“The Best Wall
To Hide Our Face Behind:”
An Introduction to the Poetry
of Manolis Anagnostakis*

DAVID RICKS

Let us begin in medias res with an initial attempt to peep behind the wall to which Anagnostakis refers in the phrase which forms this paper’s title. The poem is a literally cryptic one, but let us try to make it out as best we can on its own terms, and as far as possible without presuppositions.

ΕΚΕΙ...
Έκει θα τά βρείς.

Κάποιο κλειδί
Ποιν θα πάρεις
Μονάξα ἐν νέο ποίν θα πάρεις
Καὶ θὰ σπεύδεις τὴν πόρτα
Θ’ ἀνοίξεις τὸ δρυμάτι
Θ’ ἀνοίξεις τὸ παράθυρο στὸ φῶς
Σταματήσας τὰ ποντίων διὰ κρυφοτούν
Οἱ καθάρσεις θὰ λάμψουν
Οἱ γλώσσαι σα γιγαντιάσουν ὃς τὸν ἀνεμο
Έκει θα τά βρείς

THERE...
There you will find them.

A certain key
Which you’ll take
Only you will take
And you’ll push open the door
Open up the room
Open the windows on the light
The dazzled mice will hide
The mirrors will gleam
The light bulbs will be woken by the wind
There you will find them

*This paper, which was prompted by discussions in supervisions with Ms Elsa Amanatidou, was first given at Columbia University, and I am grateful to the audience, and in particular to Professor G. M. Sifakis and Professor Karen van Dyck, for comments which have improved it. This being an introductory account, I quote in English only all but the first and last poems discussed and refer sparingly to the extensive secondary literature. (All works have Athens as place of publication unless otherwise indicated.)
Κάπου – ἐν' τις βαλίτσες καὶ τὰ παλιόσιδα
'Ακούς τὸ κοιμμένα κοφρία, δόντια σχηματίζονται,
Κορίτσια στὰ μαξίλλα, τρυπεῖς κοροδέζες,
Μια πατωμένη έξω, τιμόνια καραβιών.
Θα μείνεις λίγο μέσα στο φύος
'Υπερα θα σφαλίσεις τα παράθυρα
Προσεκτικά τις κουίνεις
Σεβασμένα τὰ ποντίκια θα σέ γλείψουν
Θα σκοτεινόσουν οἱ καθρέφτες
Θ' ἀκνητίσουν οἱ γλύται
Κι εσείς θα πάρεις τὸ κλείδι
Καὶ μὲ κινήσεις βέβαιες χωρίς τύπες
Θ' ἀφίσας νὰ χαλάσεις στὸν ὅποιον
Βαθύ-βαθά μέσα στὰ πτυχαντα νερά.
Τότε θα ξέρεις.

(Πατήρος, ποίηση δέν είναι ὁ τρόπος νὰ μιλάμε με,
'Αλλα ο καθότερος τόξος νὰ κρύψωμε τὸ πρόσωπο μας.)

Somewhere – among the suitcases and old hardware
Among the snapped nails, fissured teeth,
Pins in pillows, frames with gaps in,
Half-burnt bits of wood, ships’ wheels,
You will be left alone a little in the light
Then you will shut the windows
And curtains carefully
Growing bold the mice will start to lick you
The mirrors will grow dark
The light bulbs fall still
And you’ll take the key
And with sure movements without remorse
You’ll let it drop in the sewer
Deep, deep in the thick waters.

Then you’ll know.

Here is a poem with a distinct tone and atmosphere, and in which the syntax is extremely simple: an exploration which is not exploratory in a syntactically involved or intricate way but deliberate, tentative. One short, plain line follows the last, and the sequence of events seems clear enough: we do not appear to be confronted with the challenging ellipses of, let us say, Sachouris among Anagnostakis’ contemporaries. At the same time, however, there is something deeply elliptical and reticent about the poem, and this quality is revealed by three formal aspects of it. As each has ramifications for what sort of poet Anagnostakis is in general, I shall – I hope not too pedantically – devote some space to them here.


First, the ellipsis in the title. This, on the face of it, might seem to be a hackneyed post-Symbolist gesture: the “…” in the title might seem to be hinting at the ineffable with some degree of wistfulness, “there” as “over there,” somewhere unattainable. Yet such a description doesn’t really seem to chime with the feeling of this poem. If we permit ourselves a glance at the context at this point, we will see that the majority of Anagnostakis’ poems between 1949 and 1962 have this form of title, consisting of the first word or words of the poem followed by an ellipse. Cumulatively, this contributes to giving his work a certain character, though not one easy to define. There are of course earlier poets such as Karyotakis who have untitled poems which are then listed in the Contents by the first line in brackets: this is clearly a related category, but not identical, as Anagnostakis makes the title an integral part of the text. In other words, his poems stand apart from the characteristically untitled poem of the modern lyric sequence. In an older context, moreover, the poem left untitled or given the conventional title, “song,” is lyric by definition – and yet Anagnostakis’ poems, though existing in some relation to lyric poetry, are not themselves lyrical.

On the other hand, by so often having titles of this non-traditional type, Anagnostakis is also cutting his poems loose from the title as label, even if often an ironic label. The possession of a title (before the Surrealists at any rate) creates a presumption that the poem will have a paraphrasable content – yet that too is a presumption that Anagnostakis wishes to frustrate (at least before his last collection). There is, in short, a deliberation with respect to the mode of title chosen which matches the deliberation of what this poem actually describes. That Anagnostakis has meditated closely on the issue of titles, indeed, comes out vividly in one of his short prose notes: “The titles in the Contents, when read in order, made up a new poem, the most beautiful of poems, without unnecessary words, without the literary, without cosmetics.”

Nevertheless, my comments so far may seem excessively finicky or simply roundabout. In order to justify the closeness of my approach I should dwell briefly on a related formal peculiarity of Anagnostakis’ work in general which I have not seen discussed.

I am referring to his line-beginnings, which are invariably capitalized. This is a general issue in modern poetry on which one tends for enlightenment (though line-endings have been illuminatingly discussed); there don’t seem to be clear conventions here. An exceptional case is Thom Gunn, who prints metrical poems with an initial capital letter and free verse in lower case—a clear distinction, this, perhaps too clear. More typical would be another eminent poet, David Ferry, who published two excellent collections of poems a decade apart (and for the same publisher), the first with verses capitalized at the beginning, the second not. Among Greek poets, relatively few (I can think of Elytis and Engonopoulos) have used capitalized line-beginnings in some of their poems. But in any case, in a poem like this one, the convention has the effect of slowing the pace, and confirmation is to be found in the record of Anagnostakis reading from his work: he reads each line somewhat flatly and fast, swallowing it up rather, but then leaves a relatively long pause between lines. It’s an audible indication that for him par excellence the space between the lines, the white space, is the real locus of interest.

Which takes me to my second visible formal point. The poem has a symmetry marked by white spaces. First, a one-line statement, then a blank, then a long stretch of lines broken by punctuation only in the visually widest section beginning Κάτω—that is, another blank space followed by a second one-line statement. That would be symmetrical, but Anagnostakis has deliberately impaired the symmetry by appending a last two lines in brackets. He does this in no fewer than 21 poems, and it’s perhaps his most insistently characteristic feature—but why?

Greece is even today a more oral-based, less print-dominated culture than the West. Poets of the earlier part of the century, poets as good as Palamas and Sikelianos, more or less left punctuation to the printer. In reaction, Cavafy and Karyotakis changed the rules of the game, making punctiliousness over punctuation a new duty for the poet. Karyotakis, in particular, is even flamboyant in his use of paren-

theses, sometimes putting the key part of a poem in brackets. A whole book, and a good one, has recently been written about the use of brackets in English poetry, John Lennard’s But I Digress, and consulting it will give us some help, though unearthing no exact parallel to Anagnostakis’ case.

On the one hand, terminal bracketing looks like a resisting of closure. By its appearance alone, it tends to impart a somewhat provisional air to a poem. It is like a statement trailing off, an opinion uttered in a lower voice, perhaps not fully intended to be heard. And yet it is not simply like the trailing off marked by a poem’s ending with an ellipse: brackets mark off the end perhaps more uncomfortably for the reader. (It’s a bit like that moment when a television detective shuffles back through the suspect’s door just when he’s thought to have gone.) The effect of terminal brackets in Anagnostakis is in fact highly pricky and sententious, and we may relate and contrast the sole example Lennard gives of this phenomenon, from the work of Stevie Smith. She ends a poem about a woman who aborted her child on the grounds that the world is too awful to bring babies into as follows: “(As, item, That the arrogance of a half-baked mind / Breeds murder; makes us all unkind.)”

I think this parallel helpful, yet at the same time not exact: Stevie Smith’s sententia is structurally, if not rhetorically, separable from the body of the poem as Anagnostakis’ is not. In the latter case, the last lines are a keystone: without that final statement we’d be unable to pin down the subject of the poem even if we were impressed by its mood. It is a mood of renunciation, about letting go: the gesture of throwing the ring into water is an archetypal one found in Herodotus’ story of Polykrates. But what all this is doing doesn’t become clear till the end. The poem ends as with the muttered aside of someone leaving a room and at last expressing his/her real feelings. And the fenc ing round of the last statement which comes out in the open is an indication of poetry’s ambiguous status as between communication and refuge.

4 See e.g. K.G. Karyotakis, Πειγματικά και Πεισά, ed. G.P. Savidis (1988) p. 82.
6 Ibid. p. 223.

2 David Ferry, Strangers (Chicago, 1983) and Dwelling Places (Chicago, 1993).
1 D. Ricks: The Poetry of Manolis Anagnostakis
But there is one final structural aspect of Anagnostakis' reticence here which is important, for without it we would find it hard to tie together the suffixed meta-poetic statement and the body of the text. The poem describes a search from the very first line: ἔκει θά τά βρέξ. But what is τά? We're never told. We might infer ποιήματα, but that would seem a little to misdescribe the poem, to make it too cut-and-dried. (Too like saying: if you look in the attic you'll find a chest of old poems.) The tone and the metaphor are in fact more clandestine, and were drawn on for precisely this quality by Jenny Mastoraki in a poem written under the Colonels.9

The whole poem is a study in reticence: it looks as if something will be found in the wreckage of life, as if there will be some flash of revelation - but then any such thing is stepped back from. The inhibitions felt by Anagnostakis whenever the possibility of poetic transcendence is raised are vividly described in the following prose note:

Now that I don't write any more and the distance of time helps, I see more clearly how often, indeed, I choked my own songs in my throat.

In the few poems which I have written over these twenty-five years and more, if I exclude my first and part of my second book, in how many of the rest did I not at the last moment erase words, alter senses, cut out whole verses because there were perhaps some things which should not yet be spoken? I wonder how many of those who have rightly found fault with my "looseness of expression," "deliberate obscurity," "indifference to form," suspected that I had almost always got hold of the right word, one capable on its own of recalling an entire meaning, of giving rise to an entire world - and didn't write it because I believed (or feared) that it shouldn't yet be written.10

If, then, poetry is "the best wall to hide our face behind," a place for concealment, how does this affect the rest of Anagnostakis' work?

9Tzeni Mastoraki, Αύδος (1990) p. 33. On women's poetry of the period and on censorship in general, see Karen van Dyck, Cassandra and the Censors (Cornell University Press, forthcoming).

10Anagnostakis, Το πεδίον, p. 9

Why has this path of self-denial been chosen? And how, if at all, is it compatible with publishing poems (albeit mostly in limited circulation) over many years?

The poem we have been discussing appeared in 1954 as the last poem in Anagnostakis' fourth collection. So far we have looked at it largely out of context, and it is important to note that there is disagreement as to what the proper context actually is. It is a fact that Anagnostakis' poems, written between 1941 and 1971, were composed at a painful period of Greek history, from the Axis Occupation to the Colonels' dictatorship; a fact that the poet has been at the sharp end of events, taking part in resistance against the Germans, being at one point sentenced to death during the Civil War, and more recently risking professional and personal security by protesting against the Junta. (He has also stood several times as a left-wing parliamentary candidate, without, however, any chance of being elected.) Once we know Anagnostakis' biography we might incline to see his work specifically in the light of what Maronitis calls "poetic and political morality," and this would certainly be borne out by his last collection from 1970/1971.11 More recently, however, Nasos Vayenas has challenged such an extrapolation back from the end-point of the oeuvre to the beginning, pointing out with some justification that, for a politically engaged poet, Anagnostakis' references to politics are very few and far between.12 (Contrast very good contemporaries also discussed by Maronitis: Alexandrou and Patrikios; and note too that Anagnostakis acquired an early reputation from reviewers who didn't pick up on his political affiliations at all.)13 Where Vayenas is on shakier ground is in maintaining that, if a later generation doesn't notice or understand the political references, then they may be ignored as not integral to the poetic effect. For reader-response theory

11D.N. Maronitis, Ποιητική και πολιτική ήθος (1976), where brief biographical details are to be found; my debt to this study is pervasive. A newer study by Vincenzo Otsina, Ο στόχος και η ονομασία: Ειδικωποι ιστορία των Μανόλη Αναγνωστάκη (1999) contributes less than might have been hoped.

12Nasos Vayenas, Ένα θαλάσσιο ποιητής του Αναγνωστάκη in Η ειρηνική γλώσσα (1994) pp. 125-32. This view of Anagnostakis as an existential rather than a political poet was first voiced by Alex. Argyrou in a review in Κανονιά, Εποχή 1,3 (Autumn, 1956) pp. 274-77.

13See e.g. the reviews in Νέα Εστία by Aimilios Choumouzou (no. 571, 15 April 1951, 563-64) and Andreas Karounidis (no. 737, 15 March 1958, 437).
of this type looks to me like a license for collective amnesia from which in the end poetry itself would surely suffer.

Reluctant to get impaled on the horns of this dilemma, I shall sidestep it now with the assessment that the issue could only be taken case by case. Having warmed up with a look at “There . . .” we should now go on to other poems. But first a word on Anagnostakis' unusual poetic career will be required.

The study of the shapes that modern poets’ careers take is of the greatest interest; and Greek poets’ careers in particular often have very anomalous contours. If Cavafy is a late developer, and if Palamas and Sikelianos both start early and never quit, we are brought up short by a case like that of Solomos, who publishes up to the age only of 35, of Kalvos, up to only 34, and of course the suicide Karyotakis, up to only 31. And when we come to Greek poets operating in the 1940s and 1950s, further disruption to smooth progress is revealed. Orthodox Stalinists like Ritsos and Leivaditis keep going no matter what, despite personal hardships, but Seferis is silent for nine years, Elytis for fourteen. Left dissidents like Patrikios or Alexandrou either stop or dwindle in their thirties. Clearly the 1940s generated a sort of poetic traumatic shock syndrome.

Anagnostakis, seen in such a context, is both a steady poet, with eight short collections between 1945 and 1962, and new and collected poems in 1971, and also an arresting example of one who quite consciously stops publishing poetry. For since 1971 he has given us no verse in proprio persona. True, we have had a number of interesting para-poetic texts. These include two short collections of personal notes of a reminiscent or reflective type with the indicative titles The Margin and PS; a spoof biography of a fictional alter ego, a fantasiste poet called Manousos Fassias; and an anthology of lyric poetry from the interwar years called The Quiet Voice. The last two items reveal, both Anagnostakis’ personal preference for rhymed and metrical poetry, and his mastery in writing it tongue in cheek – yet such modes he has renounced in his poetic work proper.

Why is the vein of renunciation so to the fore? (The whole of Anagnostakis’ work is a sort of crying wolf where he threatens to stop writing poetry and eventually does.) First, because the poet is a survivor of an afflicted generation, feeling a permanent burden of guilt, and, secondly, because he is far from convinced that poetry, other than of the most fastidious and self-conscious kind, has any place in post-war Greece. And in this century the poet, in many countries, has often wished for a literal wall to hide his or her face behind. Let me quote a note Anagnostakis wrote and circulated privately under the Junta:

In his study, the Poet is speaking slowly to a polite visitor about poetry’s mission in our time, about the indifference of the young to language, about the complexity of the spiritual problems of our contradictory age.

Imagine another room with four by no means polite visitors whipping the Poet, stripping him, putting out cigarettes on his arms, throwing buckets of water on him so that he comes to and they can start over.

In which room is the true Poet to be found?

What, I wonder, would he think then about poetry’s mission, about language, about the complexity of the problems of the age?

Under what burden have your shoulders given way, and what burden have mine?

What scales shall weigh us?

A passage such as this speaks for itself. But it also becomes an interlocutor with a memorable passage Anagnostakis could not have seen. It comes from Nadezhda Mandelstam’s Hope Against Hope, which appeared in English in 1970:

The fear that goes with the writing of verse has nothing in common with the fear that one experiences in the presence of

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14 Τὸ περιθώριον was privately circulated in 1968-69, ΥΓ (1992) in 1983. (Both works may be read as poetic texts, as proposed by Yannis Dallas, Πλάγιος λόγος (1989) p. 231. The spoof biography is Ο ποιητής Μανουσός Φασσιάς, Η ζωή και το έγγραφο του (1987), the anthology Η χαμηλή φωνή (1990).

15 The feeling is voiced by Patrikios in Όρεγέλη, Μαθητεία Στανά, p. 115. It is hard not to compare adversely the famous beginning of Howl by these poets’ exact contemporary Allen Ginsberg: “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness . . .”

16 Τὸ περιθώριον, p. 24.
the secret police. Our mysterious awe in the face of existence itself is always overridden by the more primitive fear of violence and destruction. [Mandelstam] often spoke of how the first kind of fear had disappeared with the Revolution which had shed so much blood before our eyes.17

Now why Mandelstam under Stalin and Anagnostakis under the Colonels thought like this is easy enough to see. But how did the Greek poet arrive at this self-searching view? And how did his self-imposed sense of the difficulty of poetry evolve?

Here of course Anagnostakis has his precursors, and both Cavafy and Seferis are explicitly cited in a poem at which we will look later. These two have in fact set the terms by which the difficulty of writing poetry will be seen by a Greek poet today, and I briefly allude now to two bench-mark poems. First “Darius” (1920). There Cavafy shows us a poet, Pharnazes, who is producing an epic on Darius for his supposed descendant, Mithridates King of Parthia. But with the Roman invasion the epic looks like a bad bet indeed: Pharnazes will lose a patron and possibly his life. The epic never gets written, we infer, but the poet comes to understand the vanity of rulers, and indeed his own vanity. If that were all, Pharnazes would be presented in the poem as an outright loser, yet the poem admits that “in all his confusion and his straits insensibly the poetic idea comes and goes.” Pharnazes has found some poetic wall to hide his face behind — or rather, it has found him — despite the fact that his city Amisos is not well fortified.18

In 1942, Seferis seems to quote Cavafy’s poem in the penultimate line of his poem, “Stratis the Seaman among the Agapanthi.” The dislocation of being in the Greek government-in-exile in a very un-Greek place, South Africa, seems to be frustrating the poet’s oft-essayd communication with the dead; yet the poem ends with a disjointed and desperate attempt to evade the present by recourse to words of the past. Seferis quotes first the plea, 

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It is his voice buzzing round in the crowd like a sun
Embracing the world like a sun slashing through grief like a sun
Showing us like a bright sun the golden cities
Spreading before us bathed in Truth and the clear light.  

This is the penultimate poem of Anagnostakis’ first collection in 1945, and the original has a bouncing, even ecstatic rhythm found nowhere else in the poet’s work, and very different from that of the first poem we looked at. Yet the poem is at the same time terribly retrospective: the colour of the events has already faded, obscured by the false impressions of the Liberation, and the poet’s ability to memorialize the dead seems only fleeting. Nor does the speaker involve himself in the events at all, though the poet himself was so involved at great personal cost. A prose note, of wonderful compression, gives us an idea of the sort of subject which Anagnostakis has felt obliged to exclude from his poetry as unfitting:

We were keeping lookout, the three of us, on the corner of Arrian Street and Olympus Street. We were each holding his revolver tight, hand in the wide pocket of a jacket bulging just as in the latest George Raft film. At eight o’clock there could be heard a burst of machine-gun fire, and shortly afterwards scattered shots. At five past eight Galanis came to tell us to disperse. I went with him as far as Egyptina. “Easy job,” he said. “When we went into the den we found them all lying on the rug, not moving, as if they didn’t hear us come in. We shouted to them to get up. They didn’t get up, they were completely stoned. We opened fire just as easy as that, with one burst. Not one of them moved, not a squeak, eight of them. Now the neighbourhood can breathe again, with Kiorpis’ thugs out of the way.” “Take the revolver,” I said, “I don’t have anywhere to put it tonight.” I noticed my voice. Galanis noticed it too. “I understand,” he said. “You’re not used to it yet.” “That too,” I said.  

22 Το πεπιθώμα, p.33.

It is in fact in the very poem that follows “Haris 1944” that Anagnostakis indicates that he is already struggling with the issue whether poetry is legitimate at all in such times:

The New Song

N.M.

Nearer still; and your bonds will never be broken if they don’t break now
We shan’t be able to ask our thirsty expectancy;
Why do they never die now, the days which have ransacked us so?
Or in the year we started to love like men and girls would tug away a hand without knowing why
And yet, perhaps, it might have been fine, like an open book,

One day I shall write the history of my times
A garden with unready roses pointlessly picked
A sea on which ships sail with no destination
People squandered just when they had succeeded in lightly touching a carefully hidden side of us
People whose affection was a wound in us; I’ll write this down for you.

Meanwhile on the banks of the noonday rivers pale Narcissi are no longer sleeping, they and their sensitive souls
On the park pond children are no longer sailing their fresh daydreams on their little paper boats
I remember our secret expectancy: the tightening-up at the sight of the first yellow leaf leaving an unrelievedly bitter taste in the mouth.

That’s enough of the days that tired us so
(Painful bodyings-forth of immaterial visions)
That’s enough of the azure Aegean sky with poems sailing to insignificant islands to awaken our sensitivity
Of girls falling in love with their own form in the mirror and waiting to dandle their delicate dreams
In big cities people love impulsively and die
They run, their words grow prematurely heavy, their hearts hammer away like metal
In the noisy harbours I went and breathed a chest-full of mist
at the docks which are unwilling to grow old
I came down to bring you the love I sought so intensely from you and I search for it breathlessly
On the dark ships dropping anchor, laden with maritime images and coal
In the low-ceilinged rooms of the great tall buildings which hold fire and mystery
And the clocks beat rhythmically. I haven’t time.
Sole vision of my expectancy.

On the thresholds of demolished houses defeated soldiers
await their homecoming without hope
In their empty skulls war-cries wander
The horror of pointless battle kills their nightmarish time
Pale words compose wounded elegies
And I am dreaming of one day trampling on my dead verses
in order to make emphatic in red letters (victorious trumpets) my new song.²³

If “Haris 1944” took to itself something of the qualities of song, this poem, though called a song, could hardly be less like one. Rather, it anticipates, in the most circumspect manner, some song’s being composed some day in the future. In the poem’s third section there’s an undiscouraged attack on what is seen as the escapist poetry of the previous generation exemplified by the early Elytis in particular; but Anagnostakis, unusually (and, one may add, with precocious maturity) does not boast that his generation will put something better in the earlier poetry’s place - or, at least, not without cost.²⁴ This comes out clearly in the last, very long verse:

²³Τὸ καινοῦργο τραγούδι, P, pp. 39-41.
²⁴We are speaking here of the Elytis of Ποιητικές σελίδες της Παλαιάς Ρωμαϊκής (1940), but it is possible to infer reservations about the later Elytis from an interview by Anagnostakis in Andonis Fostieris and Thanasis Th. Niarchos, Σε δεύτερο πρόωστο. Συνομίλεις με 50 συγγραφείς και καλλιτέχνες (1990) p. 26. Anagnostakis’ precocity is shown by his publication of his first poem in 1942; see Alex. Argiriou (ed.), Η Ελληνική ποιήση, ιστορία - γραμματολογία, τόμ. 5. 'Η πρώτη μεταπολεμική γενιά (1990) p. 208.

Κι εγώ ονειρέομαι μια μέρα πατώντας πάνω στούς νερούς μου σίχους να τοιχωμεν στοκάκια γραμμάτων (νομίμως στάλημε) το καινούργιο μου τραγούδι.

The brackets which surround the “victorious trumpets” look both emphatic and perfunctory, suggesting the very insincerity of the aspiration to a new song; the red letters in context look bloody and associated with the Stalinism from which Anagnostakis has already dissociated himself.²⁵ And the dream of trampling one’s own verses (the word kept late in the sentence so that we at first think dead bodies are involved) makes the role of the poet seem one of complicity. The title, then, alluding to Psalm 98: “O sing unto the Lord a new song” – only the first of a number of Biblical references we shall note – looks highly ironic.

To write of such a period as the 1940s at all might seem in itself callous, even impious: in a well-known poem, “Poetry 1948,” the Surrealist poet Nikos Engonopoulos suggested precisely that. While seeing the rationale, Anagnostakis felt obliged to make a riposte in the following short poem in an idiom much like that of Engonopoulos:

To Nikos Ε . . . 1949

Friends
Leaving
One day disappearing
Cries
At night
Faraway cries
Of a mad mother in the empty streets
A child’s crying unanswered
Ruins
Like tattered rotten flags
Nightmares,
On iron beds
When the light dwindles
At dawn.

(But who shall speak with pity of all this?)²⁶

²⁵ Anagnostakis was expelled from the Communist Party of Greece in 1949 but did not divulge this at the trial at which he received a death sentence in that year; see X.A. Kokolis, Λόγος και νοημοσύνη της Ελληνικής ποιήσης 1930-1960 (Thessaloniki, 1979) p. 134.
The word “but” here (Greek ἀλλά) conveys a strong sense of exasperation, yet is a somewhat muffled cry, bracketed as it is at the collection’s end (a collection itself called Parentheses).

The last poem of the next volume, Times 3, in turn appears to be an envoi to poetry. It is called “Epilogue” and is separated from the other poems by a blank page. Its ten shapely iambic lines, with a hint of rhyme, embody a sort of musicality familiar from Embiricos but which Anagnostakis normally only admits in broken form.27 Yet the music here is at the service of an act of renunciation, as a lost generation takes its rightful place:

**Epilogue**

It may be that these verses are the last
The last among the last that will be written
Because the future poets are no longer living
They who’d have spoken all died young
Their forlorn songs turned into birds
In some sky elsewhere with a foreign sun
Became wild rivers coursing to the sea
Whose waters you can never separate
In their forlorn songs there took root a lotus
That in its juice we might be born more young.28

Significantly, Anagnostakis gave his next collection the title, The Continuation, or The Next Instalment (1954), and the opening poem responds directly to the previous collection. For the ghosts of the past will not just dissolve into the surrounding world; they cannot be kept at bay but will make their unexpected incursions:

**You came When I . . .**

You came when I was not expecting you. As every night
Burning the memory of grievous deaths
Feebleness of old age, terror of birth,
In dark caverns, in the loop of pleasure
Beyond the empty plains of fragments
You came when I was not expecting you. Oh how you would

28 Ἐπίλογος, P, p. 99.

D. Ricks: The Poetry of Manolis Anagnostakis

have lived
You and I in times like those
Rotten fruit in the hold of a
Drunken ship on which everyone is dead
Sinking, thousands of holes in our bodies
Dim eyes insulting the light
Stray mouths on the rim of life
Burning the recollection – Dead men
In a period of irrevocable death
You came when I was not expecting you. And not a gesture
A word, like a bullet in the mark on the throat
Not a human voice because no
Voice had yet been born
The wild river had not yet been born
Which flows to the fingers’ ends and then falls silent.
Recollection of a life - when will you start
So that I unscrupulous and mild of manner may hold forth
May utter at the cenotaphs lamentations
Worn by the obsolescence of the vocables
And you locking away tiny pleasures
Not trampling on your dead verses
Because if there are bones, love-affairs, and one-storey houses
With the blanket hung in the front doorway dividing the world
In two, hiding the spasm and the despair
And, outside, passers-by chanting in defiance of the faithful
In defiance of the sick child and the winter
Oh how you would have lived in times. And he unscrupulous,
Time, shattering thought
Fixed plans and violent decisions
Hovering whys, damp smiles
You came when I was not expecting you. Do not deceive me
These are not the thresholds I have knelt at
These crypts in which the rodents shiver
Have nothing of the taste of mud
Or of the soft touch of the dead in our dreams
Because something is left - if it is left -
Beyond death, perishability, words and action.
Imperishable in this ash I burn
As every night the memory of deaths
Of grievous and inexplicable deaths

25 Ἡθεῖς ὅταν ἔγιο... P, pp. 103-04.
Writing poems without sounds or words.\textsuperscript{29}

In this poem even the ironically expressed wish to trample on one’s dead verses is repudiated. Instead, the process of inspiration is as involuntary as that which takes place in Cavafy’s “Darius;” the poet here conducts a largely unconscious sort of necromancy well conveyed by the disorientating switches of person and an elliptical syntax at odds with the line endings. The whole poem culminates in a pregnant statement of poetics: Τρίαρχος ποιητή στοιχέιο και λέξεως. The gesture possesses both modesty and a high-flown Platonic notion of poetry. To my mind, it is the high point of Anagnostakis’ career, exploiting the power of poetry even as it fences it round with so intense a degree of introspection; and the mode it initiated seems to have inspired another magnificent poem, Takis Sinopoulos’ \textit{Nekrodeipnos}.\textsuperscript{30}

But by 1962 and the collection, \textit{The Continuation 3}, Anagnostakis’ work is becoming ever more puritan, disavowing the poetic altogether. It is as if he is acting on the injunction of Ecclesiastes 5:2: “Let thy words be few.” Take this continuation of an earlier train of thought:

\begin{quote}
BARER AND BARER

Barer and barer
More and more inarticulate
Not phrases now
Not words now
Symbols for letters
Instead of city, stone
Instead of body, nail
Or even: a bloody
Murdered stain
Under the microscope.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

It is poems such as this which have led some readers to feel that Anagnostakis has by now – albeit on principle – emptied the baby out with the bath-water. I suspect indeed that the poet might have signed off from poetry at this point had not events once again intervened.

\textsuperscript{29}Takis Sinopoulos, \textit{Nekrodeipnos} (1972) pp. 17-22.

\textsuperscript{30}“Ολοκαύτωμα ποιητή. … P., p. 148. \textit{Let Thy Words Be Few} was the title of the last (and posthumous collection) by another master of reticence, J.V. Cunningham (Los Angeles, 1986).

The dictatorship of 21 April 1967 roused him to one last flurry, through the collaborative volume, \textit{Eighteen Texts}, issued as a protest against the Junta in July 1970.\textsuperscript{22} The opening poem gives a sharp idea of the tone of Anagnostakis’ last collection, \textit{Ο Στόχος (The Aim / Target)}:

**POETICS**

- There you go betraying Poetry again, you’ll say,
- The most sacred manifestation of Man
- There you are using it once again as a means, an instrument
- Of your dark purposes
- In full knowledge of the damage your example
- Is doing to the younger generation.

- You tell me what you have not betrayed
- You and your kind, year in year out,
- Selling off your possessions one by one
- In the international markets and the neighbourhood bazaars
- And you are left without eyes to see, without ears
- To hear, with sealed mouths, saying nothing.
- In the name of what that is sacred to man do you implore us?

I know: more preaching and rhetoric, you’ll say.
Well, all right then! Preaching and rhetoric.
Words need to be nailed down like tacks
Not to be gone with the wind.\textsuperscript{32}

Back in the late 1950s Anagnostakis had violently attacked the \textit{engagé} poetry of orthodox Communists, but here he takes on a self-appointed spokesman for the autonomy of art.\textsuperscript{24} The attack is conducted in language of deliberate clumsiness and at the extremes of the con-

\textsuperscript{22}Relevant here may be Anagnostakis’ preoccupation in the intervening years with criticism, especially through his journal, \textit{Krisi} (1959-61).

\textsuperscript{32}Ποιητική, P., p. 159. (All of the collection appeared in the collective volume, \textit{Λεκανοτρική κείμενα} in 1970, with the exception of the two most inflammatory poems, \textit{Απολογία για τον Ομπάτον και Προσωπικό συμπέρασμα} – a illuminating comparison of Anagnostakis’ poem with poems by Alexandrou and Leivadiotis is made by Dimitris Z親as, “Η ποιητική της κατάθεσης και το άλλο σύνολο των Λέξων,” \textit{Ποιητής} 3 (Spring 1994) pp. 89-107.

\textsuperscript{24}See e.g. Manolis Lambridis in \textit{Krisi} 1.3, 127-28 and Anagnostakis himself, now in \textit{Tά συμπέρασμα,} (1985) p. 33.
ventionally anti-poetic: repetitive, emphatic (three underlinings), and ending with a homespun comparison. But the word “preaching” (κηρύγματα) should alert us to a Biblical allusion which gives depth to the poem’s austerity. The first of the interlocutors speaks pharisaically of Poetry as a sacred thing: the second replies with apostolic zeal. If there is a Temple of poetry, it has long been occupied by the money-changers, who must be driven from it. Yet these money-changers, the false artists, have themselves become idols, in an echo of Psalm 135.15-18 (cf. also Psalm 115.6-8):

The idols of the heathen are silver and gold, the work of men's hands.
They have mouths, but they speak not; eyes have they, but they see not;
They have ears, but they hear not; neither is there any breath in their mouths.
They that make them are like unto them: so is every one that trusteth in them.

But these are not the sole Biblical echoes in the poem, which is, so to say, nailed together, in however clumsy-looking a fashion, by a closing recollection of the final chapter of Ecclesiastes 12.10-11:

The preacher sought to find out acceptable words: and that which was written was upright, even words of truth.
The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails fastened by the masters of assemblies, which are given from one shepherd.

Yet Anagnostakis’ poem turns back on itself in the final line, where my translation “not to be gone with the wind” is designed to echo the Greek title of the famous film. For the poet, like Patrikios, sees the cinema in post-war Greece as the very type of the “bread and circuses” for which Greeks have sold out their lives and beliefs.  

In a poem such as this Anagnostakis seems consumed with an all-

35I am tempted also to adduce Thoreau, who speaks of one of his country friends as follows: “he nailed words to their primitive senses, as farmers drive down stakes in the spring, which the frost has heaved.”
36See Patrikios, Στούν χαμηλότοιχο, Μαθητεία ζιανά, p. 56.

most Tolstoyan zeal to repudiate art in the name of something overridingly important which can be expressed only in the language of Judeo-Christianity. Such abstract thoughts take on a bit more color and emotion in this next poem:

**Thessaloniki, Days of A.D. 1969**

In Egypt Street – first side-street to the right –
There now rises the headquarters of the Bank of Exchange
Travel agents and emigration offices
And the small children can’t play there any more for all the traffic
In any case the children are grown up, those times you people knew are over
They don’t laugh any more, don’t whisper secretively, don’t trust each other,
Those who’ve survived, that is, for since then grave sicknesses came on
Floods, drownings, earthquakes, armoured soldiers;
They remember father’s words: you will know better days
It’s not to the point whether in the end they did know them, they repeat the lesson to their own children
Always hoping that at some point the chain will stop
Perhaps with their children’s children or their children’s children.

For the moment, in the old street we were talking about, there now rises the Bank of Exchange
– I exchange, you exchange, he exchanges –
Travel agents and emigration offices
– We are emigrating, you are emigrating, they are emigrating –
Wherever I travel Greece wounds me, the Poet said
Greece with the lovely islands, lovely offices, lovely churches

Greece of the Greeks.  

The title alludes to Cavafy, but in a Seferian mode, the reference being to the present rather than the past. The quotation from Seferis towards the end of the poem, however, is hard to assess: if it is not a direct reproach to the older poet, then the capitalized Poet, if we link

38Seferis, Ημέρες, pp. 191, 208.
him with the prose note we discussed earlier, is such as to make us suspicious.\(^{39}\) (At any rate, Anagnostakis seems not to be reading Seferis’ “In the Manner of G.S.” as the self-parody it is.) I suspect that the poem is trying to do too much here, and the final reference to the Colonels’ Έλλας Έλληνων Χρυσήτακην would have sufficed. It could once again be argued, however, that the poem needs to be interpreted with reference to a Biblical source: the mention of plagues visited on successive generations alerts the reader to this dimension. Such references also give point to the mentioning of the place in the title, for Paul’s first epistle to the Thessalonians (5.1) says: “But of the times and seasons, brethren, you have no need that I write unto you.” What power this poem has in fact comes from its specifically Thessalonian setting and its cross-reference to earlier poems in the oeuvre: Egypt Street, as well as fitting in with the Cavafian title, has appeared twice before as the locale of prostitution in the War years – an understandably unspoken-of tragedy of the 1940s.\(^{40}\)

All the old memories, though, have now been devalued by consumerism; as Anagnostakis bitterly concludes another poem of the group:

(I keep on relating, in my excessively blunt way, things you all know
Which I’ve said and other people have said before me much better than me
Boring stuff, which doesn’t spark your interest at all now
Unlike e.g. the murder of Sharon Tate or Jackie’s wedding or a Kelvinator fridge.)\(^{41}\)

The frustrated expectations of the increasingly affluent post-war years, and the ways in which they frustrate poetic discourse in turn, are neatly brought out in the following little poem, “If,” its title in English being taken from Kipling’s famous poem:


\(^{40}\)See the poems “Ο πόλεμος (with the whole phrase Στη... δεξιά) and “Οταν άποχώρησαν...” P., pp. 35, 128. On the historical circumstances see Mark Mazower, Inside Hitler’s Greece (New Haven, 1993).

\(^{41}\)Αλεξάνδρου Βίλλη, P., pp. 170-72.

If – I say if . . .
If everything had not happened so early on
Your expulsion from High School class five
Then Haidari, Ali-Stratis, Itzedin,
If at 42 you weren’t suffering from arthritis
After twenty years in jail
With two expulsions from the Party on your back, one declaration
Of renunciation when they got you on your own in the
Psychiatric Clinic
If – today a clerk in a food business –
Useless now to anyone, a squeezed lemon,
A burnt-out case, with ideas long obsolete,
If, as I say if . . .
With a little good will things had turned out differently
Or through some chance incident, as with so many, many
Classmates, friends, colleagues – I’m not saying with their
Nose clean
Anyway . . .

(That’ll do. Poems can’t be written out of that sort of stuff.
Don’t keep on.
They need another air to them in order to please, another
“transfiguration.”

We’ve really gone overboard writing about subjects.)\(^{42}\)

The poem looks like a straightforward slice of life till the last (once again, bracketed) lines, in which the poet announces his inability to keep slogging away at such material. Things have come full circle: now in the 1970s, as once in the 1940s, people still see verse as the domain of escapism. Wallace Stevens once said to Robert Frost with some hauteur, “You write on subjects” – a claim Anagnostakis would avow with pride.\(^{43}\) His ultimate idea of what he has tried to achieve is set out in the poem “Critique,” which, like an earlier poem by Karyotakis with the same title, casts a notional critic’s aspersions in

\(^{42}\)Ibid. pp. 168-69.

his teeth:

... And basically, there's a lack of any further dimension

That beguiling obscurity which gives rise to
Second levels and unforeseen perspectives
Which affords subjects for interpretation, discussion,
Reveals latent structures and uncovers essences
There's a lack of that virgin quality of expression, of that
something else

In short of the prismatic quality of things - as if

You people have a hammer in hand and like the gypsies

Just keep bashing away without letting up on the same old anvil.

- Like the gypsies
  we just keep bashing away
  without letting up
  on the same old anvil. 44

Two formal features of this poem permit the inference that it takes
cue from a 1959 collection of Aris Alexandrou, now in exile in Paris.
the beginning with the ellipsis and the staggered verses of the ending.
The former carries the strong implication that the first voice in the
poem, the critic's voice, goes on and on: wherever the tape is cut into,
so to speak, you will find the same running off at the mouth. (So that,
deprive his plea for complexity, the critic, as much as the hostile
poet, is tied into an invertebrate way of seeing things.) The technique is
here used against the Right, but Alexandrou had earlier turned it against
the Stalinists, in his poem, "Theoretical discussion, à la manière de
Jdanov." 45 The second feature appears in several poems of Alexandrou
but most memorably at the end of "Meditations of Flavius Marcus",
where it suggests the dogged deliberation the Roman translator en-
joins on himself. 46

I believe that these connections with Alexandrou illuminate
Anagnostakis' poem and the stance it takes, but connections of an

44 Karyotakis, Κροτατι, Ποιήματα και πεζά, p. 77.
45 Aris Alexandrou, Επίλυση, à la manière de Jdanov, Τά ποιήματα 1941-1971
46 Alexandrou, Φλάβιος Μάρκος εἰς ἔρωτόν, Τά ποιήματα, p. 113.

openly acknowledged kind appear in the second and last of
Anagnostakis' poems with the title "Epilogue." In this envoy,
Anagnostakis quotes a poem from 1963 by his almost equally disillu-
sioned friend Titos Patrikios:

ΕΠΙΛΟΓΟΣ

Κι όχι αυτοπατές προπαντός.

Τό πολύ - πολύ να τους εκλάβεις
σά δώνθομπος προβολείς
μές στήν διάμηλη

Σάν ένα δελτάριο σε ψίλος που
λειτουρ με τη μονάδα τή λέξη ζώα.

"Τιτό," όπως πολύ σωστά είπε
κάτοπιν και ο φίλος μου ο Τίτος.

"Κανένας στίχος σήμερα δεν
κινητοποιεί τις μάζες

Κανένας στίχος σήμερα δεν
άνατρεπει καθεστώτα.

Εσύ.

Ανάδρομος, δείξε τά χέρια σου.

Κρίνε για νά κριθείς. 47

ΕΠΙΛΟΓΟΣ

And above all no self-deception.

At the most conceiv of them as a
pair of dim searchlights in the

fog

As a card to absent friends with the
single phrase: I'm alive.

"Because," as my friend Titos once
so rightly said.

"Not one verse today sets in motion
the masses

Not one verse today overturns
régimes."

So be it.

Cripple, show your hands. Judge
that you be judged

The object of τούς isn't initially clear, but we later see that it must
be στίχους (especially as Patrikios' poem is called Στίχοι 2) and,
as with τά in the poem we began with, it adds complexity and an in-
trigative note to an otherwise plain poem. The final verse, moreover,
contains three last Biblical allusions which leave the poet's stance
delicately poised. It may not be too fanciful to infer that "cripple"
and as Acts 14:8-10, where the cripple has faith to be healed, and is
told to stand up by St Paul (who will in ch. 17 arrive in Thessalonica).
The showing of hands as testimony of identity is carried out by none
other than Christ after the Resurrection (Luke 24.40, John 20.20);
while, finally, the poem's last phrase inverts Christ's "Judge not, that
ye be not judged" (Matthew 7.1) in such a way as to suggest that the
poet's judgements are made precisely in the hope that he will in turn

47 Επίλυσης, p. 176; see Patrikios, Στίχοι 2, Μαθητεία ξανά, p. 97.
be judged, will be called to the tribunal of poetic morality.

Anagnostakis’ work affords – or indeed imposes – many opportunities for reflection, and I have concentrated on just one aspect of it, though I believe it to be the central aspect. What I have attempted to illustrate is how, having at an unusually young age opened up an unusually deep vein of reflection, and an exacting sense of the responsibilities of poetry, Anagnostakis gradually came to put up the shutters on his inspiration, for reasons that will always remain in part obscure, and which certainly cannot be explained in terms of (to quote Karyotakis), “a milieu, an epoch.” As time went on, Anagnostakis’ poetry came more and more to expose or even espouse an absence; and more recent interviews with the poet reveal a sort of nostalgia which is itself close to escapism. Yet his path towards silence is carefully laid with poems which reward closer attention than space here permits.

49 See e.g. the interview, “Δεν είμαι πουτής,” in Το γιορτάζει (Sydney) 13 (1993) pp. 5-8.