The Wall and the Wallpaper: Thoughts on the Afterlife of Lyricism[1]

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The fundamental condition of the invitation to write "about my work" as an author leaves me, in the best of cases, somewhat embarrassed. So I thought it would be better and more honest to discuss this embarrassment, or at least to begin from my embarrassment. Hopefully, this feeling will finally prove to have not only poisonous but also healing properties, perhaps even some elements of a minimum moral conclusion. This embarrassment, in any case, is the only established and true feeling that connects the author with his/her readers; it is an embarrassment combined with expectation. Is there something, then, in this mutual unease, yours and mine, that exceeds individual pathology, something that I could easily handle in a rational way from my point of view and, as far as possible, in the first person?

In order to give you an initial, short version of the problems that occupy my mind, I will have to resort to a comment by T.S. Eliot, from which I borrowed my title. When I.A. Richards, one of the most efficient and radical literary theorists—whom Eliot deeply appreciated—wrote that "poetry can save us", Eliot observed phlegmatically but very accurately: "It's as if to say that the wallpaper can save us when the walls have collapsed". I must admit that I do not particularly like Eliot's conservative cosmic theory. Nevertheless, I quite often find myself in the difficult position to agree with him. The comment I quoted above is one of these cases. There is one more epigrammatic comment by Eliot that I agree with; it is both eloquent and wise, and I quote it here as a necessary attachment to the first: "We cannot determine the importance of a literary work based on strictly literary criteria". Eliot, as you may know, converted to the Anglican doctrine in 1927, and remained actively faithful until the end of his life. Thus, we assume that the importance of a literary work should be primarily sought in its spiritual effect, and that the walls the poet is talking about make up the redeeming construction of religious faith. That is why he is evidently reserved, if not hostile, towards all the aesthetic movements that are developing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when Art aspires to the metaphysical distinction of religion, and flirts with the gap that the decline of the devotional model has left

in modern societies. Regardless of Eliot's doctrinal intentions, his observations have a solid pragmatological basis, which makes them still valid. Whether we believe in God or not, literature as a substitute of religious faith is probably useless to us. If you have the burning desire to be saved from the adversities of the times, you are free to return to the flock – following the route of the prodigal son or any other. God may be with you. Literature does not seem capable of saving man, nor does the Ministry of Culture seem able to save literature.

Nevertheless, you may wonder, and rightly so, why I feel this embarrassment. A middle-aged man, like myself, author of several books, can certainly claim that he has, after all, created some work, and that he is entitled – under certain circumstances and taking the least of precautions – to talk about his work, defending his meanings, his orientations, his choices. A published work is a public fact, and as such it needs care, protection and – why not? – a minimum of moral praise. So far so good. We will not commit the known logical error of mistaking etymology for thought (a sin, as you may know, that the great and renowned thinkers committed repeatedly). However, it would not harm you to remember, from time to time, that the Greek work "demiourgia" (creation), has two compounds: *demos* (public) and *ergo* (work). The *demiourgos* or *demioergos* (creator) is the specialised craftsman, who works and produces work for the public, that is, for the people. Let us treasure the concept of the public together with the valuables of this configuration, and let us restrict ourselves, for the time being, to the observation that a *demiourgia* (artistic creation) cannot be simply a body of published texts. It is primarily a relation between the public and the work, a dynamic relation in which the impersonal forces of language consort and are interwoven with other forces, in a usually spontaneous way. Out of ignorance, admiration or weakness, these latter forces are named *talent*, and they finally constitute the personality of the work. This thought may sound commonplace, but it still includes an important unknown and radically undefinable social factor: the public and the sophists. The work is addressed to this audience, seeking its praise and something more, infinitely more honest and more difficult now than praise: its attention, that is, its time, the most precious good in our so-called post-industrial societies.

In other words, we are faced with an old and rather trivial question: who do we write for? I respect all the idealised and idealising answers, those that have been called forth in response to this resounding question. I shall remind you of some. We always write with the ideal reader in mind; this is an imaginary being, comprising heterogeneous qualities, some borrowed from our friends and others from our more or less important ancestors, of the type we wish to excel in. Or, that we write so that our book "can take its place on an abstract bookshelf", according to Calvino's ingenious statement. Or, even, that we write *ad maiorem gloriam dei*, for our secretly glorified self, for a couple of friends who understand us, for anyone who may find the bottle with our desperate message or, after all, for no one in particular. These are charming and worthy answers. However, they are hopelessly metaphorical. I also consider as trivial and enter-

taining the view that this question is of no importance, because, as we often hear, poetry is a way of life. I honestly do not know what poetry as a way of life can be like, either for the poet or for the reader. But I cannot imagine it as something particularly pleasant. Thus, I insist on reading the question literally and my answer is: I don't know. I don't have the slightest idea who I write for. Even if I held a full list of subscribers in my hands and knew, one by one (which may be true), all the readers of a poetry collection, and had their names and home addresses, again I would not be in a position to answer the question. I can see people, some people; I see them from very close and one by one, but I do not see the public. I can only see vague images, the idols of publicity, and I receive an unceasing mass of confused messages, which testifies to the continuous decomposition of the experienced world and its reincarnation into tradeable information. This is the first condition of my embarrassment.

I do not claim that this vagueness is new. On the contrary, it must date at least back to the era of romanticism (the late 18th century), evidently culminating with modernism, that is, the early 20th century which has just expired. One could even argue that the poetry of modernism, in all its versions, is a colossal attempt to transform, in an internally necessary and fundamental way, this deficit into a strike-force, into a wholeness. The work of modernism daringly advances into an area where it does not know its readers any longer; it seems to follow Dante in the dark woods without the assistance of his unearthly guide. Instead of trying to find his readers behind, in the established relations of the past, he tries to find them ahead, that is, he aspires to form them from naught. This was the beauty and boldness of modernism.

This struggle has probably been completed. It has led to both defeats and victories, with significant losses on both sides, and each one can draw their own war-report depending on their needs, their expectations, and their ghosts. Poems are now written for Universities, and they are wilfully incorporated within a horizon of expectations depending on the interpretative and evaluative work of academic teaching. This is more or less true for the entire western world, but mainly for the Anglosaxon countries. Poets have stopped writing for the imaginary bookshelf of the reader who has a certain education and some free time (a construct of the 18th century liberal urban societies); they write in order to be included in the curriculum, and they often earn their living teaching at a University. However, the old flexible citizen and reader cannot be taken for granted by poetry today, although poetry alludes to him and misses him more than ever. What else can the following anxious line by Baudelaire, the most modern of all modern poets, mean in a poem which focuses on the theme of ennui: "You, hypocritical reader, my semblance, my brother"? This almost ritualistic line initiates a reversed solidarity, by assimilating the loss of the true reader, and transforming it into an ironic condition of validity for the poetic utterance. The poetic endeavour is desperately looking for its originality, without ever knowing who exactly it addresses.

You have already guessed the second condition of my embarrassment. It is

wonderfully summarised in the expression *man of letters* or – to come closer to my interests – in the word *poet*. Then, why is embarrassment still here? Embarrassment, as we all know, usually betrays the existence of mixed, and at times strongly conflicting, feelings. For this reason, as an emotional mood it is similar, or even identical, to shame. I would very much like to explain why I believe that shame is one of the most valuable feelings available to lyrical poetry. Only in the present situation, shame and other mixed feelings are aroused by the word *poet* – its obligatory participation in the pathetic parade of vanity in the so-called "art pages" of the daily press. And I would like to confess that, because of that shame, I get unbelievably tired of poems on poetry, poems on poetics, as they are usually called. These are passionately drawn from the long-exhausted repertory and wardrobe of an imaginary but narcissistic being, generally and vaguely called a *poet*. Some would say that the course leading to this stage of poetic autism is determined in a renowned excerpt by Friedrich Schlegel (*Athenäum*, 238); this excerpt supports a new type of poetry – romantic poetry – together with a new type of self-consciousness in poetry: "This poetry", the German thinker wrote, "should depict itself in its every representation, and it should be, always and everywhere, poetry and poetry of poetry".

Such poems on poetry, and the poet imprisoned or enthroned in them – without any responsibility, I assure you, on Friedrich Schlegel's part – have recently appeared, as a separate category of poems, in a new anthology ("teaching manual") for the last grade of highschool in Greece. I cannot know what Schlegel would say or think about this anthology. However, I can rightly assume what the pupils will think about poetry when they are called upon to read "poems on poetry", when they want poems "to be like a soft dream and talk / to the soul about worldly matters", to quote Karyotakis. At this age, when the embarrassed and clumsy adolescent mind keeps the greatest reserves of euphoria and inner life, a specific textbook, probably seeking to gain the laurels of innovation, gives to the pupils another large dose of mandatory suffocation. And I leave aside the fact that poems like "Η δελφική γιορτή" [The Delphic Feast] (with its indirect reference to Sikelianos) and "Μικρή ασυμφωνία εις Α μείζον" [Short Symphony in A Majore] (with its direct reference to Malakasis) can never be considered "poems on poetry" – unless the imaginative editors of the anthology gave the poems these subtitles as a justification for the fact that the anthology includes no poems by Sikelianos or Malakasis. Still, there is an extensive section with "supplementary texts", where the more studious pupils can climb to the highlands of contemporary poetry, and read some of the most boring texts that have ever been written in our language in the form of a poem. Poetry can be anything, depending on what each period decides to consider as poetry. But it can never be boring.

You will allow me to insist a little longer on the word *poet* and its connotations. John Keats's short life was filled with the ceaseless desire to leave *a work* behind – so simple and yet so absolute. When reading his biography, we gratefully acknowledge his work and we devoutly receive his ultimate wish "to be

included among the English poets", as he put it. I can very well understand what he meant by this almost inconceivable and yet touching blend of pride and humility. But I can also understand the embarrassment this self-taught poet must have felt, the degree of annulment and shame he had to face in order to find an inner balance between a sensual temperament, and his ambition and clarity of mind. However, Keats had the time to admire his achievement, in this irreproachably direct way, despite the intense premonition of death that loomed over him, even before he was diagnosed for tuberculosis which led him to a difficult and premature end. And when again, dying at the age of twenty-six, he expresses to a friend his desire to have the following words inscribed on his grave: "here lies a man whose name was writ in water", we can understand what he meant.

Keats, as you know, died and was buried in Rome. His grave is not to be found in the enviable Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey. Nevertheless, his work is included among the English poets; and the way he handled his gentle ambition, his anxiety to last and to root in the memories of his countrymen, cannot alienate him from contemporary sensitivity, no matter how close we bring him to our suspicious and long-sighted eyes. On the contrary, the current reader who reads Keats's letters will have the privilege of understanding some of the most acute observations ever made on the art of poetry; he will also find something else, not so usual for a poet: an extremely nice person, an unexpected friend. At this point, our mind very easily leads us to a few lines written over a century after Keats's death:

We all start off as a mob
looking for rhyme.
Such a noble ambition
has become the goal of our lives.

Karyotiakis's sarcasm does not annul Keats's assertion. They both belong, as historic feeling can easily realise, to the valuable heritage of this art. They are the two sides of the same coin, that we all use in our innermost transactions with great poetry. We need the irony of Karyotakis, in order to fortify our credulousness, as we need Keats's abundance, in order to respond to the deeper request for human solidarity that the poems address to us. Keats and Karyotakis set forth from the same starting point, but follow opposite directions. However, since they have both been poets of the deepest modesty, they carry for us the load of embarrassment and shame, and they manage to liberate us. That is why we can understand them.

For the same reason, it is difficult for me to understand the following:

> The poet ... is an alarm system that poetry has placed in its vulnerable parts so that it is not broken into. He is the red sensor that starts to ring demonically as soon as a suspect walks within its range, be it a cat, a

> mosquito, or some bulky indifference. The poet immediately unleashes all his detective skills that run to arrest the stimulus.

This quote belongs to an important poet, Kiki Dimoula; it is included in the "supplementary texts" of the highschool anthology. I respect Mrs Dimoula and I honestly believe that she has written some good poems. However, I cannot perceive any direct or indirect reason why the above text is weaving this web of affectation, sophistication, and forced narcissism around the very simple word *poet*. Anyone who has the ambition to write good poems is called upon to balance the huge originality deficit which, unfortunately, cannot be replaced by witticisms. I may be unfair to Mrs. Dimoula, by mentioning her immediately after Keats and Karyotakis. However, I cannot hide my suspicion that the coin exchanged here, in such a pompous and loud way, is probably false. Faced with such pretentious attacks against pompousness one is tempted to cry out, playfully and probably in order to find some relief, "poetry is the acceleration of a shiny bicycle".

Consequently, I realise that the acceptance of embarrassment uncovers more than embarrassment itself hides; that, by assuming this position, I seem to ignore deliberately an entire repertory in which anxiety for the position of the poet has been, and still is, the cause for important thoughts and even more important poems. Indeed, between Shelley's notorious statement that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world", and George Seferis's "the poet, a void", spreads an entire landscape made up of similar statements on the role or the fate of the poet; some are affirmative and ritualistic, such as the one by Shelley, while others are negative, restrained or cautious, such as the one by Seferis. Both statements, the one ritualistic and the other bewildered, are founded on the same exaggerated evaluation of the poetic subject, the poet and his function, which from now on usurps the prominent position of religion. This extravagant claim is inscribed in the genetic code of poetry, and it would be highly improbable, if not impossible, to take it out without adulterating or irreparably harming the very essence of lyricism. However, we have now moved to the unseen, until recently, side of this extravagance. We no longer live under its light and warmth, but under its cold shadow, where we entertain ourselves with unintentional parodies of the initial plan.

Nevertheless, the distance between the ritualistic and the negative model is not as great as it seems. Sometimes it is even eliminated entirely by other aphorisms, of an imperial range, such as the one by Mallarmé: "Everything in the world exists in order to end up in a book". This totalitarian verdict confirms the end of poetry as a genre, and proclaims the absolute kingdom of the text. It was adopted and is still trumpeted by fervent messengers of the "postmodern condition" like an uncontested oracle, and a fully realised prophesy in the electronic, now, book of the universe. It is very fortunate for us that very distinguished poets, like Yeats, Rilke, Pasternak, Eliot, Cavafy, Frost, Dylan Thomas, Montale, Neruda, Auden, survived Mallarmé, writing very important poetry without

losing their contact with worldly matters. What makes a text a poem is certainly a theoretical issue, either very interesting or immensely insignificant, depending on how you see it. But it does not change the fact that poetry fascinates us because it *is not* (only or entirely) a text.

Thus, on the side of embarrassment, the poet does nothing more than pompously renounce poetry. This is the case, for example, with what I consider a bad poem by a good poet, Miltos Sahtouris, entitled "Ο στρατιώτης ποιητής" [The Soldier Poet]:

I have not written any poems
I have not written any poems
only crosses
on graves
I grind

We would rather he wrote poems, because he has indeed written some good ones. I understand and share his need to talk about the failure of poetry – about the wall – without letting himself be assimilated in the narcotic pattern of the wallpaper, or giving himself up to the saturation of one more meaningless affirmation without a fight. (The old saying "Εκόμισα εις την Τέχνη" [I Brought to Art] is not easily uttered any longer.) However, this type of disdaining self-reference is now commonplace, and it would take something extra, something more drastic than this trivial bidding to horror, for the poet to make himself convincing again. The rhetoric of the poet's renunciation can be, as it very often is now, a poetry as boring and indifferent as the rhetoric of its apotheosis.

Now crossing to the other side of embarrassment, where the wallpaper is still thriving, and affirmation colours our ambitious dreams, I must confess that I immensely admire Odysseus Elytis; I admire him as one of the great instructors of the Greek poetic expression. With Elytis, the modern Greek lyrical line culminates in a majestic way – almost final, I was going to say. For this reason, it would seem graceless, ungrateful and petty to nag, to hesitate and to taunt him for his unlucky moments. Nevertheless, allow me to confess that every time I read phrases such as "I wake up restless at nights for a shade of purple", I retreat and close the book. I cannot believe that there is a man who stays awake for a shade of purple – unless it is one of those caricatures of the Victorian aesthete who walks about in Oscar Wilde's comedies, or one of those thoughts that probably distressed the beautiful and vacant head of a sensual young man of the otherwise charming Preraphaelite painting.

Embarrassment seems to be inevitable, after all.

From what I have written so far in an effort to describe, with a certain clarity, the conditions of my embarrassment, nothing is new, nothing is literally recent, a product of the absolute present. On the contrary, everything looks – even to me now that I read it – commonplace, a simple reiteration of the past in

the present, in the present now. And it is rather arbitrary on my part, not to say misleading, to appropriate as a personal embarrassment the difficulties that are a catholic condition in the practice of the poetic art.

However, I have to tell you – and I am evidently the last person to bring you the news – that the present now, contrary to the past now and to all the other anxious nows that history has recorded, is at the final stage of a process that was accurately defined by Max Weber in the previous century; he called it "die Entzauberung der Welt" [the de-witching of the world]. This de-witching, a simple consequence, if not a synonym, of the rationalisation of the world, the so-called globalisation, has crossed to the other side of a defeated Enlightenment. Thus, even our longing, in certain cases, is presented to our eyes like an element of enlightenment and valuable resistance. Because you cannot convince me that there can be a University today which does not cherish some form of longing for a human type or reality which is sinking, year after year, deeper into history, somewhere between the defamed Middle Ages and the dishonoured Enlightenment. How can there be a University at all, if some people, notified of man's doings, do not insist that education improves man? How can a society undergo the suffering and the cost of education without an ultimate *reason* which would justify education in the collective consciousness? Usurping this ultimate reason on behalf of the interests of economic globalisation – I am sure you will agree with me – leaves out some three quarters of our planet's population.

But let us make a small step outside the stifling ring of embarrassment, and let us consider for a while the following short poem:

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This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me –
The simple News that Nature told –
With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see –
For love of Her – Sweet – countrymen –
Judge tenderly – of Me

This poem was written by the American poet Emily Dickinson, probably the most important woman poet after Sappho, at least in what we call Western culture. A corresponding but more familiar to us poem that directly comes to mind is the daring and final "Εκόμισα εις την Τέχνη" [I Brought to Art] by Cavafy. They are both poems on poetics, if you wish, in the more drastic meaning of the term; poems that presuppose an entire *work* and handle all the terms of its manifestation: who is talking, to whom is it addressed, what is he saying? Observe the prismatic way in which Dickinson depicts our initial question: who do we write

for? (Evidently she did not mean the students of comparative literature at Yale University.) While in the past we used to hold in our hands a stiff, undisciplined question, now we find ourselves holding the analytical terms: the "World", which I would call a condition for the universality of the work; the "Hands" (literally and not as a metonymy of the face, nor as a synechdoche) that Dickinson sees as receiving the message; and the "countrymen" that Dickinson addresses as specific – in place, time and language – receivers of the "letter". The receiving act is projected onto the future (that is why these are "Hands [she] cannot see"), without however betraying its materiality or timeliness; it is both transgressive and real, abstract and specific; it is addressed to the present and the future generation, to utopia and democracy (where the "countrymen" are also judges). As the eyesight of a dying man fades gradually and everything around him becomes blurred, so the poem opens up and fills the future – a future, however, that contains both the death of the poet and her magical interrelation with Nature. Thanks to Nature (the "tender Majesty" as she calls it), Dickinson wishes to be judged kindly and "tenderly" by her compatriots. The poem is an act of despair and a plea for solidarity, at the same time.

Here, there is a poetic stance at work. Without considering the problem of "who we write for" as solved (on the contrary, the problem is bequeathed in its entirety to the future generations, and it is presented as identical with the future of poetry), this poetic stance allows the poet to address her words daringly to her future receivers and talk to them directly about the major issue, that is, about the walls that may not have collapsed entirely. In other words, we can understand why this poem was written as soon as we finish reading it. It may be enigmatic, as all Dickinson poetry is. And it is also, in the most demanding way, "poetry on poetry" as Schlegel envisioned it. However, it refers primarily to the World and "worldly matters". It is quite difficult to find other poems that are so enigmatic, almost self-raptured, like Dickinson's poems, which also express, with such urgent emotion, the need to address specific people. That was Dickinson's triumph; and our standards are too high when we promote her as a role model. However, only when we feel that the ultimate reason for writing a poem is part of the poetic organism, melted in the conditions of its manifestation, only then do we allow a poem to address us and win us over as true factors of its meaning. And then we evidently hold in our hands a lasting work.

You will permit me to narrate two incidents, insignificant in some respects, which for me have the power of a parable. Many years ago, during a trip with a dear friend, I went to the Archaeological Museum of Ioannina, an austere building designed by Aris Konstantinidis. Among the various ephemeral exhibits, those that do not enjoy the prestige of a work of art, the visitor can see, placed in special cases, several foils like those on which the pilgrims to the Dodoni oracle put down their questions to Zeus, the god of the oracle. One of those foils suddenly attracted my attention. It had spelling mistakes, like most of the other texts, and it was written in the Corinthian alphabet of the 5th century BC; it asked the god the following simple question: *Ει αποδαμών τύχοιμι κα επί ταν*

τέχναν [If, going abroad, I will succeed in my art].

It is not so much a fact that this reported speech outlined a human type that was familiar to us and very common in this corner of the Eastern Mediterranean. No, it was not the ghosts of the historic continuity of the Hellenes that fascinated me then. It was rather the thought that the request indirectly expressed by the anonymous Corinthian, a request for solidarity to the god, went through the centuries to reach our eyes, our unseen – to the receiver – hands, to remember Dickinson. Time, as a measuring instrument, has transformed us into embarrassed receivers of the question, or else embarrassed receivers of a gift. We ought to judge the anonymous Corinthian, our countryman or not, leniently. The first-person utterance of the question, the doubt of a human being who was suddenly and unintentionally found looking towards our side from a distance of twenty-five centuries, all of a sudden worked with the same magical combination of familiarity and solidarity with which lyrical poetry wins us over. We are free to imagine the life of this man in any way we like, even though this is forbidden by the critical orthodoxy, the life (the lyrical, if you wish, life) that gives a personality to a linguistic construction as distant to us as, let us say, a poem by Sappho.

The second incident was again a travel inspiration. When, a few years ago, I had the good fortune to travel to Egypt, I visited the impressive Cairo Archaeological Museum. I do not need to describe all the wonderful and unique exhibits of the Museum, every section of which bears, as an honour, the magical name of one of the eminent archaeologists who worked on the land of the Nile. However, it was a small – almost unimportant – exhibit that caught my eye and fascinated me, then, more than all the others. It belonged to the renowned "Tutankhamun Treasure", but it was neither a valuable object nor a wonderful work of art. It was simply – or so I thought at the moment – the camp-bed of the young Pharaoh, an object that I doubt was ever used, given the fact that its owner died at the age of 17 or 18, probably before marching out to war. A simple folding camp-bed, with a wooden frame and a mattress made of papyrus stripes. The know-how which this object testifies to is no different from the present one: this is exactly how a contemporary craftsman would have made it, replacing the papyrus stripes with sailcloth, or even plastic. If it was not betrayed by its old age, it could have been used at the children's YMCA camp, as I knew it, or it could have been installed in a luxurious villa in the Côte d' Azur. The same function, the same principle, the same construction. No progress here. I imagine that the contemporary craftsman could evaluate the art of this object, touch it, admire it, or criticise it – not condescendingly, but as equal to equal.

This strange solidarity, as I imagined it, between the present carpenter and Pharaoh's carpenter, where there is no progress and where distance (some 1360 years BC) and continuity blend in the meaning of a craft, this form of historicity (completely different from that of a doctor, a physicist, or an astronomer) is a form of historicity that belongs to poetry. The same rationale allows a man writing today to learn his art from Sophocles and Shakespeare, Sappho and Cavafy,

whereas an astrophysicist has nothing to learn from Ptolemy, or a nuclear physicist from Democritus. The pseudo-Supreme-Court may declare that celestial bodies are attracted to one another because of the love of God, but this attraction has no relation to Newtonian physics, which is indeed some form of very important progress. However, Homer cannot be regarded condescendingly by any contemporary poet, not even, as Marx used to say, in order to have fun with the funny doings of humanity.

You may remember the incident from the *Iliad*, when the poor Lycaon, son of Priam, having just returned from Lemnos, unfortunately finds himself for a second time faced with Achilles, who is enraged by the death of his friend. Lycaon, then, falls to Achilles's feet, clasps his knees (υπέδραμε και λάβε γούνων / κύψας [Lycaon stooped and ran thereunder, and clasped Achilles's knees]) and begs him, "with winged words", to spare him his life. Achilles's answer has the same sound for us, for Karl Marx, for the young disciples of ancient Greece. Achilles, *αμείλικτος* [relentless] as the Homeric text has it, calls the kneeling Lycaon a *νήπιον* [infant] – that is, fool and thoughtless – and continues:

> No, friend, you too die; why lament you thus? Patroclus also died, and he was better far than you. And do you not see what manner of man I am, how fair and how tall? A good man was my father, and a goddess the mother that bore me; yet over me too hang death and resistless fate. There will come a dawn or evening or midday, when my life too will some man take in battle, whether he strike me with cast of the spear, or with an arrow from the string.[2]

Achilles's relentless reason is that of our mortality. I do not think it is only a figment of my imagination that in the following poem by Gryparis we can hear a whispered answer to Achilles's words:

> I would welcome the final moment
> which my eyes for ever would close
> and at any time, either now or later,
> as long as it doesn't come like a heavy thunder.
>
> Spring it should be, like now,
> and one more sweet sunset,
> and a soft breeze would blow
> and the little white-dressed soul would fall
>
> Like an apple-tree flower[.]

Both excerpts teach the acceptance of death: Achilles teaches relentless enforcement, while Gryparis the softer ethos of reconciliation. In the third angle of an invisible triangle, that performs for us the rite of human solidarity against

mortality, we have to place Lear's voice, the cry of a man whose conscience cannot tolerate the injustice, the impropriety of death. Thus, I quote the verses Lear utters over Cordelia's dead body, because they delineate, more clearly than anything else, the boundary of literature:

> And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no, no life!
> Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
> And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,
> Never, never, never, never, never!
>
> (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act V, Scene III, 304-307)[3]

These lines include one of the most famous and drastic iambic pentameters that Shakespeare ever wrote – a reversed iambic pentameter, since it comprises five pure trochaics: Never, never, never, never, never – the absolute expression of final loss.

Thus, we trust all three excerpts that I quoted because, each in its own way, they share our deeper concerns related to our sense of time and death. Solidarity against mortality is evidently the hard core of lyrical poetry, and duration is its natural component. That is why we never wonder, when we have such poems before us, why they were written. Only where poetry bears within, like a tender foetus, the ultimate reason of its existence, only there will we see the emergence of the crude words of our solidarity against the inescapable. And only when one feels the depth of this solidarity – its temporal depth, such as the one felt when faced with Pharaoh's camp-bed – and the violent annulments, those brought forth by the de-witching of the world, only then can lyrical poetry re-witch the world in its small territory, in the little Alexandria that it still owns.

The two successive and relevant, as you must have realised, observations by Eliot that I started with remind me of a peculiar phenomenon described by archaeologists. It so happens sometimes, during an excavation, that they find architectural parts of an older construction, yet not scattered in a disorderly way, as they would be if they had been left at the mercy of time and weather, but placed in a neat order, collected together in a corner and classified. Then, archaeologists assume that a major catastrophe, an earthquake or a fire, caused the collapse of this older building, and the people who survived the catastrophe, unaware of the technique of the particular construction, collected and ordered the scattered but intact parts so that they could re-build it in the future, when they would recover the forgotten know-how. The embarrassment of these people, as the skilled scientific imagination of the archaeologist can reconstruct them, seems similar to my embarrassment while writing this paper. I wanted to share with you the art of a wallpaper, and anything that may be relevant to that important and great art, without however hiding my feeling that the walls – some of the walls – have already collapsed. When they are rebuilt, whenever

and however they are rebuilt, one would hope that the art of the wallpaper has not been entirely forgotten, so that the walls are then decorated in a way worthy of the expectations of the people who will reconstruct them.

However, by talking about walls and brickwork, I recollect a scene from a film with the Marx brothers: the deaf Harpo, his body slightly bending and with one hand in his pocket, is leaning with the other hand on a wall. I do not remember if this wall is part of a larger construction, but I have the impression that it is completely loose, like a setting. In this position of semi-rest, he is found by his brother Chiko, who asks him in his Italian English, evidently making fun of him: "What are you doing there? Are you holding the wall so that it doesn't fall?" Harpo nods assertively, with that demonic smile that often lightens up his face. Chiko laughs condescendingly with this evidently outrageous, childish claim, and grabbing his brother's hand, he pulls him abruptly so that they can go. And the wall collapses.

It is probable that poetry does not hold the wall on which it is leaning persistently. However, let us not pull it abruptly from its small illusion, because you never know what may happen.

Notes

1. Lecture given at the Department of Philology of the University of Crete in November 2000. Translated by Fotini Apostolou.
2. Homer. *Iliad II*. 1925. Trans. A.T. Murray. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999. 413.
3. William Shakespeare. *King Lear.* Ed. Kenneth Muir. London: The Arden Shakespeare, 1997.