

## Notes on Modern Greek Poetry

Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke

*Oh! beauty, though you never gave yourself  
to me completely, I still managed  
to appropriate something of you.*

Odysseus Elytis

*Oh! Silent beauty, why can't it seduce us again.*

Yiannis Ritsos

In 1991, two books of poetry, by two major Greek poets, made their appearance on the Greek poetic scene: the posthumous work of Yiannis Ritsos, who died in 1990 at the age of 81, entitled *Late, Very Late into the Night* and a collection of 14 poems under the title: *The Elegies of Oxopetra*<sup>1</sup> by Odysseus Elytis (he died 3 years later). Elytis complained in one of his very rare interviews that his book was received as a kind of farewell: "You would think that they were already in mourning" he said; "They isolate one line ('the truth is given only in exchange for death') and they conclude that with these poems I try to come to terms with my death, as if I hadn't been dealing with death in all my poetry!"

Be that as it may, one cannot help noticing common points of reference in these two books written by two poets who otherwise could not be more different. This common ground is, obviously, offered by the proximity of death: "But how, in what way / can the unspoken be revealed?" asks Elytis, while Ritsos has "no suspicion any more but the certainty / that he is heading / for the deep nowhere, the absolute night / leaving to the world its landscapes full of light / with their poplars, birds and tiny angels". Diametrically opposed also as types of writers, Ritsos leaves behind about 45 unpublished and more than 100 published collections of poems—not counting several volumes of prose and theatre—while Elytis used to let sometimes years of silence separate one book of poems from the next.

Ritsos was totally involved in the social cause and suffered years of exile and

persecution for his communist beliefs. Elytis hardly ever made a public appearance, lived in his little flat in the heart of Athens and saw very few people. Ritsos in his poetry glorifies the everyday, insignificant detail, the old lady peeling peas and the humble objects in the room, the life of simple people who know only struggle and death. "That is all I wanted to say even if no one believes me!". Ritsos wants to talk about "lilies not as symbols of innocence but as the fragrant plants they are / and of the olive tree not as the emblem of victory or peace but as a fruitful, providing mother / ... and me – he said – no myth at all, hero or god, but a simple worker / ... who writes incessantly about everybody and everything / and whose name is brief and easy to pronounce: Yiannis Ritsos". Elytis said once: "I write, so that black won't have the last word". And Ritsos: "And he refuses to utter the unique and ultimate word: *black*".

Ritsos is saying *yes* to life. A "yes" full of suffering and joy, truths and lies. "If I told you lies, it was not / that I wanted to deceive you / it was to protect you / from your own shadow". Elytis is groping for the magic thread which will lead him to the heart of the mystery, the mystery of life, the mystery of Eleusis maybe. "We all finish equally last / Bitter saliva remains on your unshaken face / Some Greek letters struggling to find / a harmony amongst themselves so that / the word of your life the only one *if ...*". And Ritsos says about the poet: "No matter how deep he dips his hand into the darkness / his hand is never black. This hand is impermeable / to the night. When he goes (because we all go one day) / I think the sweetest smile will be left behind in this world, / which will incessantly say yes and again yes to all our eternal dashed hopes".

If I have indulged in this game of ping-pong between Ritsos and Elytis, it is not only because I want to show that when death casts its shadow different kinds of poetry seem to converge. It is not even because both books, each one in its own way, are two very happy moments in Greek poetry today. It is mainly that I feel that with these two great poets we say good-bye to a certain element of Greek poetry, which may even have ceased to exist some time ago. I refer to a particular relationship between the Greek poet and the consciousness of his Greekness. Given the complex and tortuous nature of modern Greek history and the somehow insoluble problems of the Greek identity *vis-à-vis* the Western world, the poet (often capitalized) was the one who like a soothsayer or like a rhapsodist, like an historian or a psychoanalyst, a revolutionary or a conservative, was always the one who was trying to define, through his poetry, the position of a Greek soul in the modern world.

All major Greek poets have at some point probed this same area from different angles, methods and poetics. Already in the 1820's, when the national poet of Greece – and the unsurpassable, for many, diamond of all modern Greek poetry – Dionysios Solomos was witnessing the struggle of the Greeks against the Ottoman empire, he was trying, through his poetic vision, to see clearly this newly born Greek consciousness which had to be already so mature as to fight for its existence. His approach was an ethical one. The concept of good and evil conceived in its pure form (Solomos was in essence a symbolist) was the one

that would assist the Greeks in their struggle for freedom from the Turks and against temptation. What was the temptation? What else but the physical beauty of Greece which in all its spring splendour was there to lure the fighter away from death and into the arms of a sweet life.

A hundred years later, in the 1920's, Kostis Palamas, another beacon of Greek poetry, with tremendous literary influence—he even managed to keep Cavafy off the shores of the Athenian literati for quite a long time—tried in his laborious, long poems to establish the psychological elation of the modern Greek man supported by his past history (ancient, Byzantine, folk) and the present. Angelos Sikelianos (died 1951) expressed in his visionary poetry this feeling of “oneness”, linking the Greek of today to all the premordial elements which had nourished, on his land, gods and men alike, a land “where memory has no end and no beginning”. In a sort of pantheistic exaltation, where the god Dionysos and Christ take part in the same ritual, Sikelianos celebrates life and life giving death.

George Seferis, the inconsolable witness of the Asia Minor disaster of 1922, strived to find “another life” in a country resembling “a large plane-leaf / swept along the torrent of the sun / with the ancient monuments and the contemporary sorrow” (“The King of Assini”). He traced the itinerary of the Greek man, who, like a new Argonaut, sets out not to find the golden fleece but his Greek identity, a reconciliation between the ancient statues and contemporary sorrow. Even the Alexandrian Cavafy, distanced both geographically and psychologically from mainland Greece, created a totally original world where modern psychological attitudes are dressed in the frock and charm of the forgotten protagonists of a very obscure moment in history, i.e.: Hellenistic times, the days of the epigones of Alexander the Great. Odysseus Elytis, on the other hand, through a mystification of the “sparkling” Aegean, saw a natural and eternal value, which was there to sustain the Greek soul: all this light to be shed in the dark path of our contemporary world! Ritsos saw this support coming from a combination of the natural gifts of the Greek land and communist ideology.

Around these figure-heads, the stream of Greek poetry circulated. A poetry rich in its variety, receiving and assimilating foreign influences, from France mainly but also, recently, from America. French surrealism, for example, found a fertile soil in the Greek psyche, which always felt very comfortable with both the unreal and the real, often too painful to be overlooked. The Second World War—and the ensuing civil war—was a dramatic turning point in Greek life and poetry; the result was a generation of poets who experienced and, of course, expressed disillusionment and defeat. “Find me a form of struggle / that saves without killing. / Look at the smoke and the dust / look at the disaster within us”, says one of the lesser known but most embittered poets, Vyron Leondaris.<sup>2</sup>

My aim, though, is not to trace here the history of Modern Greek poetry, but to attempt to take the pulse of poetry in Greece today. Poetry, like the sensitive organism that it is, could not remain untouched by the total overturning of the Western world, especially in the area of the Balkans. While all these deve-

lopments are very recent—and by no means final—one can discern already in the poetry of the second half of the 80's, what one might call a tendency towards a private vision. The concern to define their poetic Greekness was certainly not the rule among Greek poets. Nonetheless, even in those who created exclusively out of their personal imagery, one can trace some sort of participation in the common lot. (For example: *The Carnival*, by Miltos Sahtouris, where in his surrealistic poetic idiom he gives, in reality, a deeply stirring description of the nightmarish atmosphere of Athens during the German occupation). A very different air is blowing in the 80's and 90's.

“As if my soul was something utterly personal / and my insistent silence words / that showed a passion / always simply uttered and always / so sweetly dumb” writes George Blamas, a very young poet. The shattering of all frontiers and ideologies, the awakening of old, forgotten voices of anger and fanaticism and the awe in front of a new millennium brought about an even further closing into themselves than is natural to poets. The “dream” seems to have made a triumphant comeback on the Greek poetic scene. The dream, though, not as an allegory for emotion but as a vehicle of “another” reality that the poet-dreamer is trying to pierce. Very recently, a book that made a considerable impression is *At a Scale*<sup>3</sup> by Dionysis Kapsalis, poems dealing with Jacob, when one afternoon he fell asleep on the grass. On the screen of his dreams, the images that appear “resemble perhaps the scenes one sees, when, at the point of dying, events and faces of his past life, parade in front of him at a dazzling speed”. Incidentally, it is interesting to note the recent publication of an album containing the *real* dreams of 30 Greek poets and writers, each one illustrated by a Greek painter.

The second element that characterizes, in my view, Greek poetry today, is a concern for structure. This tendency is expressed either in a quest for a strict poetic form (*At a Scale* consists of 30 strophes with an 11-syllable iambic line and a rhyme abacc) or for a theoretical framework, within which the whole purpose and function of poetry is being re-evaluated. “As life becomes more and more horrific / poetry cannot rely / on the instantaneous conceptions of the mind / or after a cure / invented by articulate invalids”, writes Haris Vlavianos, one of the outstanding poets of the 80's. And elsewhere: “Each one of us cashes in his end / with the words he spreads around him. / In poetry nothing is real / except the exaggeration of the self”; He also declares: “Those who disagree with the way I write / have never risked anything”.<sup>4</sup> To this Elytis replies: “Today beauty is considered as something simplistic and they react in a negative way to what I say. They think that these are the words of an unsuspecting man ... They don't realise how sacred senses are!”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps they do, but from another angle.

In fact, still another tendency is apparent in Greek poetry today. It is a desire to recapture the embryonic state of being; the poet freshly created recreates the world afresh, returning by doing so to the archetypal meaning of the word poet: i.e. “to create”, in Greek *ποιώ*. “Without a voice and in the echo you learn how birds sigh, how entrails are stirred”, writes Thanassis Hatzopoulos, one of

the finest young poets writing today. His language equally gives the impression of having been just taken out of the cauldron of the human word. "I will return to my body when earth's breath will have completely assimilated it, so that I, travelling I, can breathe from everywhere the blackness of the world, that in the dust stars detect".<sup>6</sup>

I have left women's poetry last not because it is negligible; the opposite is true, and it has been stressed by the critics so often that I don't have to defend it here. The reason is that I see it moving in a distinctly different direction. It seems that women poets are increasingly concerned with the examination and analysis of the tool of the poet, i.e. language. One could maintain that this is a general phenomenon, the difference being that women do this from within. Women place themselves at the core of this complex mechanism and ask themselves the archetypal questions of expression. What is the relation between language and feeling, or thought and emotion? Where does the experience start to formulate itself in terms of language? At the beginning was silence: "I respect silence; it comes from the cosmos" says Athina Papadaki<sup>7</sup>. And Maria Kyrtzaki:<sup>8</sup> "Ariadne really existed. / First appeared this ball of words. Nothing else pre-existed. Poor words gathered together / they appear wanting and abandoned / words slaves rolling and dragging behind / their children-threads / remnants of stones that once were, / had been precious / rolling and pushing carriages of meaning".

This search for the origin of expression could be seen also as a process of questioning the structure of the world as a man-created construction. Paraphrasing Genesis, Maria Kyrtzaki sees man as an ark of loneliness. Upon his death he has to give back to God the loneliness from which he was made. This is why, deep inside him, he is always turned toward the nothingness he was created from. A woman is turned toward man whereof she stems, like profiles looking in opposite directions. This communication becomes a pure abstraction. "I am at awe in front of the full stop / The next muttered word / requires my most grieving soul / So much so, that I pursue defeat" writes Athina Papadaki and adds: "Little that I care about my verses' long life! It is enough that thanks to them I have survived". Greeks may very well owe their survival as an identity, as a race, as a language, to poetry. "In me shines what I ignore. And yet it shines" (Elytis).

Athens, February 1992

### **Epimetron**

"And now, what is to become of us without barbarians? These barbarians were a kind of solution...".

These lines by Cavafy, used, abused and, by now, overused, come to mind when one tries to fathom Modern Greek poetry today, at the dawn of the 21st century. Cavafy's Barbarians were always subject to interpretation, according to personal ideological needs. I, for my part, see them as the "enemy", the "opposition", even the wound, i.e. something that gives birth to vision. Indeed, there

must be an adversary element in the life of a poet (historical circumstances, unbearable surroundings, an aching body, an unacceptable pattern of life offered by the parents, etc.), something to which his deepest self is utterly opposed. A world that doesn't agree with him or a self that doesn't agree with the world, eventually becomes a punch in the stomach, more or less violent, constant or subdued, but always there.

In other words, you have to be in opposition to something, "in court" against your own conscience, or the conscience of the world, in order to create. In an idyllic, harmonious, a perfectly peaceful universe, what is the point of developing a vision of another reality, even more perfect, even more satisfying—possibly even more boring—than this one?

I am well aware that these generalisations are not only dangerous, by definition, but also may not concern the poetry written in Greece today. And yet ...

An awful lot has been written about the death of the communist ideal. I, personally, don't understand how this ideal died, since inequality never reigned so overwhelmingly on our planet! On the other hand, Greece has paid the tragically high price of a civil war for it and we all know that there is no greater curse than that for the history of a nation. But, Greece, also, saw some of its finest poetry coming out of this disaster. Far from opting for war, horror and death, I am talking here about an essential attitude of the soul which is capable, hopes, even desires to have some say in what concerns this world's good and future.

This attitude is close to the essence of poetry as well as is another powerful vision-producer: religion. To my mind, though, the Greek soul, in spite of picturesque recent events, is not naturally inclined to draw inspiration from religion, unless we refer to nature adoration, an awe in front of the unfathomable energy and beauty of this world, not to mention a philosophical capacity to contemplate its loss.

Recently, even love, this universal, this great instigator of poetry, seems to be canalized in extremely precise norms of expectation and behaviour. What is left then?

Everything that is happening around us points only to one direction: return to the cell of the self. There, language is the host and the guest of honour, the lover and the loved one, "god non god and its opposite" (Seferis) as well as the visionary of a timeless future.

But hasn't language always been the cornerstone, the roof and the walls of the edifice of poetry? It may well be so, now, though we are driven to a situation where this truth becomes even more evident, because it shines alone. "I will pay off with gilded words / The bars of dark that I consistently store away / In the treasures of the chest" says Antonis Fostieris in a recent poem.<sup>9</sup> Not to mention, of course, Kiki Dimoula who, with every new collection of poetry, plays more and more frenetically with language as if she wanted to underline, again and again, the obsessive loneliness of the center. Yes, I think this is more than ever the kernel of modern Greek poetry today—and not only of modern Greek poetry—loneliness. A loneliness that is not only physical—alone in a room, a



natural state for a poet—but also metaphysical. No more revolutionary ideas and ideals, no more glorifying the immortal beauty of the Aegean, no more baptising ancient heroes in contemporary sorrow, like Seferis did. Not even the bitterness of defeat, since there is no defeat without a battle. We now have the poetry of discontent, a discontent that never rises to the point of opposition, never steps so low as total despair or self-destruction. “It was an Everyday day / From the black gardens as usual, / It came among us at dawn / hurriedly made its way / Through the garbage of sorrow / And dragged itself hastily to the fountain / To drowsiness, obeisance, humiliation”, writes Dimitra Christodoulou in her latest collection of poems.<sup>10</sup>

But, I think, that one should not overlook the fact that this exclusive encounter with the self has led to a refinement of poetry; to subtlety, to the art of combining the purity of a poetic image with the authenticity of a feeling running the risk of even sounding slightly commonplace. As for the future, it is always open to suggestions. This poetic as well as historical fact will never change.

Thessaloniki, September 2000

### Notes

1. A rock in the Aegean Sea. Also a play with the word *exo*=out, outside. Could it possibly be translated as *exit-stone*?
2. Vyron Leondaris, *Reconnection, Poems*, 1962.
3. Dionysis Kapsalis, *Υπό κλίμακα*, Athens: Agra. In Greek the word κλίμαξ means both scale and ladder.
4. Haris Vlavianos, *The Nostalgia of the Skies, Poems*, Editions: Nefeli.
5. From an interview in the newspaper *Ta Néa*, 3 Nov. 1990.
6. Thanassis Hatzopoulos, *From the Beginning of Dew, Poems*, Editions: Kastaniotis, 1991.
7. Athina Papadaki, *The Vigilant of the Skies, Poems*, Editions: Kastaniotis.
8. Maria Kyrtzaki, *Split Way, Poems*, Editions: Ipsilon, 1992.
9. Antonis Fostieris, *The D and the A of Death*, Editions: Kastaniotis, 1987.
10. Dimitra Christodoulou, *Burden, Poems*, Editions: Kastaniotis, 1997.