his
exposing his person during the war. As profoundly ignorant of politics, as of letters,
he seemed disregardful of his reputation, and his actions have been uniformly
directed by his ruling passion, avarice; and, as subservient to this, a desire of
military supremacy in the Morea. (Hour 49)

In Petrakis, the first impression of Kolokotronis by the wife of Petrobey Mavromichalis
“was of a huge, clumsy-bodied man, an immense shaggy head united to the brawny
neck of a bull.” The passage concludes, “she imagined him coarse and profane, a
predator desiring to engrave his deeds on history with a sword dipped in blood” (Hour
80-81). There is a distinction between what Petrakis’s character sees, which is exactly
what Howe sees, and how she imagines and assesses his importance. Petrakis makes
Kolokotronis the main hero of The Hour of the Bell; the only one who always puts Greece
ahead of personal gain:

Of all the chiefs, Xanthos felt the most potential for greatness lay with
Kolokotronis. Perhaps not as sophisticated in political administration as the Prince
Ipsilanti, not as instinctive a fighter as Niketaras, he had a rudimentary force and
wisdom. In addition to his ability to cleave decisively to the heart of an argument,
he also understood the dimensions of the struggle beyond the scope of their own
theater of action (Hour 183-84).

Howe, like Byron, leaned toward Alexandros Mavrokordatos as the person to lead the
Greek in their struggle despite his flaws:

There is but one opinion in Greece about the talents of Mavrocordatos; all will allow
them to be very great, but this is not the case with respect to his virtues. His friends
ascribe every action to his disinterested patriotism, but his enemies hesitate not to
pronounce them all to have for their end party or private interests, and say that he
would sooner subject his country to the Turks than have his political opponents get
the credit of saving her. But here, as is often the case, the truth lies between the
two extremes: let his enemies avow that he loves his country and has labored hard
to benefit her, and his friends confess that that he is ambitious and has always had
a considerable regard for his own political interest, and a nearer approach to his
character will be had. (70)

Howe provides the following description of the man:

Alexander Mavrocordatos is about 36 years of age, rather below middling height,
but perfectly well made: his fine olive complexion looks darker than it is, from the
jetty blackness of his hair, which hangs in ringlets about his face, and from his large
mustachios and sparkling black eyes. His manners are perfectly easy and
gentlemanlike; and though the first impression would be, from his extreme
politeness and continual smiles, that he was a good-natured silly fop, yet one soon
sees from the keen inquisitive glances which involuntarily escape him, that he is
concealing under an almost childish lightness of manner, a close and accurate study
of his visitor. (70)

Mavrokordatos makes only a very brief appearance in The Hour of the Bell as a
man in his late thirties, with a fine olive complexion and jet black hair hanging in
ringlets about his eyes, above large mustachios and bright, black eyes. His extreme
politeness and continual smile convinced many of the captains that he was a silly,
shallow, fop. But Xanthos felt an undeniable quality of strength in the man, a keen
mind and a sharp wit. He thought this might be the leader to unify the bickering of
the captains and the primates, giving a more coherent direction to the conduct of
the war. (311)

This somewhat favorable opinion will change in The Shepherds of Shadows, when
Kolokotronis and Mavrocordatos become political opponents, since for Petrakis the
heroic, unselfish, leader of the Greeks remains Kolokotronis.

Howe had said that “he may appear to have dwelt much upon the characters of the
principal Greeks; but he flatters himself, that the authenticity may apologize for this; as
he has not ventured to speak of any, whom he has not known personally” (v). Howe
also noted that, although he had offered just a sketch “the information may be
depended upon, although it is not all that is wanting” (v). Petrakis takes Howe as a
trusted eyewitness source when he describes a person’s features—not to plagiarize but
to get his description as close as possible to what an actual eyewitness saw. But Petrakis
does not accept Howe’s analysis of the character of the Greek leaders, and their role in
the struggle. For Howe, Kolokotronis is an impediment to any useful strategy to oppose
the Turks, while for Petrakis he is the one Greek leader who has such a vision. In
essence, the scribe that Petrakis creates serves to correct the errors of judgment of the
actual eyewitness source that is closely used for description.

It should be clear that The Hour of the Bell is entangled in a narrative web with An
Historical Sketch of the Greek Revolution that will take time to unravel. As noted above,
Petrakis said that he had delayed writing a book about the War of Independence
because in the process he might lose the myths of his youth, and no one likes to lose
their myths. At another point where he references taking part in the March 25th
ceremonies as a child, he speaks of those “myth-laden giants who dwell in ornate
frames on the walls of the Historical Museum. I remember their names from the
holiday programs of my childhood, Kolokotronis, Botzaris, Diakos, Kanaris…. We
recited the epic poems without understanding what we were saying. But that poetry
must have left a resonance inside me then, for I have the task to save them now by
returning them to life” (Journal 10). While some of the gilded, untarnished legends of
Petrakis’s childhood were scarred during work on The Hour of the Bell, at least one
survived the process of composition, and that was Kolokotronis. He will return years
later as the Greek hero of the sequel, The Shepherds of Shadows. The scribe Xanthos
attaches himself to Kolokotronis because he sees him as the man who will lead Greece
to freedom, as the man who puts Greece before himself. So, one has to ask, if Petrakis
leans on Howe for other material, why does he reject the American’s view of
Kolokotronis? Why does not a little bit of tarnish get on the image of Kolokotronis?

The answer would seem to be that, while Howe was useful for descriptive material,
Petrakis’s guide to the Greeks and their spirit was Kazantzakis. The final scene in The
Hour of the Bell, when Xanthos hears the song of a thrush and realizes that “the thrush
was Greece” (356), is taken directly from a tale in Kazantzakis (Journal 38). As he worries
that he might not understand the fighters that he is writing about, he observes:
“Perhaps my concern was also the concern of Kazantzakis who felt that Alexis Zorbas
was a ‘true man’ and that he, Kazantzakis, was simply a ‘pen pusher.’ But the image of
that free and natural man lives today because of Kazantzakis. That might validate the pen pusher's role, as a mythmaker, as a recorder of the struggle” (Journal 73).

In the journal, Petrakis worries that “the Cretan sequences seem an intrusion, not really part of the original structure of the novel. Perhaps that, too, is a warning from the blessed Kazantzakis. He is helping me with the Greek revolution, but Crete must be left to him” (Journal 144). But Petrakis cannot, in the end, leave Crete to Kazantzakis (although the Cretan episode is the only part of The Hour of the Bell that is not included and expanded on in The Shepherds of Shadows). The Cretan sequences do seem something of an intrusion and simply a vehicle for Petrakis to include a conflict between two men over a woman that comes straight out of Kazantzakis’s novel Kapetan Michalis (in English Freedom or Death). Petrakis references Freedom or Death by name in an interview in 1977 (“Song” 118), in which he also says that Kazantzakis is “the single most important writer in my hierarchy” (116). He adds that “if Kazantzakis had done the War of Independence,” he would not have tried to write about the conflict himself (188). At one point in the journal, Petrakis makes the following prayer: "Nikos Kazantzakis, my Cretan father and brother, grant me your blessing for I feel my frailty and weakness and have great need of your solace and faith” (73-74).

In The Hour of the Bell, and again in The Shepherds of Shadows, Kolokotronis becomes the true and natural man, he is the Zorba that Petrakis wants to create. The physical description of this hero may have come from Howe, but the spirit comes from Kazantzakis who is repeatedly invoked in the journal that Petrakis kept during composition. Howe, despite the fact that passages and phrases from A Historical Sketch appear in The Hour of the Bell, gets a reference in passing only once. In a passage quoted above, Petrakis had seemed to suggest that the roles of mythmaker and recorder of the struggle could be combined. And he does combine them in The Hour of the Bell. Like Howe, he does not shrink from describing the horrors of the conflict and the atrocities committed on both sides. But he also creates Kolokotronis as a cousin to Zorba, a man who has all the experience and value that a pen pusher does not have. However, one also wonders if, by creating a Greek scribe who is writing the history of the revolution as it happens, Petrakis also wants to correct the view of Kolokotronis provided by one of his key sources, Howe. Petrakis certainly knew that his insistence that Kolokotronis was a selfless, tireless, George Washington of the Greek Revolution was open to debate. Howe, for one, had made a different argument.

In his foreword to The Shepherds of Shadows, Peter Bien posed a question that is equally relevant for The Hour of the Bell: “What is Petrakis saying about Greece through this patriotic rather than nationalistic reenactment of its struggle for freedom?” (xiii). It is a question that needs to be addressed in these bicentennial years, not only because The Hour of the Bell has been neglected and Petrakis deserves more attention as an author, but also because the novel has a place in the discussion of the transatlantic link between Greece and America contained in the phrase Greek American. I hope to have shown that this text has layers that need more exploration and that the complications in writing about the Revolution that exist in The Hour of the Bell are relevant to how we discuss the ways to convey that struggle to an American public during this bicentennial year.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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NOTES


3. Even David Roessel, who discussed the novels in English of the Greek War of Independence in In Byron’s Shadow, did not claim that any of them was a major work in English literature.

4. For a recent challenge to Howe’s heroic image, see Elaine Showalter, The Civil Wars of Julia Ward Howe.

5. There is only time here to show a few of the connections between the two texts. Petrakis also borrows from Howe (80) in his account of Boubolina’s distasteful activities at the conclusion of
the siege of Tripolitza (33), although in this case he does not use Howe’s description of her as “old and ugly, and fat and greedy” (79).

ABSTRACTS

Petrakis’s novels about the Greek Revolution are the most significant efforts by an American author, in this case a Greek American author, to place the narrative of the struggle in front of an American public. This paper uses the journal that Petrakis kept while writing The Hour of the Bell to examine his thoughts and motives in the composition of the book, with close attention to Petrakis’s reading of the American philhellene Samuel Gridley Howe’s contemporary history of the war. The ways Petrakis uses Howe, and the ways he does not, offer insight into Petrakis’s own goals and conflicts in writing his version of the Greek Revolution for an American public.

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AUTHOR

DAVID ROESSEL

David Roessel is the Peter and Stella Yiannos Professor of Greek Language and Literature at Stockton University. He is the author of In Byron’s Shadow: Modern Greece in the English and American Imagination (Oxford UP, 2001) and also the coeditor of Selected Letters of Langston Hughes (Knopf, 2015) and The Collected Poems of Tennessee Williams (New Directions, 2007). He is the Stockton coordinator for the exchange agreement with Aristotle University.