

Communism and Poetry¹

Stathis Gourgouris

Προσανατολισμός²

Σχεδιασμοί οικονομικοί, χάρτες, πυξίδες, διαβήτες—
τίποτα δὲν καταλαβαίναμε ἀπ' αὐτά. Ἡ προμελέτη
σὲ ἀποτυχία θὰ κατέληγε πάντοτε.

Ἐμεῖς

πιασμένοι ἀπ' τὸ σκοινὶ κατεβαίναμε κάτω, πιδὲ κάτω
στ' ἀρχαῖο πηγάδι, νιώθοντας στὰ πέλματά μας
τὴ σκοτεινὴ δροσιὰ τοῦ βάθους.

Στὸ στόμιο, ἐπάνω,

ἓνα ἐλάχιστο φῶς (ἴσως ἢ καύτρα τοῦ δικοῦ μας τσιγάρου),
κι οἱ πέτρες ποὺ κατρακυλοῦσαν στὸ βυθὸ
μᾶς ὄριζαν μιὰ θέση μὲς στὸν κρεμασμένο κόσμο.

Γιάννης Ρίτσος

Ἀθήνα, 13.V.71

Ἀνατολή ἡλίου³

στὸν Γιάννη Ρίτσο

Εἴταν ἡ ὥρα ποὺ ἐπρόκειτο νὰ ἀνάψουνε οἱ φανοστάτες. Δὲν εἶχε κα-
μιὰ ἀμφιβολία, τόξερε πῶς ὅπου νᾶναι θὰ ἀνάβανε, ὅπως καὶ κάθε βρά-
δυ ἄλλωστε. Πῆγε καὶ στάθηκε στὴ διασταύρωση, γιὰ τὴν ἀκρίβεια στὴ
νησίδα ἀσφαλείας, γιὰ νὰ δεῖ τοὺς φανοστάτες νὰ ἀνάβουν ταυτόχρονα,
τόσο στὸν κάθετο, ὅσο καὶ στὸν ὀριζόντιο δρόμο.

Μὲ τὸ κεφάλι ἀσάλευτο, ἔστριψε τὸ δεξιὸ τοῦ μάτι δεξιά, τὸ ἀριστερό
τοῦ ἀριστερά. Περίμενε, μὰ οἱ φανοστάτες δὲν ἀνάβανε. Τὰ μάτια του
κουράστηκαν, ἄρχισαν νὰ πονᾶνε, σ' ἐκείνη τὴν ἄβολη στάση. Σὲ λίγο δὲν
ἄντεξε καὶ ἔφυγε.

Ἦστόσο, τὸ ἐπόμενο σούρουπο, πιστὸς στὸ καθῆκον, πῆγε καὶ ξανα-
στάθηκε στὴ νησίδα του. Οἱ φανοστάτες καὶ πάλι δὲν ἀνάβανε, οὔτε
ἐκεῖνο τὸ βράδι, οὔτε τίς ἄλλες νύχτες, μὰ τὰ μάτια του συνήθιζαν λίγο
λίγο, δὲν κουράζονταν πιά, δὲν πονοῦσαν.

Καὶ κάποτε, ἐκεῖ ποὺ στεκόταν καὶ περίμενε, χάραξε ἐντελῶς ξαφνι-
κά. Ἐντελῶς ξαφνικά, εἶδε τὸν ἥλιο νὰ ἀνατέλει, ταυτόχρονα, ἀπ' τὸν
κάθετο δρόμο κι ἀπ' τὸν ἄλλον, τὸν ὀριζόντιο.

Ἄρης Αλεξάνδρου

Παρίσι 1971

I recognize that the title of this paper may puzzle even the best intentioned audience, given the historical juncture we all inhabit. Even avowed Marxists speak nowadays of the need to negotiate the fate of Marxism as political or epistemological project (a fate that, most agree, ranges from dismal to precarious) on the ground of communism's resolute corpse—a corpse that unlike its illustrious leaders does not enjoy even the privilege of being embalmed. This death is so final that it has become in effect a global condition. Regardless of one's ideological principles, to say that we live in the era of globalization is to say that we live in a world after communism. But while the problem of "Marxism after Communism" may make for an interesting task to pursue—even in the context of literary studies or literary theory—it isn't quite what concerns me here. I am, quite literally, interested in the relation between communism and poetry (which isn't to say, the relation between Marxist theory and literature or between literature and the poetics of revolution—all crucial topics for interrogation in the current historical juncture). I am interested in this apparently incompatible pair because I find it curious that despite this incompatibility at first glance—owed perhaps to the historical dogmatism and prescriptive aesthetics of communist practice which conceived itself superior to the poetic imagination—some of the greatest and most experimental poets of the twentieth-century were *avowed* (albeit maverick) communists. Mayakovsky, Eluard, Brecht, Hikmet, Neruda, Ritsos, Pasolini could be proposed as a set of exemplary representatives, fully immersed in their national literary traditions and yet ultimately uncategorizable within strict national boundaries.

Indeed, there seems no other way to approach an inclusive categorization of such experimental poetics than to proceed through an interrogation of the odd couple I have invoked for a title. Of course, I hardly mean to disregard the particular cultural, historical, biographical dimensions here—a detailed treatment of such a group of poets and their poetics would have to trace its theoretical steps on a case by case basis. Nonetheless, what is more peculiar than the peculiar story each such case would narrate is the incommensurable conjunction between the explicit political claim and the equally explicit poetic practice they all share. In terms of this argument, this incommensurability is not merely exhausted in the incompatible pair of communist universality and poetic singularity—and here, I opt for a very schematic, almost cliché, rendition of the traditional assessment of such notions in the twentieth century specifically. There is nothing more facile than supposing, for example, that Mayakovsky's suicide was the outcome of the insurmountable clash between a strangulating universalist duty and the intransigent singularity of poetic genius—though it ought to be said, in all fairness, that this was also a factor.

The methodological hurdle in posing such terms of inquiry is precisely to dismantle the "obvious" contradiction I have already raised as an assumption: namely, the historical dogmatism and prescriptive aesthetics of communist practice is hardly conducive to the poetic imagination. This contradiction may be

obvious in one sense but is neither self-evident nor easily resolved. The hurdle is thus real and substantial, and though I consider its dismantling as a departure point, I do not believe this can be accomplished with a sweeping gesture. First of all, the relation of the poets I mentioned above to their respective Communist Parties was idiosyncratic, ambivalent, and even adversarial on certain occasions. And yet, all of them repeatedly avowed their communist allegiance—even, rather significantly, when discussing matters of poetics—and some of them suffered life-threatening persecution for this avowal. Therefore, we must account for this precarious adherence—which is often uncompromising on both fronts: adherence to principle and defiance of authority in the name of the principle—without obliterating the contradiction. To give it away, I guess, before we do the work: we are compelled to seek a certain explanation for radical poetic experimentation in the historical and psychological factors that sustained the communist allegiance of these poets against all odds—against history, against their Party, against themselves. This suggests an internal—an *esoteric*, as Geoffrey Waite has termed it—complicity between an anarchic attitude that fuels constant poetic interrogation (the foundation of the “modernist” desire for continuous experimentation and invention) and the revolutionary impulse (the vision of total emancipation) that produces the communist project.⁴

On the face of it, the incompatibility or incommensurability between communism and poetry obeys a well-known logic of almost cliché representations—by calling them cliché I do not mean to dismiss them as false but merely to underline their partiality and thoughtless reproducibility. I will just list the elements of this partial logic without comment. (It should be clear that I do not forward these as truths but as clichés, although many would argue that there is a lot of truth to the cliché...) On the one hand, communism invokes a strict authoritarian relation to history, whereby the notorious and catastrophic worship of party discipline is merely a symptom. The often raised charge against the teleology of communist thinking is largely based on communism’s professed understanding of the nature of historical agency: the motor force of history is the class struggle and the logic that makes history perfectly comprehensible—and thus enables an agency *in* history as well as an agency *of* history—is historical materialism with its well known progressive and stagist determinations. This teleological vantage point is immanent to the Bolshevik commitment to the total conquest of power and, I would argue parenthetically, directly linked to the assault against both proletarian self-determination (the obliteration of the worker’s councils) and Marxist internationalism (according to the abominable Stalinist decision to build “socialism in one country”). To sum up: this belief in the perfect understanding of history—which is to say, in the cognitive control of history—is precisely what constitutes the enemy of the historical imagination, of humanity’s capacity to invent itself, and may be thus termed inherently anti-poetic.

On the other hand, the realm of the poetic has been occupied, since the late-18th century Revolutionary era that presides over the notion of modernity, by certain fundamental values of Romantic aesthetics—in brute terms, the belief in

the uncompromised singularity of the human mind (in the sense of *Geist*), which is taken to be precisely a ghostly presence verifiable only by means of the equally singular art that it produces. This, more or less, constitutes the classic Romantic equation between the poetic genius and the sublime object, whose mediating idiom forms what has come to be called the “lyric subject”. The teleology of this equation resides in the suggestion that the poetic element is a practically untheorizable realm of human endeavor, a certain demonic presence that surpasses the properly historical, despite its continuous aim to shape our world anew. From a traditionally conceived Romantic vantage point, here too lies a claim to cognitive control, although of a very different, almost non-logical kind, whereby the poetic act, as a radical creative/destructive force, exceeds history in the sense that Rimbaud ascribed to *voyance*. To sum up in turn: this faith in the omniscience of poetry—let us say, in cognitive control of what lies outside of history, beyond history—is precisely the enemy of history’s own instituting power (the enemy of the fact that “men may make their history, but they do not make it as they please”, to quote Marx’s famous phrase) and thus may be said to be not merely anti-historical but also anti-political, insofar as it seeks to erase the antagonistic relation between the force of history and the force of the human imagination. At its most elementary level—and again, in traditional, almost cliché terms—this discrepancy between, let us say, the total claim to history (“communism”) and the total claim to beyond history (“poetry”) translates into an uncompromising conflict between an ethical impulse and an aesthetic impulse.

But obviously the matter is hardly this clear-cut. For one, there is a historical affinity between Romanticism’s visionary claims and the revolutionary impulse (even though, interestingly enough, it was precisely this affinity that the communist conception of revolution sought to repress in the attempt to found a new revolutionary tradition that would displace the originary significance of the French Revolution). Though one can hardly call the poets I mentioned above Romantics in rigorous terms, they are nonetheless exemplary in their ascription of a lyric subjectivity to the demands of historical materiality [*matter-reality*]¹—and this is precisely the sort of hinge that enables me to articulate communism and poetry as a problem. In other words, we might say that these poets saw the ethical demand of communism’s historical intervention as a poetic task and, conversely, their poetic project as a chance to hone history’s materiality into a language that metabolizes itself in turn to an actual historical praxis. This chiasmic configuration—which is, incidentally, internal, esoteric to the antagonistic relation “communism and poetry”—is what makes such poets political in the strictest sense, which would have to include their intransigent commitment to experimentation with poetic form. Otherwise, if this chiasmus is disengaged, we have either a political poetry that merely extols an ideological certainty (and is thus hardly political, not to mention unable to go beyond established poetic forms—such, of course, would include “communist poetry” in a typical sense: socialist realism, agit-prop, etc.) or a purely self-referential poetry that may

indeed unravel all limits of established form but remains unable to theorize the political intersection between literary experimentation and historical materiality (this would be the case with many *l'art pour l'art* forms). Surely, there are exceptions to this schema as always: Pound would be a glaring such example and I have often thought that Pound would belong to this sort of grouping, which in itself raises all kinds of questions that I cannot address here.

The real challenge is to consider each term of this peculiar pair as the point of orientation of the other—to use the idiom of the poems I will discuss—as the means of delineating a horizon of meaning in which the contradictory coordinates of these terms will enable us to situate ourselves in the paradoxical and incomprehensible historical universe we currently inhabit. This sort of dialectical orientation to which these poets devoted themselves is important to me beyond my desire to posit and understand the problem of “communism and poetry”. I see it as a heuristic or methodological condition for understanding two fundamental problems that have occupied me for some years: on the one hand, how societies manage their self-alteration (which includes the fact that they hide it from themselves—in effect, the question of transformative politics and its multiple disguises) and, on the other hand, how literature theorizes this collective self-alteration in its various components: creating new myths, abolishing and recreating forms of expression, staging a transformative poetics of worldly life. Especially because in our present time the death of communism is final and the distance from any social emancipatory vision abyssal, the challenge to understand the poetics of self-alteration—of making oneself into another, of seeing oneself and the world from the standpoint of another, of remaking this world into another—emerges with formidable urgency. My argument, as does the argument of the two poems to which I will now turn briefly, responds to the contemporary conditions of feeling suspended in a world satisfied with its mere repetition, content with its inability to imagine itself otherwise.

I thought that it would be useful to consider this odd relation I have invoked for a title in the domain of Greek literature which, as we all know, has a profound and varied tradition of poets associated explicitly with leftist politics in the 20th century, from Varnalis and Ritsos to the Surrealists and the post-Civil War generation. The poetry of the 1950s particularly is deeply stained by the trauma of the Civil War and the insurmountable criminality of Communist Party politics in all spheres of social, political, and cultural endeavor. In this latter sense, no poet, to my mind, has dealt with the question of poetry’s antagonism with communism’s strict standards of so-called “true knowledge” and its prescriptive consequence—*engagement*, in the sense popularized by Sartre, or as it is rendered better in Greek, “militant commitment” (στιάτευση)—more rigorously and more thoughtfully than Aris Alexandrou. The fact that the results of this quest proved to be untenable in the realm of poetry (and thus led Alexandrou to write the most extraordinary postwar Greek novel—*To Kιβώτιο* [The Box]) will serve as the underlying counterweight for this investigation. Though I cannot delve into this novel in this brief time-frame, I do want it to haunt us, and not even so

much by the utter brilliance of its form and the way it stages the void of history's law, but by the peculiar condition of its being—despite the impeccable novelistic form—the work of a poet.

I would like, if I may, to digress for a single paragraph—again, short of making any substantial comments—on why I make this claim. *To Kιβώτιο* must be seen not only as the *mythistorical* summation of a certain age (in Greece, but also internationally), but as a *poetic* manifestation of its very logic. This celebrated novel has always been identified as a poet's work, and I believe that this essential disjunction at the level of genre and form is key in the interrogation of Alexandrou's universe. The work is indisputably a novel, not only by the strictest standards of genre, but by the pleasure it gives us in reading it, a pleasure characteristic of the novelistic experience. It is not merely a novel; it is an extraordinary novel, a master work of twentieth-century literature. It has remained virtually unknown internationally for various historically contingent reasons, but also because it is written in a virtually unknown language—Greek. I mention this here not to lament the predicaments and perils of translating Greek literature (which are unfortunately numerous), but to confirm the extraordinary attachment this work shows to the Greek language, an attachment whose immanent nature is poetic.

Dimitris Maronitis once commented that Alexandrou had granted the gift of the Proustian sentence to the Greek language, and it may be the wisest comment he ever made, because it is true that this work is a Promethean gesture toward the entire postwar Greek poetic and political universe. So, by the standards of Proust, *To Kιβώτιο* could only begin to be accounted for if one read it in its original language the way one reads a poem. Only this way could one begin to comprehend the extraordinary upheaval it creates. This upheaval (but also the means of comprehending it) would have been impossible if this man were not: a) a poet and b) a communist. Both aspects are constituted by a necessary internal antagonism between a desire for unlimited interrogation and invention, on the one hand, and a desire for rigorous ethical order, an order over the accountability of decisions, on the other. Together they form not a binary but a dialectical figure. Each aspect of Alexandrou undergoes an internal contest, whereby the associations (poetry as interrogation and invention; communism as order and accountability of decisions) are reversed and act counteractively. The terms therefore are always in crisis (in the ancient Greek sense: subject to *krisis*, to decision), while continuing also to be perpetual sources of *aporia*, undecidability, and renewal.

Around the time when the laborious writing of *To Kιβώτιο* was nearing completion, Alexandrou wrote a prose poem with the title *Ανατολή ηλίου* [Sunrise], which stages concretely one of the main concerns of the novel: the horizon of poetic/political praxis in a worldly universe when historical agency has been voided, blanked, emptied by history itself. The poem, which was set to open a short unity of poems (the last in Alexandrou's life) titled simply *Parisian Poems* and never published as a volume, was dedicated to Yiannis Ritsos. Alexandrou

had a very complicated relation with Ritsos, in whom he saw not quite a peer but somewhat of a mentor since the 1940s, but whose friendship had undergone a demise during the years of exile in Ai Stratis (from about 1950 to 1958), as Ritsos conformed with the Party's decision to reject comrade Alexandrou's unacceptable heretic stance. Ritsos simply fell in with the multitude—or perhaps worse, submitted to the Party's "transcendental authority" without question—even on matters of poetics. Ritsos criticized Alexandrou for writing pessimist poetry and, when Alexandrou tested him by ironically reversing a "pessimist" poem to an "optimist" one and Ritsos applauded the effort missing the irony, Alexandrou broke off their friendship in disgust.⁵ But the relationship was strong enough to survive, largely because Ritsos compensated for this moment later with genuine and enthusiastic generosity toward Alexandrou's radical vision. It is also possible to argue that Ritsos' poetic vision of the late '60s and early '70s, the junta years, came very close to Alexandrou's: though never quite as far-reaching philosophically, still it wrestles seriously with the voided poetic/political praxis I mentioned above. In any case, a poem that Ritsos wrote in the same year with the contiguous title *Προσανατολισμός* [Orientation] makes for an uncanny co-incidence of not only vision but metaphoric terminology. This poem too can be said to emerge from the problematic laid out by *To Κιβώτιο*, as Alexandrou had entrusted Ritsos with the completed manuscript and had received an enthusiastic and deeply thoughtful response.⁶

I begin in reverse chronological order by looking at Ritsos' poem first. Those familiar with Ritsos will recognize the stripped down description of a striking image usually targeted with strong allegorical content, a method that Ritsos often employed since the earliest *Μαρτυρίες* [Confessions]. The outcome was a poem of great abstraction rendered via striking imagistic concreteness, a method I hardly see as paradoxical but as dialectical (in the best sense of Hegel's notion of the most concrete essence of the abstract). The impulse here mobilizes the desire to make abstract thought poetic, which is to say concrete, without employing a philosophical idiom. There are several components to this impulse—two of which interest me particularly: 1) an attempt to align oneself with literature's unique and intrinsic capacity for theory; 2) an attempt to transform poetically communism's dogmatic tradition. I use the term "dogmatic" not pejoratively but literally in order to describe the fundamental triptych of communist ethics: self-interrogation, self-critique, self-reflection. Surely, I do not need to dwell on the mockery of this ethics throughout the history of Communist Parties; a deathly theatricality woven precisely around this schema was put into catastrophic use in various countries since the Moscow trials of the early '30s. More important, in light of this catastrophic legacy, is how this triptych served as the basis for defiance of Party authority (and Alexandrou is the most exemplary practitioner). In this latter sense, "self-reflection" entails a dialectical process whereby, as Hegel would say, self-consciousness is constituted in a split moment of recognition through alienation, which I see as the philosophical groundwork for the self-alteration inherent in every revolutionary project. It is in this

aufgehoben sense of *self-reflection as self-alteration* that such abstract/concrete allegorical poetry deploys communism's dogmatic tradition against the grain.

Ritsos' poem, like Alexandrou's, is a poem of resignifying one's coordinates against the grain of theoretical foreknowledge—in our terms, against communism's belief in a predetermined mapping of history or human/social destiny. All instruments of precision that aspire to an *a priori* representation of our world are doomed to failure. The task is "to represent ourselves" (to remember again one of Marx's famous invocations from *The 18th Brumaire*), as we descend all the deeper into history ("the ancient well"), where three-dimensional coordinates of representation disappear. In this condition, the horizon has turned to zero. We no longer gaze ahead to the future, to what is foreseeable because it is allegedly created by our own capacity to theorize correctly, to plan our steps with a compass. Here, there is no horizon to serve as reference point for the navigation of the present. The present is a continuous state of descent and our points of reference certain, almost random, sensual signposts: "the dark coolness of the depths" on our feet, the scant light from the entry point above, the rope to which we cling, the stones rolling down (where do they come from? history's own passage?). To these we must add, perhaps most significantly, our own utmost self-reference: our cigarette burning before our eyes, the most ephemeral closeness to our being.

All these elements, which defy reason and mathematical representability, which are only sentient flashes, become the instruments of orientation, the means of definition. Indeed, herein lies the poem's dare. Bereft of an exoteric theory, the poem reaches internally, esoterically, to seize the means of definition—which is, after all, nothing other than the means of production of meaning—not so in order to represent the world but to represent our place, our *θέσις* in this suspended dialectics, this "dialectics at a standstill" as Walter Benjamin so memorably has put it. To my mind, the most radical gesture of this poem is to reverse the typical image of the lost subject amidst the incomprehensibility of history—the image of feeling rootless, homeless, and suspended in the world—and attribute it to the world. It is the world which is suspended in the fullest sense: according to the ambiguity of the Greek *κρεμασμένος*—meaning, hanging as well as hung—the world is not merely hanging in the balance, it is also hanging from the rafters. In this world where the horizon is zero, we are at the horizon, or better yet, we are the horizon, perched on the edge of the world at the zero point.

It is important to recall for a moment the historical context. The poem is written in Athens upon Ritsos' return from exile in Samos, approximately two years before the Polytechnic Uprising, written under the phantasm of total political and historical failure. And it is honest enough to encounter head on the actuality of the present, while suspending any sense of the future. There is a window in certain limited aspects of the Greek Left at this time from which history is rather clear—another triptych: external defeat, self-defeat, extinction. It is in this window, looking outward from within, where I would choose to place the

so-called, by Vyron Leontaris, “poetry of defeat.” (Incidentally, the relation of Ritsos to this tendency—to this *window*—is very complicated and deserves to be examined further.)

However, precisely because this poem is so attuned to this *esoteric* triptych of defeat, it is “optimistic” in the best sense—and dead against any sort of Zhdanovian optimism. Orientation is our own matter; theory is sensual and esoteric, praxis therefore is, in a word, *poetic*. The poem serves to remind us that we make our orientation as we make our history—in the most poetic sense of “make”—and it is precisely what Aris Alexandrou conceptualizes in his enthusiastic response to Ritsos: “your poem, rejecting all compasses, became for me a compass and I don’t know if I will always manage to orient myself right, but I’m certain that now I know, now I no longer have the excuse of ignorance (though truth be told, I wasn’t completely ignorant before, it’s just that this is the first time I saw the matter so ‘clearly’) and, therefore, from now on every error in orientation will be all mine.”⁷

Alexandrou’s excerpt is written much in the language of *To Kιβώτιο*, in the sort of syntactical barrage of a “lyric I” that stages a confession in the manner of lucid delirium. Hence, Alexandrou is perfectly attuned to the poem’s calling, as the poem insists on the inclusive “we”—accentuated by indentation—in its attempt, as I said, to deploy the dogmatic idiom against the grain. Truth be told, Alexandrou had already oriented himself, or more precisely, provided his own poetic manual for orientation in a poem written just prior to Ritsos’ and dedicated to him. This had prompted its own exchange. Ritsos wrote to Alexandrou that *Ανατολή ηλίου* has “the simple paradoxical nature and the double vision of true poetry, along with the necessary persuasiveness of the inexplicable.” But Alexandrou himself, in a rare instance of commenting on his own work, says: “It is the poet who stands at the crossroads and exercises his eyes to look left and right simultaneously. The result of this askesis and compulsive devotion to duty is that eventually he succeeds in seeing things clearly.”⁸ Seeing clearly, let us remember, is what Alexandrou attributes to Ritsos’ *Orientation* as object-lesson. But when it comes down to it, seeing things clearly means overturning the order of things, or rather altering one’s relation with the order of things so as to achieve perception from the coordinates that make this relation possible (and alterable). This process requires a transformative language—not a language of the Other but a language of self-othering, which is precisely what preoccupies the poem’s persona.

Thinking momentarily through Alexandrou’s own description, I would argue that the poem emerges from the poet’s daring to go against the grain of the world. This counteractive (or perhaps even, contrapuntal) desire is fueled by a compulsion to see with absolute clarity the inevitable paradox of one’s position. Alexandrou renders this forcefully as a problem of material reality, excluding all metaphysical insinuations from its reference frame. The poem happens in the streets. This exercise in simultaneous perception also guides us, like Ritsos, to one more meditation of dialectics at a standstill, but this time with ourselves at

the orthogonal center. This time, the split subjectivity is not constituted between the recognition of myself in my alienated reflection (Hegel), but in-between my two eyes attempting to engage the entire sphere of the perceptible and, at the limit, split in utter simultaneity. At that moment, the strain—of thought, of poetry—no longer registers. It is the moment of a different sort of sublation (*Aufhebung*) constituted in the absence of light, or more precisely, in the technological failure of light. In the course of the failed production of light, which spawns a perfect darkness, the sun rises all at once from both directions, vertical and horizontal. Dimitris Raftopoulos, in his excellent book on Alexandrou, identifies this moment as “the overturning of metonymy” (from “street-lamps” to “sun”), which entails “an overturning of physical and logical order.” But this is a rare instance in this book where his argument is forced. For this is not merely an overturning [*ανατροπή*], as it is not after all a matter of simple metonymy, in the sense that in the universe of this particular poem the street-lamps never feign to stand in for the sun. They belong to a different order, the order of technological production registering its sterility, its glorious failure, while dawn is entirely a poetic moment, the moment when technological darkness is sublated by mere poetic askesis. To put it simply: the poet trains himself to look in the dark in order to make light.

Raftopoulos, however, is accurate on the question of orientation, when he points out that this poem does not merely abandon the onesidedness of a specific point of view on the world but the external point of view altogether in exchange for an internal one: in his words, the abandonment of an “eroptic” [*εποπτική*] surveillance of the world in exchange for an “enoptic” [*ενοπτική*], or in my terms, esoteric perception, in the sense of both looking inside and looking out from within. Hence, Raftopoulos concludes, “the poem itself has no external form of versification; it has no poetical facade but is instead a [poetic] blueprint.”⁹

My argument is that this poem is a blueprint of the intersection between the political and the poetic. Poetry leads to the breakdown of monological order; it involves the means to perceive the world in its paradoxical multidimensionality: the unspherical, untotaled totality of dialectical contradiction. The theoretical vision of poetry consists in a centrifugal dialectic, which retains the radical difference of each thing (the singular language of each moment) in the very same gesture of co-articulation, of simultaneous definition. In political terms, this can only mean that self-determination is possible in a simultaneous co-articulation with the other: autonomy is predicated on self-alteration. In this respect, going further than Ritsos, Alexandrou’s erasure of the dogmatic tradition from which he emerges is complete. Poetic thought is the greatest enemy of dogmatism, for no other reason than its capacity to encapsulate paradox, to occupy a contradictory temporality, to exist in an antagonistic simultaneity that gives definite form to two otherwise imperceptible positions. In terms of Alexandrou’s imagistic frame of reference, to stand at the orthogonal center and be split from sheer vigilance is the abolition of every orthodoxy.

While political praxis is always plural, the poet's work is solitary. So, loyalty to duty, in Alexandrou's *communist-anticommunist* universe, means commitment to this solitude simultaneously with immersion in the intersections of the world, the interstitial spaces that only "life in the streets" offers with abundance. It does not matter if one meets again and again the face of failure; failure is elsewhere, in expectation, premeditation, technological rationality, instrumental production, sterile power. To be fully situated at the intersection of poetic and political praxis nowadays requires a certain scandalous persistence in one's own vision, particularly when at this present moment of the historical world there is nothing to see. As Toni Negri has put it in a memorable phrase: "in the rupture of historical continuity, solitude becomes creative untimeliness."¹⁰ It is this creative untimeliness, the compulsion in the dark face of failure, that makes dawn possible, the dialectical dawn, where history rises from both directions, vertical and horizontal.

Notes

1. This is more or less the intact text of a paper presented in the Modern Greek Studies Association Symposium at Princeton University on November 4, 1999. It represents the preliminary thoughts of a future project that may or may not come to life. Nonetheless, I submit this text, with all the limitations of its initial experimental state and oral form, as a proposal for possible dialogue on what is admittedly a complex and wide open subject.
2. From *Θυρωρείο* [Concierge Office], first published in 1976 and subsequently included in *Poimata* Vol. X (Athens: Kedros, 1989), 378. My translation.

Economic plans, compasses, maps –
these meant nothing to us. Premeditation
was always doomed to failure.

We

hung tightly to the rope descending deeper
in the ancient well, our feet caressed
by the dark coolness of the depths.

From the open hole above us,
the barest light (perhaps the burning from our own cigarette)
and the stones rolling down to the bottom
defined our place in this suspended world.

Athens (13.V.71)

3. See Aris Alexandrou, *Poimata (1941-1974)*, Second Edition (Athens: Kastaniotis, 1978). My translation.

This was the hour when street-lamps were supposed to light up. He had no doubt they would light up any second, like every other night at this hour. He stood at the intersection, or more precisely on the cement island divider, to see the street-lamps light up from both directions simultaneously, vertical and horizontal.

Keeping a steady head, he turned his right eye to the right, his left eye to the left. There he waited, but the street-lamps remained unlit. His eyes got tired; they began to ache in this uncomfortable position. After a while, he could no longer

stand it and he left.

Yet, next evening, loyal to his duty, he returned and stood again on the cement island. Again, the street-lamps did not light up this evening, nor any other evening, but his eyes eventually got used to the task. No longer tired, they ached no more.

And at some point, as he was standing there waiting, dawn emerged all at once. All at once, he saw the sun rise from both directions simultaneously, vertical and horizontal.

Paris 1971

4. Geoffrey Waite has constructed an impressive and highly nuanced argument for the esoteric dimensions of philosophy under capitalism (which would include both capitalist philosophy and philosophy against capitalism). I refer to a project still in progress, with the provisional title *The Trace of Communism: Essaying the Premodern Post-modern*, of which I am fortunate to possess a couple of unpublished parts in manuscript. I hereby thank the author for generously granting me access. The reader can get a profound sense of this innovative argumentation in Waite's "On Esotericism: Heidegger and/or Cassirer at Davos", *Political Theory* 26(5), October 1998, pp. 603-651.
5. See Dimitris Raftopoulos, *Άρης Αλεξάνδρου, Ο Εξόριστος* [Aris Alexandrou, The Exile] (Athens: Sakkolis, 1998), 175-176.
6. It is important to add that the two poems had also been exchanged in manuscript form, provoking here as well some insightful comments by both texts, which I address below.
7. In Raftopoulos, *ibid.*, p. 269 (my translation).
8. Quoted in Raftopoulos, *ibid.*, p. 251 (my translation).
9. *ibid.*, p. 251 (my translation).
10. Antonio Negri, "Pour Althusser: Notes sur l'évolution de la pensée de dernier Althusser" in *Sur Althusser: Passages*, ed. Jean-Marie Vincent (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1993), p. 54 (my translation).