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Poetry and Politics: The Greek Cultural Dilemma

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TONIGHT I WILL SPEAK TO YOU ABOUT POETRY, GREEK POETRY, in itself a powerful experience at any time in the historical span of that culture. But to speak of Greek poetry is to speak of politics—not so much in the rarefied aesthetic sense of the old duality: poetry versus philosophy, that old Aristotelian kind of politics; rather, in the raw sense of poetry as crisis, as the rhythm and heartbeat of a nation's identity. And, politics as when a soldier says "in my politike zoe I am a carpenter," meaning in his 'civilian life,' using precisely the same term normally used for a "political life." Poetry, then, as one of the primary acts of the zoon politikon. And politics as when a civic model becomes workable after it has been heralded by the vanguard art of that culture, which has always been poetry.

In a country where for the last century and a half at least poetry and politico-cultural crisis, or better yet, poetry and revolution, have been virtually synonymous, it seems most apt to use the method of "cultural discourse" in understanding what I take to be a current crisis in poetry.

The good news is that we continue to have poetry in Greece after the last major political struggle of 1967-1974. The bad news is that it has virtually become useless to a wider public; it is no longer invested with danger; it has already begun to point more and more in the direction of those Western European democracies where poetry has no real subject-matter, only an ostensible one, and only occasionally in subversive use, where the subject-matter of poetry is poetry itself in a narcissistic, confessional, stranglehold on consciousness. Post-1974 Greek poetry concerns itself with urban boredom, with highly personal states of mind, with the failure of nerve, with the fragility of urban neuroses—

in other words, with a generalized confessional mode, the state of poetry we have known in England and America for decades now. (But perhaps I should exclude from this category the poetry of a handful of women, three of whom will be among the poets I will be concluding with, this evening: Kiki Dimoula, Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke, and Jenny Mastoraki.)

One might well ask, however, is this urban boredom, this generalized confessional mode, such a bad state of affairs—as exemplified in, say, the fine tuned verse of Tassos Denegris? Greek poetry will become completely transformed as the politics of the country is undergoing transformation. After all, it is the one art form in the Greek world that has always heralded change; sometimes in an incendiary fashion, nowadays

with a mere whimper.

No, it is not such a bad state of affairs in itself, this whimper. For it heralds a special kind of sophistication in the aesthetic sphere commensurate with the developing democratization and the shifts in the socio-cultural domain. Then, again, one might look at the other side of the coin and say: Yes, it is a disastrous state of affairs; not only because it will take such a long time to stabilize the transition and find the new voices, but because merit will become extremely difficult to identify (or achieve), thus encouraging the hoards of younger poets to plunge, as most of them are doing right now, headlong toward inventing and becoming masters of the obvious; in other words, the obvious (the invention of the wheel, so to speak) becomes the confessional mode, poetry as consciousness of self. As one of the women poets, Ms. Anghelaki-Rooke has recently said, "poetry in Greece has finally become a victim of itself."1

So, then, shall we ask as Heidegger does in his famous dictum, using the line from Holderlin's ballad, ". . . and what are poets for in a destitute time?" Is the time destitute? I think for Greek poetry we are already there. Saying this much it is not my intention to develop a criique of any specific political ideology. Rather, by characterizing the politico-cultural transition as a destitute time for poetry I am identifying the power in the court of Social Science, a cultural power no longer in the Humanities—and not at all in Philosophy. Greek culture is now in the grip of developing democratization in the specific way that Europe's unification principles demand, a road as much in danger of losing its way as of finding the means to transcend its own ideology. In the larger Western democracies, democratization is no longer a matter of developing; if anything, it is being shaken to its foundations by their vast array of special interest groups, by the various ethnicities and nopulation shifts of the last few decades. The main concerns there are issues of Law and of Ethics, of how to tip the scales in the direction of the disadvantaged by a system of representation; and there, the maintaining of a democratization balance becomes as elusive as it is for East Europeans in their struggle to catch up with Western style politics, which in their case means mainly economics. The Greek cultural dilemma is the loss of time, quality time, between 1967-1974. During those years an economic ideology developed and grew out of all proportion in a disoriented fashion, bearing little relation to the zoon politikon, who was in fact sleepwalking over the body of his real political life, while poetry was despairingly wringing its hands. Even Seferis, who had never exhibited revolutionary inclinations, revolted against the sleepwalking massess. So this road, trying to do two things at once: to bring politics to some alignment with the aberrated economic ideology that ran wild during that quality time, and to find the means to transcend its own ideology of European equilibrium, may well lose its way. If that should happen, then poetry will have foretold the malaise, the decadence, the boredom; if not, then poetry will have lost its way, become relegated to the "esthete" byways of culture; in other words, poetry will have taken its place as in so many countries of the West. But this troublesome road in the last half dozen years has opened up by fits and jolts, sometimes elusively taking one step forward and two backward. And while democratization in the '80's has often, and perhaps rightly, caused euphoria in certain social and political science circles, the tremors it has set off in culture, in the arts in general, and particularly in poetry, have been significant enough to compel—some of us, at least—toward a new way of looking at this art form and its product, the poem: I'm thinking of the method of "cultural-political discourse"-leaving behind the rarefied theories and formulas (e.g. structuralism, semiotics, deconstruction) of the last two decades, whose main thrust has never been political, hence distressingly reactionary. And, to be sure, this method (whether seen as new or not) is taken up of necessity, for it would be inadequate, to say the least, to look at Greek poetry without politics.

I will begin by placing before you a working model for looking at poetry in the fashion that I have suggested. Then I will proceed to look at how two of the more venerabe names in Greek poetry, Elytis and Ritsos, have weathered the transition; next I will take up some examples from a group of younger, middle-range poets, concluding with a special case, a fully accomplished artist, the exceptional poetic voice of Kiki

¹ Unless otherwise attributed, the translations are my own.

Dimoula.

First the model: I should like to speak simply of first-order, second-order, and third-order poems. I am borrowing this logical scheme from the philosopher, C. S. Peirce, who gives us a working breakdown of his logic, thus: "First(ness) is the conception of being or existing independent of anything else. Second(ness) is the conception of being relative to, the conception of reaction with, something else. Third(ness) is the conception of mediation, whereby a first and second are brought into relation." Helen Vendler in her The Music of What happens makes use of a similar method, loosely, though not of Peirce's breakdown.

My intention is to adapt this model into a working tool, thus; First-order poems are those whose narrative voice is the first person ("I walked to the edge of the cliff and saw the red helicopter rising"). Second-order poems reveal the poetic voice in reaction to, or in conflict with, the world outside ("So they have their meaning, the weighed oranges/beside the dirt road . . ."). And third-order poems provide a mirror with which to look at the *relation* between the first person voice and its conflict with the conception of being in a certain way in the world ("Might that reflection have stayed on the ceilling/golden like that among the shadows? Because of course/those things can't be hidden any longer.") This last is where the zoon politikon dwells, for it is the region where consciousness reflects and comments on the condition of self in political life. Likewise in the second-order, the struggle as merely ascribed is a raw political act. And while the first-order voice seems patiently apolitical, it can often be deceptive.

Of course poetry is never written so neatly as to follow this or any other model; just as Cavafy's saying that his work fell into three categories, poems of the historical, the philosophical, and the erotic mode, when the truth is that the best of his poems partake of all three; just as Euripides' narrative prologues tell the story of his tragedies, then what follows in dramatic form varies in subtle and significant ways, rendering his prologues ironic; in the same fashion, logic undergoes a transformation in our daily actions, creating a relation that is often incomprehensible and indicative of a personal identity. So too this model, then, will take on the life of the poems and will lead us in directions that may be different from my initial intention. To make the point clearer, a substantial number of good poems pretend to be first-order when in fact they are implicitly second-order poems ("I did X, I thought

Y'') by nature of reflecting on the independent first-order narrative; to make things even more difficult to decipher, some extraordinary poems will operate on all three levels at once ("I did X, I thought Y, the world is Z").

Let me now willfully overreach in my reading of this simple model and suggest that first-order narrative-based poems tell the story of consciousness and are basically confessional; second-order poems are those of a personal, political crisis; and third-order poems bespeak of social and cultural revolt, of political suffering in an open, public arena; they are not entirely lacking in a narrative base, but presupposing it so they may build on the other two levels—in short, most of Greek poetry from Kalvos and Solomos, right up to the crisis in the last seventeen years.

Elytis and Ritsos

Both Elytis and Ritsos write a certain kind of second-order poem; they shape an attitude in the first person which transforms the first order narrative experience into a social and political reality. In Ritsos's case it becomes a wounding reality with immediate political implications:

THE MOST PRECIOUS THINGS

He hid them under the floorboards, spread the rug, put the table and chairs back in place. He sat down, calm now. He lit a cigarette. When they entered, they headed straight there. They dug up the things. Who had spotted him, and from where? Suddenly he saw the reflection of those things painted on the ceiling as though they were lighted up inside. They took them. They tied his hands. They dragged him outside. And he between them in the street like a thief—no, not at all frightened, only wondering: might that reflection have stayed on the ceiling golden like that among the shadows? Because of course those things can't be hidden any longer.

Athens, January 14, 1972⁵

What we have here is second-order reflection of a first-order wounded self, with a third-order ending, a coda that is implied throughout. We must not be misled by the third person narrative, for it is arranged as the "voice of the poem" to represent the deeply

² J. Buchler (ed.), *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (New York, 1955), p. 322.

³ (Cambridge, 1988).

⁴ Ritsos, "Sunday Excursion," Trans. E. Keeley (Journal of Literary Translation, 14 (1985) 9.

⁵ Exile and Return: Selected Poems 1967-1974. Trans. E. Keeley (New York, 1985), p. 138.

wounded first person in political crisis. The poem veers to a dramatic turn, toward reflection and away from narrative, upsetting the epistemology from Plato's cave with its shadows on the wall, "Because of course/those things can't be hidden any longer." In other words, a fine poem and an excellent example of second-order/first-order poetry with a third-order punch to it. All three orders are fully visible, for this is late Ritsos, only a short time before the fall of the military dictatorship when he had already turned away from the bold personal political statement in the second-order of his earlier work.

For Elytis's middle period, too, the political reality emerges in the second-order part of his poem which only appears to operate in first-order narrative techinque. I quote from *The Axion Esti*, ⁶

Greek the language they gave me;
poor the house on Homer's shores.

My only care my language on Homer's shores.

There bream and perch
windbeaten verbs.
green sea currents in the blue,
all I saw light up in my entrails,
sponges, jellyfish
with the first words of the Sirens
rosy shells with the first black shivers.
My only care my language with the first black shivers.

This manner, pre-1974, in both poets brings about an immediate cultural-political discourse which takes place within the poem. The reader is brought into the area of discourse through an ever-expanding narrative purpose of his own as reader, thus conspiring with the poet to give the poem strength and shape, commensurate with his (the reader's, again) socio-cultural and political experience. It is not so much the language that is Greek, which provides the cultural discourse; it is also the poor house on Homer's shores that accounts for a vast cultural history. The politics are effortless, as they are a part of the emotional texture of both "Greek the language they gave me" and "poor the house on Homer's shores." Of course, it is of particular interest how these two segments interact with the reader as a historical consciousness.

But after 1974 both of these venerable poets seem for the most part to abandon this open style where art does not conceal its destructions

⁶ Axion Esti, Trans. E. Keeley and G. Savidis (Pittsburgh, 1974), p. 31.

in the manner, say of Picasso's Guernica, and turn to a more illusionistic, virtually elegiac technique where the concern is strictly with the self in first-order experience mirrored as experiencing self. Consciousness becomes now the first-order subject. In Ritsos this mirrored self after 1974 takes the following guise: from the *The Distant*, in Keeley's translation:⁶

"TOWARD SATURDAY"

The deep voice was heard in the deeper night.
Then the tanks went by. Then day broke.
Then the voice was heard again, shorter, farther in.
The wall was white. The bread red. The ladder rested almost vertical against the antique lampost. The woman collected the black stones one by one in a paper bag.

In his later work, Ritsos moves with a memory landscape, not with the immediacy of emotion as before. He insists on second-order economy in his poetry; and that includes the ever-increasing first-order personal, erotic overtones. Ritsos' transition from one kind of poetry to another, which is a movement more toward the first-order type of poem, is smooth, professional, and craftsmanlike. But in the end it is a poetry that does not sit easily with him. His most recent work reflects an uneasy spirit, for he cannot cope with the psychoanalytically observed boredom and the destitute times around him. Even the communist party is treating him like an icon of the long passed and sainted martyr. He must surely wonder, "What are poets for then . . . ?"

Elytis, on the other hand, after his Nobel Prize, in his more recent work, proceeds more cautiously, taking us along similar ground as that of his earlier poetry; he too moves quite a ways toward the mirrored self of consciousness, an area he always explored through his surreal tendencies. In the last few years, along with the mirrored self he engages irony, sometimes in the mode of self-irony, occasionally with derision, thus moving more comfortably than Ritsos toward the first-order poem: (from *Three Poems with the Flag of Opportunity*)⁷

reality gives not a hoot

⁶ Yannis Ritsos: Repetitions, Testimonies, Parentheses. Trans. E. Keeley (Princeton, 1991), p. 200.

⁷ (Athens, 1982).

for who gets the lion's share and who the other

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The arrows travelling upward and the arrows travelling downward never met, anyway

(from "The Garden Sees," p. 12.)

(from "Ad Libitum," p. 34)

It's a while since I've uttered a word

as if events have ignored me for those who hear in the night how a pen scratches away male cat before the closed door of the unknown

(from pp. 12-13)11

What will happen then

When social struggles cease when inventions useless collapse when all measures are satisfied empty space

inside which fall (good thing too) those who make the wheel turn for its own sake a mere glitter

We will begin to live now familiar with the sanskrit of our bodies

speaking substantively and metaphorically

I mean to say the way Pierro della Francesca painted or Arthur Rimbaud urinated always with the consent of the sunflowers (That's Poetry for you)

It may be argued that this direction which Elytis has taken is not at all new; that it is a return to the simple, direct, and ironic mode of his first period rather than of similar ground as that period. Be that as it may, it is certainly another look at the world (and at art) in its simple pictures. Elytis' move toward the first-order poem carries a wisdom far superior to his first period, a life lived and suffered, of a world now in repose, one that is understated as never before in his work.

Now, with the younger generation, one might begin by involving Seferis or Lorenzatos and the so-called "lost center." But I think it would hardly apply to the particular destitution of the times. Anghelaki-Rooke has said that during the military dictatorship she "worked in a symbolic, elegiac, romantic mood," something she can no longer face.

Instead, she suggests, she and her generation are confronted with a deeper cynicism, an apostrophic rejection, a turning away from the destitution of the world, working all the while to find voices in the mirrored self, like those of their Western European and American counterparts.

Poets like Anghelaki-Rooke, much like Kiki Dimoula just before her, as well as Kondos, Mastoraki, and Poulios, among others, are confronted by and respond harshly to a reality so droll that they are forced to withdraw into their own cultural-neurotic center and take the only comfort they can in the first-order poem. They respond to the vast sleepwalking armies of civil servants on any given morning, rushing to accomplish nothing, and the absurdity of it supercedes any notion of the irrational — for even the irrational has a positive side to it. (This is certainly the landscape of Denegris' and of Kondos' poetry, and the natural topos of Dimoula.) Perhaps the anachronistic poetic techniques of surrealism still survive in Greece because of this seeming irrational. but really droll way of life under a cultural destitution.

The paradox in countries which have a strong intelligentsia, most often liberal to left, is that when culture is at a high point, political life is chaotic and traditional democratic rules are absent. Greece has shifted too rapidly, alarmingly so, from a chaotic political existence with a strong cultural and intellectual base as gadfly to a relative political orderliness (at a popular infrastructure) accompanied by an astonishing collapse at the same time of its strong cultural base; indeed, accompanied by a virtual loss of the underpinnings (some of them, to be sure, para-social or quasi-underground in their day) that held a strong intelligentsia together.

It is, then, within such a vulgarization of culture that the new poets must find their way; in the thickets of a paradox where we have a cultural domain that has been dwarfed by a political progressive ideology and the establishing of a political life that is for the first time seemingly healthy.

As Lefteris Poulios tells us in a deceptive first-order poem, untitled.8

Empty life profit mongering syphilitic art frozen intelligentsia madness beckons to each

⁸Enantia (Athens, 1983).

with a sprig of death and no drunkard to be found who could escape from Athens to the world of poetry

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The malaise speaks for itself. The poets see a world without politics; and those who, like Poulios, built their poetic voices around a political life and consciousness can only observe the loss in lamenting tones.

The three women poets that follow have each published major work in the past two years. I have in mind Mastoraki's With a Wreath of Light (M'ena Stefani Phos),9 Anghelaki-Rooke's Closing Wind (Epilogos Aeras). 10 and Dimoula's Joyful Never (Chaire Pote). 11 I have chosen them as the most acute poets of their generation because they transcend the working model of Greek poetry, thus breaking away from their national identity. And they do so because they succeed in being political with what seem first-order poems which are really thirdorder searing indictments — as only Greek women can deliver at this time - if we really stand up and listen. The third-order reality is women's politics in the finest and most dire contemporary sense. Mastoraki and Anghelaki-Rooke have taken the poetry scene by storm last year, causing many to turn to them as the two women poets who have passed into full maturity; while Dimoula, during the past decade, has been consistently accepted as the woman poet of very high caliber. Last year too Kiki Dimoula became an issue on several popular radio programs (e.g. the Sunday morning Nikos Dimou political program where he read one of her long poems and had his audience mermerized), taking everyone by surprise that her new book could actually reach that kind of an audience.

I present here an example of each poet's work:

YANNOUSA AND WHAT DOESN'T SHOW by Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke

Had I not suffered would it have appeared to me? Stones and greenery things which the sunset covers over with red death no, they do not speak — it would be

against their nature — they mean
the truth of woman
because they reveal to her their own.
The sea has the other face, the blackbird
the rock, the branch
the pull of the flower, the mud.
The power of a dark life
breaks out in pestles, in stamens
in deeply troubled sighs like those
you fell slave to once.
Now down there, deep down, do you feel the smell,
of that which is not visible?¹²

And an earlier poem by Jenni Mastoraki, published in the *Journal of Literary Translation*.

THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD

Nighttimes I skate over thin ice.

I drape long loops of string from window to window and pin banned news-sheets to them.

What the hell, poetry cuts no ice these days.

We've heard it all before, they say.

And after all there's lots of women who can gush on about the joys of motherhood.

My daughter came into this world like any other child.

All the signs are she'll grow strong legs, good for a burst of speed at demonstrations. 13

Kiki Dimoula, from Chaire Pote.

UNEXPECTANCIES

My God, what is not in store for us still. I sit here and I sit.
It's raining without raining as when shadow gives us back body.

⁹(Athens, 1989).

¹⁰(Athens, 1987).

¹¹⁽Athens, 1990).

¹² Closing Wind (Athens, 1990).

¹³Trans. John Stathatos (The Journal of Literary Translation, 14, 1985), p. 24.

I sit here and I sit. I over here, across there my heart and further still my tired relation with her. Just so we can appear many each counted by what's empty.

Empty room blowing. I hold tight from the way I have to sweep myself up.

I have no news of you. Your picture static. You look like arriving vou smile like a no.

Dried flowers to one side repeat endlessly for you their boundless name semprevives semprevives — eternal, eternal so you will not chance to forget

what you are not.

The weather asks me where should he pass from where do I take the accent on bent or on old. Joking. No end recognizes its syntax.

I have no news of you. Your photograph static.

As it rains without raining.

As shadow gives me back body. And as one day we will meet up there.

In a sparsely planted field with opaque unexpectancies and evergreen rotations.

The interpreter of the angry

silence we will feel - refined presence of angry

intoxication that brings about the one encounter down here - will come to fashion empty space.

And we will be overtaken then by a frenzied unknowing of the other

- refined presence of the embrace a practice of the one encounter down here. And we will meet. Breathing freely kept secret from attraction. Under heavy rain sudden absence of gravity. During perhaps some outing of infinity beyond the infinite; during an awards ceremony for Loss to the known for its great contribution to the unknown: invited to a starlit firmament of the oncoming, to entertainments for the retiring, dissolving intentions and farewell wishes of the heavens' former great meanings. Only, this togetherness of distances will not be cheerful, nor happy even though nonexistence finds happiness at zero point. Perhaps because the soul of this togetherness will not be present. The flesh.

I shout to the dust to disarm me. I call the dust by its code name: totality.

You will meet often, I expect, you and the death of that dream. The youngest offspring of a dream. Of all I had, the most wise. Clearheaded, affable, understanding. To be sure, not so dreamy but neither stooped low, no groveling to the ground. Of an economical dream in intensity and error. From all the dreams I nurtured this one cared most for me: so as not to grow old alone.

You will be meeting often, I expect, you and his death. Give him greetings, tell it to be sure to come too when we meet there, at the awards ceremony for Loss.

Love me, when you're no longer among the living. Yes yes the impossible is enough for me. I have been loved before by it.

Love me when you're no longer among the living. Because I have no news of you. And what are we to do if the irrational gives no sign of life.¹⁴

Perhaps by a simple presentation of these poets I have made my point. It is clear how first, second, and third-order poetry is fully blown in each of these examples. In Dimoula's masterful voice the third-order acquires, apart from politics, a deepening metaphysical implication, which characterizes in large part her latest book. My choice of the Mastoraki poem from her earlier collection points to the swift political self-irony. Her current work moves in more complex mythic swamps in an effort to show her political malaise. With Anghelaki-Rooke the matter is compounded, for she has moved out of her bold erotic inclination and towards a brute-truth phase that is full of pain and self-irony. She has made an important leap forward to a self-confidence and a political stance that is effortless, born of suffering and revelation. Perhaps these women are the only political poets Greece has at the moment. For it is women's politics that makes any real sense nowadays.

I should like to conclude this talk with the following: Because so much of current Greek culture is under the dominant influence of the "new social science," history is likely to ask some harsh questions of its high priests. Why take up the failed cry of Walt Whitman concerning a cultural revolution seen through his populist "Democratic Vistas" — a revolution that never happened according to Susan Sontag (in her words, it "disappointed many but surprised none. . . ."), one that requires a leveling out, a lack of distinction between what is important and what is trivial. As Sontag observes in her On Photography: "If (in Whitman's words) 'each precise object or condition or combination or process exhibits a beauty,' it becomes arbitrary to treat some moments in life as important and most as trivial."

To be sure the Greek intelligentsia failed before to expand its elitist frontiers; but *that* is precisely the reason why the Social Scientists, once their turn at power came, should take close care not to fail the very thing they want to save.

Radicalizing Modernism: The Conception of an Ethnic Avant-Garde in N. Valaoritis's My Afterlife Guaranteed

PANAYOTIS BOSNAKIS

To the cult of N. Kalas heretic poet and polemicist critic

"The month of caves opened to receive my tongue"

N. Valaoritis "Punk Language Language Punk"

MODERNISM IN GREECE WAS INTRODUCED BY TWO HIGHLY CONflicting, yet at a higher theoretical level not contradictory, theories regarding the conception of a *littérature nationale*: a nationalist writing which valorized continuity and tradition, and an anti-nationalist writing which attempted to transgress the boundaries of national literature. The result of this dichotomy represents the confluence of two differing ways of writing, namely the nationalist Modernism and the transnationalist (or cosmopolitan) Avant-Garde.¹

Nanos Valaoritis's (1921-) aim in poetic writing from its very beginning was twofold: first, to expand the space(s) of Modernist writing already introduced to Greece by the Surrealists, primarily A. Embeirikos, N. Engonopoulos, and N. Kalas, and second, to revise the "Modernist poetics of Greekness," or nationalist Modernism. His intention to radicalize Greek Modernism finds him confronted with the laborious task of redefining the Avant-Garde. Although Valaoritis is a diasporan poet and his work does not belong exclusively to Greek literature, in this paper, I want to examine how his poetry expands Greek Modernism in particular, and how it foregrounds an ethnic Avant-Garde

¹⁴ Joyful Never (Athens, 1987), p. 1ff.

An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the Conference "The Greek American Experience: Past, Present, Future," at Hellenic College, Boston, October 19-21, 1990.

See also Mary Layoun's introduction in *Modernism in Greece? Essays on the Critical and Literary Margins of a Movement*, Editor Mary Layoun, (New York, 1990).