

## Greek Poetry in the Late Twentieth Century<sup>1</sup>

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“Και ο ποιητής αργοπορεί ...”<sup>2</sup>

G. Seferis, “Ο βασιλιάς της Ασίνης”

Cutting time into slices in order to study history, including literary history, within the expanse delineated by some conventional or arbitrary milestones, is not the safest way to reach conclusions. So, you stay in the realm of assumptions, and try to avoid turning your assumptions into aphorisms and axioms, or you try to prevent necessary telegraphic brevity from leading to the construction of conclusive decisions.

After this short introduction, what could be the meaning of the insecure title “Greek poetry in the late twentieth century”: from 1974, the year of the political changeover, to 1999 or 2000? And what does the title allude to? Does it allude to the poetry *produced* in the last quarter of the century? And by whom: only the poets who first appear or mature during this period, or those coming from the distant past and already carrying a rich work? And in this case, would we consider as present, that is dynamic and influential, the posthumous publication of work by poets who died before the great war (I refer to Cavafy’s *Ateli* [Incomplete], in particular) or poets who just survived the political changeover, but whose interesting work was first published years later (e.g., Andreas Embeirikos’s collection *Η σήμερον ως αύριον και ως χτες* [Today like tomorrow and yesterday] published in 1984, nine years after the poet’s death)? So, under the light of what period are we to read and translate Embeirikos’s poem—of a Mallarmic title and Bretonic exodus—“Μια ριξιά ζαριών δεν καταργεί ποτέ την τύχη” [A throw of dice never annuls fate]? Here is the poetics of Embeirikos, then, vivid and absolute, which is typically not included in the period we are discussing but its essence remains incessantly opportune:

Όχι

Δεν είναι το “art pour l’ art”

Η ανωτέρα εκδήλωσις των ποιητών και των ανθρώπων

Ούτε ο σοσιαλιστικός ρεαλισμός που είναι απλώς πολιτική  
 Ούτε η τέρψις τάξεων προνομιούχων  
 Δεν είναι αυτά ο προορισμός των ποιητών  
 Γιατί δεν είναι δυνατόν  
 Με την αφηρημένη μόνον ομορφιά  
 Ή με την συμβατικώς παραστατική  
 Ή με το “όπερ έδει δείξει” μόνον ή το “γαρ”  
 Να αντικατασταθούν ή να πνιγούν των ενορμήσεων οι ώσεις  
 Αφού ο λόγος δεν είναι λογική  
 Αφού το κάλλος δεν είναι αισθητική  
 Και το καλόν δεν είναι ηθική  
 Αφού “un coup de dés jamais n’ abolira le hasard”  
 Αφού εν σπερματοζώαριο μονάχα αρχεί  
 Να γονιμοποιηθεί το ωάριον της γυναικός ή ο λόγος  
 Αφού μόνον ο έρωτας τον θάνατον νικά  
 Θάναη ποιήσις *σπερματική*  
 Απόλυτα ερωτική  
 Ή δεν θα υπάρχει<sup>3</sup>

With this warning in mind – which we have to set against Aris Alexandrou’s verses: “Προορισμός της ποίησης είναι να επισπεύσει / την τελική κατάργηση των ποιητών”<sup>4</sup> – let’s return to the questions. Does the evidently conventional term “post-junta poetry” direct us to the poetry primarily *read* during the specific period, in which case we would be re-discovering America, that is we would realise that the reading of earlier poetry far exceeds that of new verses? Does it also allude to the *translated* poetry (ancient Greek and foreign poetry), given that translated poetry is again *poetry*, whether it is Greek or not, good or bad, attractive or dull? Does it also lead to poems *set to music* and popularised – we certainly have to consider this type, otherwise we would violently and unjustly exclude Nikos Gatsos from the post-junta poetic map, and we wouldn’t estimate the loss and gain of poetry when it is sung, when it broadens its audience through a modulation or even a dissonance. And even more, we wouldn’t focus on the popularity of Nikos Kavadias’s poems, that are constantly renewed through aggressive music.

Finally, does the defining sentence “Greek poetry from 1974 to 2000” dictate a focus on the poetry that is *reviewed* and *studied* in this period, since critical readings (either through their depth and their persuasiveness, or through their persistence and constant attraction to limited products) reproduce or put forward certain paradigms, thus affecting poetic vision? This question encloses two more: How far do retrospective approaches, such as those for Kostis Palamas, Andreas Kalvos, Kostas Karyotakis or Dionysios Solomos, reactivate older poetic texts? And how far did poetry series that were published, with or without a philological support, inscribe in the present body, on an equal footing, the earlier production (primarily “minor”, subdued poetry, declared anachronistic and old-fa-

shioned)?

The labyrinth is evident. And frustrating. Then, let us sail around it for the time being, changing our course.

A way to approach the poetry that was written in the years of the political changeover—whose end we have announced repeatedly until now—without however having found or invented the *post of post*, the *afterwards*, would be to focus on the names of those who were awarded prizes (evidently, I am not referring to the Nobel prize awarded to Odysseus Elytis). This will help us find the poetics that were considered praiseworthy, the literary modes that were promoted and praised (and by whom), and those that, on the contrary, were deemed deficient. However, such a torchlight would not really shed light on the field, because we would soon lapse unavoidably into the intense and possibly blind discussion about the criteria governing these awards. So, let us simply put forward certain questions, even for a private reconsideration, bearing in mind that the existing regime is driving towards its smoothening, perhaps to prevent its utter degradation. How far is the critical/appraising nature of the award annulled by the often suffocating attitude of servitude (often political) and the desire to be of service? How much and how far is the present landscape illuminated by the usual retrospective awards or those based on a priority list, which often consider the pre-war or early post-war contributions of poets who may have ended in silence or mere self-reproduction? And how important is the emotional component, or even remorse towards some poets who were not honoured in their time, because they were not part of the (politically dependent literary) “canon”, since they were imprisoned or exiled, expelled *both* as citizens *and* as poets?

I am afraid that even K. Th. Dimaras, who insisted that criticism poses questions rather than gives answers, would resent the persistence of the previous questions. So, let us find the active, that is both physically and productively present, generations during the period we examine. But, first, let us remember some of the deceased poets, so that we can look at the geography of poetry through their absence: Kostas Varnalis, Nikos Kavadias, Andreas Embeirikos, Nikos Engonopoulos, Aris Alexandrou, Dimitris Antoniou, Nikitas Rantos/Nicolas Calas, Dimitris Papaditsas, Takis Papatsonis, Aris Diktaios, Takis Sinopoulos, Dimitris Doukaris, Rita Boumi-Papa, Kriton Athanasoulis, Kostas Tzamalīs, Yiorgos Themelis, Minas Dimakis, Yiannis Ritsos, Andreas Tzourakis, Tasos Leivaditis, Nikiphoros Vrettakos, Nikos Karouzos, Athos Dimoulas, Alexis Trayianos, Yiannis Negrepointis, Yiorgos Daniel, Nikos Karydis, Kostas Koulofakos, Andreas Angelakis, Tasos Korfis, Anestis Evangelou, Nikos-Alexis Aslanoglou, Zoe Karelli, Aristotelis Nikolaides, Odysseus Elytis, Michalis Katsaros. All the deceased poets are evidently recorded in a random and non-exhaustive manner, that follows no particular order.

The first of the poetically active generations (perhaps to confirm Vyron Leonardis’s verses: “είμαστε ο μεσοπόλεμος σου λέω / ανάτα ο μεσοπόλεμος”<sup>5</sup>) is the legendary or even fictionalised generation of the 30s, many members of which still form the “canon”. A detailed mapping is not feasible here, so I will focus on

two important names that, during the period in question, reinforced or reversed their image. Thus, Elytis, very actively present and substantially political through his art, publishes a major part of his work after 1974 (major as to its extent, diversity, importance and objectives). In particular, he publishes the following collections: *Ετεροθαλή* [Step Brothers], *Τρία ποιήματα με σημαία ευκαιρίας* [Three Poems with a Flag of Convenience], *Μαρία Νεφέλη* [Maria Nefeli], *Μικρός Ναυτίλος* [Young Nautilus], *Ημερολόγιο ενός αθέατου Απριλίου* [Diary of an Unseen April], *Ιδιωτική οδός* [Private Road], *Δημόσια και Ιδιωτικά* [Public and Private], *Ελεγεία της Οξώπετρας* [Elegy of the Stone Outside], and posthumously *Εκ του πλησίον* [From the Near-by].

Yiannis Ritsos is also present, but split between the consumable or even politically usable Ritsos, and the less known and misunderstood poet. The former enjoys the praise of the majority of the knowledgeable or even instructed public by reproducing a literature of emotions which, however, seem not to flow from within the poet. The latter is the much more substantial Ritsos of a problematics that is often expressed through a tranquil self-sarcasm, who earns his riches through baser material.

George Seferis is also present – although physically absent – at times in a despotic or normative way: the Seferian literary body, like the Seferological body, has never stopped expanding after the poet's death. Seferis's methodically economised language and his paternal tone, that deeply incorporates his rhetoric and his dramatic character in the way he weaves the "fairy-tale of the race", lays claim to the position of an arbiter. Simulations and light-hearted imitations of this tone, however, have resulted in the accumulation of endless lines of unmusical babble.

The landscape is now dominated by the imposing presence of the *first postwar generation*, especially after the delayed appreciation given to the poets' work, both for its literary directness and its cultural moralism. Some of its members have a strong presence (e.g., Ektor Kaknavatos, Nikos Fokas, Titos Patrikios, Nikos Karouzos, whose public image threatened to shadow the wealth of his work, or to draw the reading of his work towards arid regions). Others (like Miltos Sachtouris) appear sporadically, probably aware of the possible fatigue of the public and the risk of repetition. Still others reprint in collected form their earlier work and either turn to fiction and essay writing or remain silent. This silence takes many forms: one form is that adopted by Manolis Anagnostakis who, evidently disheartened by the ineffectiveness of poetry, temporarily disturbed his poetic silence by publishing his –whispering– *Υστερόγραφο* [Postscript]. Michalis Katsaros also underwent a painful silence in the way he spent himself in successive collections, in order to exorcise the *Φόβος του ποιητή* [Fear of the Poet] and find the flame that seemed to have burned him down.

The *second postwar generation*, now in general lines mature, powerfully controls its Karyotakian nature, deepens its elegies, technically processes its material and stands at a greater distance from the patterns of the (political, social or personal) annulment and vanity which organised its thought. Therefore, it lays

claim to a genuine share in the image of postwar literature, a far greater share than the one it managed to have, squeezed as it was among its immediate, acknowledged precursors and the “generation of provocation” – a generalising and exaggerated title for the *generation of the 70s*, due to the high reactionary tones of some of its members, especially those who gained fame before they turned to poetry. Thus, the contribution of the generation of the 70s to contemporary poetry has not been negligible. However, it falls short of expectations after the first, probably hasty, positive evaluations; after the initial enthusiasm, some of its members turned to fiction, others were consumed by their theoreticized aggressive spontaneity, and still others chose the relative security of self-confirming repetitions. As for the *generation of the 80s*, my generation, already followed by its successors (notably fewer, perhaps because the seduction of fiction proved irresistible), I can say that the characterisation “generation of the private vision” does not sound convincing, perhaps because it mismatches privacy with vision.

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Did Greek poetry alter its approach during the period in question? Did its language, its style, its morals, its way of thinking, its form, its music change? What was the cost of the oppressive dictatorship, and where did it lead Greek poetry? How aware is it of international movements, if and where they exist? I will attempt to put forward some general observations:

1. The so-called politically engaged poetry is particularly popular during the first post-junta period, when the fresh anti-junta feelings play a regulatory role. However, it is later judged with severity, that is, from a literary perspective, and its demagogic hyperbole and emotional style are denounced. Its seeds are scarce, almost non-existent.
2. However, the radical receding of the politically engaged rhetoric in poetic form does not mean that political poetry is deemed unimportant. Its gaze changes direction, distances itself from the large historical complexes and focuses on the individual face, since visions are blooded and annulled. Poets are not loud-speaking prophets and prime movers anymore, but melancholic confessors and visitors on a tour around remnants. They do not bear the torch or the flame but rummage in *ashes* – and the word *ashes*, with its synonyms, is the connective link that brings together the verses of three or four generations of poets, since the feeling of defeat that is handed over from one generation to the next has now become more painful. Every generation of poetry, if we accept the conventions of genealogies, is a generation of defeat, since poetry is always exercised in a “petty time” – to reach the point of saying, in Katsaros’s pen, “Τι τη θέλετε την ποίησή μου. / Δεν παίρνετε κανένα βίντεο”.<sup>6</sup>
3. We are witnessing an increase of self-referential poems; verses focus not only on poetry itself, but also adopt an acutely ironic and bitter stance towards poetry. It is a self-reflexive poetry, which at times becomes narcissistic and

collapses. Narcissism, according to its mythical model, is all too dear, but it does not necessarily promote self-awareness. “Τὸ ἄσπρο χαρτί σκληρὸς καθρέφτης / επιστρέφει μόνον ἐκεῖνο που ἴσουν”<sup>7</sup> – Seferis’s words are always true.

4. Thus, more poems that invest in intertextuality continuously make their appearance, since they converse with their predecessors, either to celebrate them or to deny them. The fact that we rely on foreign techniques of intertextual dialogue, those of Pound for example, without knowing how, why and when the axes of these techniques were formed, merely reveals the superficial approach of our education.
5. We see poems which focus on language, especially from the younger generations. This is a sign of introversion if not bewilderment, and at times a frustrating paradigm of joining poetry with theories and disciplines, or even its subjection to them.
6. The enforced demotic language of the cities causes a decrease of loans from puristic Greek (in case we have such loans they serve the purpose of parody) and from rural idioms. At the same time, the texts host more words and images from technology, science, even football (mostly in the generation of the 70s), and of course foreign words and slang, typically crude, aiming at producing a provocative or shocking effect. Quite often, however, the arrows miss their target, because provocation is identified with its preconceptions or its attempt to create sensation.
7. I can also see a decrease in the loans from ancient Greek literature or history and their use is reduced to the formation of a distinct identity. The voice of poetry is gradually denationalised, because it follows side routes to reach its socialisation – evidently following the western societies of isolation, hostility and consumerism. We are heading towards a homogeneous and almost universal poetic idiom, easily translatable, because the poet has denounced his/her linguistic specificity. Poets do not see their involvement with language as a challenging and dangerous condition of their poetic undertaking, thus they do not risk a defeat.
8. Long pieces, lengthy durations, operating as functional background of poetry, do not enjoy their previous frequency; similarly, complicated poems are rare. The lens of poetry focuses on the instantaneous, on individual psychical shots, on “experiences” that are exhibited without any reshaping or transformation in the name of a certain fashionable trend.
9. The “canon” is not only aggressively negative to the lyrical attributes of the earlier poets, but also degrades any existing lyrical attempts, without “reading” them. This is done in the name of a simplicity which, from a mode or an objective was transformed into a “theory”, willing to convert weakness into power, and enforce negligence as a self-evident, mass obligation.
10. One starts sensing, at least if one does not choose to become a passive follower of doctrines, that free verse, in its present unmusical and very prosaic manifestation, threatens to eliminate rhythm and form altogether. So, we

come to realise what we misunderstood in the past: that there is no meaning without form, no poetic discourse without metre, whether assimilated and unobserved or manifestly present; and also that we can have *tradition* only as long as we have *recovery*.

11. It is certain that there are not many inclusive perceptions of the world nor collective interpretations, or visionary transformations. This world is not considered a sphere any longer, but a polyhedron, full of fractures and gaps. The poet moves towards the monitoring and exploitation of one side only, in which case tone is moderated, language is grounded and receives common signs from its surroundings, while at times lyricism seems not to trust itself, to feel guilty.

In the years in question, Greek poetry – even in the absence of a reading public, which is won over by a prose that never invests in literature, even if the stance of posing meets with a weaker resistance, even if public relations claim an increasing importance – not only holds out but also produces work that is very important in its diversity, a diversity that scorns all earlier naive codifications. Although it basically explores the same core issues of love and death, it has not been threatened by fatigue or exhaustion. Through its debate with the celebrated, everlasting “decay”, it invents new songs, more subdued than the old ones, perhaps slightly more fragmented, more private, and converts its confusion and weakness into its raw material.

In place of an exodus, therefore, I will quote two poems on poetry and the poet, two poems that deal with criticism and self-criticism (wasn't Schlegel right when he said that “poetry can never be anything else but a critique of poetry”?). The two together could be used as good guides in our contact with poetic pursuits, which cannot evidently be exhausted in the period we described. The first poem by Nikos Karouzos is a self-centred poem from his collection *Δυνατότητες και χρήση της ομιλίας* [Potentialities and Use of Speech] written in 1979. It internalises and exploits, in a self-knowing way, all the melancholy feelings which arise out of the sense that the constant conflict with the unattainable and inconceivable other “end” has no other goal but to renew the desire for this contradiction. The second poem by Nikos Engonopoulos is from his collection *Η κοιλάδα με τους ροδώνες* [The Valley with the Rosebushes] written in 1978. This poem treasures within its verses all the impetuosity of the poet, the smile it invented in sorrow, and opens up towards a new self-confidence.

First the poem “Πήλινο αγαλματίδιο” [Clay Statuette] by Karouzos:

Αισθάνομαι ωσάν τρελλός  
 παραχαράκτης του Γίγνεσθαι  
 γράφοντας διψαλέα ποιήματα  
 (της κοιτίδας μου  
 κάλπικα χαρτονομίσματα).  
 Γιατί η γλώσσα είν' η αχόρταγη

μοιχαλίδα του Πραγματικού  
 με αρίφνητα ψέματα προσπαθώντας  
 να περισώσει το γάμο της.  
 Κάθε τραγούδι θλιβερό χαράκωμα  
 ενάντια στη μουσική  
 κάθε μορφή ζαβλάκωμα  
 χωρίς αληθινά σταφύλια  
 δίχως κρασί που να σπιθίζει  
 απ' τα φαινόμενα κλήματα.  
 Είν' αυτά μονάχα τα έρημα  
 της καρδιάς τ' αναστήματα.<sup>8</sup>

Now, Engonopoulos's poem "Ο υπερρεαλισμός της ατέρμονης ζωής" [Hyperrealism of an Endless Life], dedicated "to Tristan Tzara", depicts a poetry that unwinds like a spiral:

η σαρμανίτσα του ποιητού  
 είναι το νεκρικό κιβούρι  
 του  
 κι' η κουδουνίστρα που βάζουνε  
 στα βρεφικά του χέρια  
 είναι το κυπαρίσσι που θα φυτρώσει  
 πάνω στον τάφο του

γιατί  
 — παρ' όλες τις πικρίες που τονέ ποτίζουνε  
 ο ποιητής  
 την άρνηση του θανάτου φέρνει μαζί του  
 κι' ακόμη είν' αυτός τούτος  
 του θανάτου η άρνηση

κι' έτσι  
 το νεκρικό κιβούρι του ποιητού  
 θα γενή πάλε η σαρμανίτσα του  
 του τάφου του το κυπαρίσσι  
 πάλι η κουδουνίστρα  
 που θα κραδαίνει  
 στα φωτεινά τα χέρια του<sup>9</sup>

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"Μόνο διά της λύπης είμαι εισέτι ποιητής",<sup>10</sup> as Vyron Leondaris states with his sharp self-knowledge. He goes on to present his view that "η Τέχνη [είναι] ένας πανικός μπρος στην πραγματικότητα".<sup>11</sup> The poets' sorrow, their only



property, sharpens words, composes stories, confronts the justice of history with its own justice and, of course, contradicts the sophistry of news-stories, disturbs our bliss, envelops and concerns us – either as our dowry or as a fear.

*Notes*

1. Translated by Fotini Apostolou.
2. “And the poet lingers”.
3. No  
“Art pour l’ art” is not  
The superior expression of poets and men  
Nor the socialist realism which is simply politics  
Nor the satisfaction of privileged classes  
This is not the poets’ destination  
Because it is not possible  
Through abstract beauty only  
Or through the conventionally depicted beauty  
Or through “quad erat demonstrandum” only or the “because”  
To replace or suffocate the impetus of drives  
Since discourse is not reason  
Since beauty is not aesthetics  
And good is not morality  
Since “un coup de dés jamais n’ abolira le hasard”  
Since one spermatozoon only is enough  
To inseminate woman’s ovum or the word  
Since only eros can beat thanatos  
Poetry will be *spermatic*  
Utterly erotic  
*Or it won’t exist*
4. “The destination of poetry is to hasten / the final abolition of poets”.
5. “We are the interwar I’m telling you / incurably the interwar”.
6. “What do you want my poetry for. / Why don’t you buy a video”.
7. “The white paper, a bitter mirror, / reflects only what you used to be”.
8. I feel like a mad  
forger of Becoming  
who is writing thirsty poems  
(my homeland’s  
forged banknotes).  
Because language is the insatiable  
adulteress of the Real  
with countless lies trying  
to save its marriage.  
Every song a bitter trench  
against music  
every form a daze  
without true grapes  
without a wine that sparkles

from the visible vines.

It's only those dismal  
revivals of the heart.

9. The sarmanitsa [folk dance] of the poet

is his  
death coffin  
and the rattle placed  
in his baby hands  
it is the cypress tree that will sprout  
on his grave

because

– despite all the bitterness he is given  
the poet  
carries with him the negation of death  
and he is even himself  
death's negation

thus

the death coffin of the poet  
will become again his sarmanitsa  
the cypress of his grave  
again his rattle  
that he will grip  
in his bright hands

10. "Only through sorrow am I still a poet"

11. "Art [is] panic felt before reality"