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On Becoming a Greek Poet

*...se rappeler...que Qui êtes vous? est tout à
fait une question de langue...*

—Alexandre Duchaconne

Two weeks before the end of my semester in Athens teaching in a study-abroad program, I began this account as a fiction, as if in 1960 I discussed how we had gotten to the Moon. Four months do not make a Greek poet. Yet neither do four years or decades. It's always too early for a final report, and it may be worth describing the early stages before the memory of them is lost, or suppressed as embarrassing. In the first fourteen weeks I had written eight poems in Greek which, after expert correction wherever my reach exceeded my knowledge, seemed to native speakers to make interesting sense.

Before going to Greece I listened to and dutifully parroted about half of the tapes in a language-lesson set, which got sounds into my ear and provided some set phrases—"thank you," "we want to eat now." Listening while driving, I couldn't do the accompanying exercises in reading. The first weeks in Athens seemed largely occupied with deciphering street signs, helped by the transliterations they usually carry, hindered by the absence of accent marks. Constant work with the dictionary, though, made the alphabet familiar in the special ways that concern its arbitrary order (to the mnemonic chants of age three one adds "zita, ita, thita, iota") and a letter's weight in the language. A dictionary we know well seems to fall open near the word we want; the hand learns that the section of *περι* words goes on and on, while the whole letter *ω* is a skimpy afterthought.

I was using the dictionary all the time, despite the lexicon at the back of the textbook, because along with attending the daily beginners' course I soon began transcribing poems, mostly by Yiannis Ritsos, and working out translations word by word. I was too impatient to do otherwise; all semester the urge to rush ahead and turn over every amazing stone in the Greek landscape competed with the wish to keep up with the class in that careful, tedious drill which puts a language at the tip of the tongue. (As a visiting professor I was auditing the course, and class participation counted toward the other students' grades; so my teacher rarely called on me to perform.) Drill generally lost; it was soon clear that

I would read and write Greek, however slowly and clumsily, better than I could speak or hear it.

On the other hand, as other poets and musicians sometimes report, people complimented me on my lack of accent in the few sentences I could throw together fast enough to speak them. A professional listener to language develops that kind of ear. The penalty was entering conversations and being faced with a barrage I couldn't begin to understand, baffling my interlocutor since I had at the outset palmed myself off as a speaker of Greek.

Ritsos wasn't the first object of my yen to translate, or rather to understand by translating. It was a song recorded a year earlier by Thanos Mikroutsikos (composer and pianist) and Dimitris Mitropanos (singer), with lyrics by Alkis Alkaios. On the first of our program's field trips, on the bus between sites in Crete, "Rosa" came on the radio and one of our archaeologist guides—an American who has lived long in Greece—dove for the dial and turned it well up. He and our other guide, a young Greek woman, sang along with vigor and shining eyes; I hadn't seen such an anthem phenomenon since "Hey Jude" was released. When the song ended our Greek guide glossed the words for me, adding that this song was not like others but "really poetry": "How necessity becomes history / How history becomes silence . . ."

Later that day I went out into the old city of Chania intent on finding the CD. I can't remember ever planning a serendipity which then occurred. I was both astonished and not surprised when the last shop I had time to check displayed it prominently. Just punctual marketing, I suppose, though one writer after another attests that this kind of thing happens in Greece.

The CD is called *στον αιώνα την παράγκα*: "In the Shack of the Century" or "In the Hut of the Age" (inverting Ron Silliman's *The Age of Huts*). The enclosed booklet gives the songs' lyrics, which I would not have been able to pick out by ear accurately enough to look up the words. Word-boundary—one of the last marks to be added to written language—is a major obstacle for the student listening to native speech. Back in Athens I copied the song with triple spacing and began looking up the eighty or ninety per cent of words I didn't know. I may have been recalling Ernest Fenollosa's method when he studied Chinese poetry in Japan, glossing each of a line's characters and below that writing the whole gist.

"Rosa" is an anthem indeed; the words about necessity and history and silence come in the midst of a plaint of love:

My lips dead-wood dry and thirsty
Seek in the asphalt water...
An insect's voice now is my voice
A climbing plant my life...

Why do you look at me, Rosa, grown numb?...
I sleep by your side, starving.

The juxtaposition of broader political or existential doubts lifts "Rosa" above conventional love lyric. The song appeals immediately to listeners who can understand it immediately, like the guides on the bus; for me, though, having to scrutinize it syllable by syllable brought out particular wonders.

The song is in iambic pentameter, which told me a great deal. I hadn't even been sure that modern Greek meters were accentual-syllabic like those of English, rather than the ancient quantitative measure. In English, the pentameter dominates metrical poetry but is rare in modern songs; less "literary" meters—tetrameter, heptameter—are more frequent. The rift between song and poetry seems to have grown wider in English than in Greek. The pentameters in "Rosa" are quite regular (two anapests, one headless line, a few trochaic inversions and spondees), and this too is rare in popular songs in English. Two aspects of this regular meter, however, stand out for an English reader: extra-syllable endings ("feminine lines") are very common; and the regularity often depends on elision of adjacent vowels.

Both facts reflect the nature of Greek. Greek words are long, because of the thoroughly inflected grammar and a tendency toward compounds. Peter Mackridge, in *The Modern Greek Language*—to which I clung for technical help beyond the textbook's reach—declares that Greek contains *no* adjectives of one syllable, and (aside from unassimilated borrowings like μπαρ, "bar") exactly four monosyllabic nouns: το φως, ο νους, ο γιος, η γη, the words for *light, mind, son* and *earth*. (A vestigial fifth is the version of *health* used in greetings; and παν, "all," can be used as a noun.) Even pronouns and prepositions are often two or three syllables long. "Words of up to eight or nine syllables are not infrequent," Mackridge notes. Since many declined and conjugated endings finish with unstressed syllables (hence the extra-syllable endings of lines), and many words begin with vowels—vowels seem more prevalent overall than in English—opportunities for elision abound; and there's hardly any other way to compress comprehensible Greek into iambic pentameters, without enjambling the lines beyond all hope of coherence.

So I noted with particular delight the fourth line of "Rosa." It follows lines of five, four, and five words (indicating in fact that those words are unusually short, in keeping with the determinedly fundamental tone of the song's language); but this line begins with a splendid run of monosyllables:

Και συ μου λες μας περιμένει μπόρα
(Ke si mou les mas perimeni bora)

And you tell me there awaits us a rainstorm

The effect is entirely different from English, where such sequences may remind us of Pope's disdain: "And ten low words oft creep in one dull line." In Greek, the sudden breaking-through of single syllables yields a paradoxical effect of compression; we sense how much is packed into each: "And" (despite the asphalt and its traffic), "you" (not yet mentioned except in the title that says she will be the song's focus), "me" (the singer whose lips are dry), "tell" (a rare monosyllabic verb, in the intimate second-person singular), "us" (the object of a verb we have not yet heard, and a claim that "you" and "me" may be conjoined), περιμένει μπόρα: a refreshing shower awaits us.

Within a few days of encountering "Rosa"—a few weeks into my stay—I began translating Ritsos in much the same way. I started almost at random, since I could barely decipher the titles of his books in the store, with a poem called Πάντα ("Always" or possibly "Everything"); I picked a second because I understood its title: Λίγο-λίγο, "Little by Little." (Greek has dozens of reduplicated adverbs, which strike an American ear with a weird kind of childish stateliness.) I handed the translations to my Greek teacher, who corrected my howlers and filled in the half-dozen gaps where grammatical ignorance had made me unable to reason my way back to a form I could look up. (What kind of relation to language makes one *reason out* the root and derivation of a word? No normal speaker's, certainly. Just as it is the beginning student's relation, I was to realize that it's also a certain kind of poet's.)

These were tiringly long poems for a beginner, and I soon seized on a book by Ritsos which I found in a small shop filled mostly with school supplies. Πάροδος is a remarkable work, a volume of 117 short poems whose first drafts Ritsos produced in 74 days—often three, sometimes four, once five in a day—near the end of his internal political exile on Samos and then in Athens, in late 1971 and early 1972. The title means "byway" or "sidestreet," but also "passage" or "lapse" of time and, in Ancient Greek drama, the first entry of the Chorus; and there's a formal expression that includes the word and means "incidentally" or "in passing." The poems are moderately Surrealist ("The other old woman in the cupboard. The eggshell / in the jewelbox. With the big hammer / break the mirror into pieces and pieces, / a fine dust for the toilet bowl, / for the cutlery, for the dreams."). As such, they tend to emphasize nouns—the focus of surprise is the juxtaposition of things, not the rhetorical turns of voice—and make single, comprehensible gestures. This commends them as objects of translation by someone totally dependent on the dictionary, since it minimizes their grammatical complexities. (They remind me enough of poems by Russell Edson

to raise the question of whether that splendid eccentric of American poetry has read Ritsos avidly.)

In the next nine weeks I worked through the first two dozen poems from Πάροδος. Aside from the tiny window this gave me on modern Greek poetry (which I knew previously only from translations of Ritsos, Seferis, Kavafy, and Elytis—the others all turning out to be very hard Greek for the beginner, with dialect words, neologistic compounds, and syntax highly compressed for metrical and other reasons), the poems' running commentary on my learning of Greek provided me with a peculiar vocabulary. Among the thousand or so Greek words I more or less know, I can include "barbed wire" (συρματόπλεγμα) and "sewing machine" (ραπτομηχανής), but not the words for "elbow," "trust," or "bowl." As a poet, this gives me odd shivers. What idea of English, or of American life, would some unlikely eager student glean from my poems? "Discontinued parts for Chevrolets"? (Is this English at all?) "not a chance / this noctilucous afternoon / to put any best light on it"?

Is this English at all? Naturally one effect of studying Greek for hours each day was a stream of subliminal messages about the strangeness of English. Steven Wright, that linguistic connoisseur masquerading as a comedian, has wondered why we drive on a parkway and park in a driveway; but only from a still more foreign perspective does it become apparent how truly bizarre is "The more the merrier," or "Prices are sagging," or "on fire / the sly / holiday / the cheap"; or this dialogue:

John Hawkes (in a long speech of welcome): "...and how delighted we are that they have honored us with their presence—"

Franny Levine (from the back of the crowd, being welcomed):
"But we didn't *bring* any presents!"

Greek is a smaller language than English, of course—no language approaches English for sheer size, with almost a million words, and Greek has something less than a thirtieth as many native speakers cobbling it together—yet a largish language for all that, and for some of the same reasons. Just as English, the bastard child of early German and all the Latin and Greek roots of Norman French, offers uncountable doublets (Walter Scott's famous citation of "mutton" versus "sheep" and "beef" versus "cow"—the language and focus of conquering consumer versus indigenous employee—barely nicks the surface, as "doctor," "physician," "quack," "healer" and "sawbones" suggest), so Greek—the language of a place that practically everyone in the ancient, interregal, medieval, renaissance, and modern worlds has colonized, ruled, exported population towards, or visited, who hasn't simply lived there—exhibits its influences.

Aside from loan-words, revivals, and dialectal variations, the vocabulary has responded to the peculiar historical fact that the rest of the world derived a scientific and technical lexicon from Greek while Greece remained a rural backwater. (I'm indebted to Mackridge for examples, though everyone who notices the moving vans in Athens with their sides proclaiming "Metaphora" glimpses a related phenomenon.) Greek had kept using κυβερνητικός for "governmental"; when it needed to retranslate "cybernetic" it had to add the new meaning to the existing word. "Stochastic" is "difficult, if not impossible, to translate"; the Greek means "judicious." On the other hand, the concerted effort of the nineteenth-century intellectuals who revived Greek as a modern language created—"an achievement for which they have received scant acknowledgment in recent times"—ingenious neologisms such as ποδήλατο ("foot" plus "drive") for the Ancient-Greek-and-Latin *bi-cycle*.

One thinks of the massive effort required to resurrect Hebrew as the language of modern Israel—and, on the other hand, of the Vatican office whose task is to forge Latin equivalents for "disarmament" and "weekend." Greek is a language with a conspicuous history, and it is a history of subjugation and renaissance. No wonder Greeks love it with a half-conscious passion, far more passion than I encounter in most native speakers of English. In a bookstore in Athens, handing the women at the sales-desk the poetry I meant to buy, and responding to their incomprehensible queries with a stumbling Συγγνώμη, μαθαίνω Ελληνικά ("Pardon, I am learning Greek," since I didn't yet know how to say "trying" or "slowly"), I was told in careful English, "We are glad you are reading this, to learn the right language, not the ugly thing we speak in the streets." I could hardly say, or they couldn't believe, how fascinating I found what I heard in the streets.

The language on the streets in Greek cities isn't the rolling and booming diapason that Ezra Pound so loved. Two thousand years have changed its sound. The number of phonetic vowels declined to five while the alphabet stayed the same, so that there are six different ways to spell the sound "ee." (Spelling an unfamiliar word, such as a name, seems almost as difficult for a Greek as for a foreign learner.) But the vowels are remarkably pure, and must be so in order to distinguish words. (The verbs "clean," καθαρίζω, and "appoint" or "determine," καθορίζω, differ by one unstressed 'a' and 'o'; every syllable has to be enunciated clearly enough so that a physicist doesn't clean the speed of light nor the laundry appoint our clothes. Αφόρετος and αφόρητος—"new" and "intolerable"—are even closer in sound.) Though I've heard conversations between young Greek males consisting entirely of έλα and μαλάκα ("come on" and "masturbator"), the length and historical resonance of many words makes ordinary conversation sound extraordinarily learned and reasonable, no matter what the tone. The

rhythm, as I learned from "Rosa," is not the old quantitative one in which a long vowel took roughly twice the time of a short one, but a more evenly paced quickstep of stressed and slack syllables. And it is a language in which intonation is even more important than in English; only intonation distinguishes yes/no questions from statements, and the ubiquitous exclamation Πω, πω! (which a dictionary glosses as "golly! gosh! my!") can express anything from awe through compassion to doubt and contempt.

A day after I began on Ritsos, I wrote my first poem in Greek. This is importantly untrue; that day during a visit to Spetses I wrote the poem that would become my first in Greek:

Island

If we have a harbor
if we have rooms for rent nearby
if paintings hang on the walls of the rooms
if they are paintings of harbors
why should they be paintings of harbors
other than ours?

In another place
we have heard them ask why
paintings on the walls of rooms should be of
where they are when they are
there already; they were
a tall people lean with running
for the sake of it.
When we finished what we went for we came back.

The point of view is notably Greek; the poem counts as a dramatic monologue, since I've never lived on an island. One might take this as evidence that the spiritual precedes the linguistic, or more generally that life persists in preceding art. What interests me more in retrospect is that exactly the same date *is* written at the top of the first Greek draft of the poem. Traveling, I probably had with me only the textbook and a tiny pocket lexicon, not the two-volume Oxford dictionary; and while this partly accounts for the clumsiness of the translation, in retrospect it makes the fervency of the effort even harder to understand. It was as if I had taken to heart the message offered by the point of view, in a way I wouldn't have done in English. If I write a poem from the perspective of a woman,

I don't yearn toward a sex-change operation; if I write an imaginary elegy, my grief is mostly confined to the poem, or comes from elsewhere and remains mine.

I struggled with Νησί for well over a week, with some help both from my teacher and from my friend the Greek guide on the Crete tour. (The help was generous, but sporadic from the point of view of someone trying hour by hour to get a poem right.) The difficulties were enormous and trivial. The English turned out to be more complex than I realized, despite the fact that I had developed a style—emphasizing short words and common syntax as prophylactics against a tendency toward the baroque—which studiously masked this complexity. I was fascinated, for instance, by the gradual transformation of the repetitive first lines. The rhetoric of the passage demanded repetition and recombination, but in Greek different words wanted to be repeated and recombined; literally: "If we have a harbor / if we have rooms nearby / if on their walls hang paintings / if the paintings show harbors / why would they show another harbor / than ours?"

The differences between this literal rendition and the English may seem minute; to someone fluent in Greek they would just signify the different contours of two languages' ways to get the same thing said. But my experience was far slower, and so more particular, than any translator's or bilingual speaker's. Each word had to be chosen with great, stupid labor; every divergence from the original represented a painfully ignorant decision. A few detailed examples should indicate my bewilderment.

The textbook showed two ways to handle verbs in conditional sentences: "If" plus the subjunctive followed by the future ("If it doesn't rain we'll go to Aigina"); or "If" plus the imperfect followed by the conditional, which can mean either "If I knew him I would help him" or "If I had known him I would have helped him." Neither formula suited the indefinite, timeless reference of the poem's opening. When I turned to Mackridge, he provided a bouquet of a dozen combinations of tense and aspect in the two verbs, an embarrassment of riches. The "literal" version of the Greek first line looks identical to the English—the difference is vanishingly small—but this is merely the result of my translating it in both directions.

"For rent" had to drop out of the second line because the five-syllable word made the line too long for this early stage in the house-that-Jack-built construction. Similarly, "on the walls of the rooms" had to become "on their walls" because the genitive phrase, expanding the third line from ten to fourteen syllables, made the repetition of "rooms" too glaring. So the sequence which in English proceeds by fractional increments, in Greek instead resembles a chain, less circular and more purposive. In English the language is that of someone drowsily working out a puzzle; in Greek, the speaker is more nearly presenting a

case. This changes the sense of address, and so the tone of the poem's beginning and the direction of the whole poem.

In the second stanza, "why / paintings on the walls of rooms should be of / where they are when they are / there already," which in English sounds like a patient explanation to a backward child, won't translate into any equivalent oversimplicity in Greek. A painting can't "be of" something; "show" is the closest. As for "where they are when they are," a direct rendition into Greek is, as my teacher firmly pointed out, simply not Greek. The first "are" would be replaced by a word meaning "are found" or "lie" ("Corinth lies on the coast"), and the second becomes a subjunctive, "were."

Late in the poem, "lean with running / for the sake of it" grew more and more strange as I hunted for Greek equivalents; "sake" is a deceptively simple English word. One of my advisors suggested "from the running / for the same running," which the other didn't like at all, recommending instead "from the running / and for the running." I settled on "lean from / the running, for the running." All these alternatives replace the elliptical compression of the English (in "for the sake of it," is the antecedent of "it" the leanness or the running?) with an almost Euclidean decisiveness.

Most strikingly, the pronoun in the second and third stanzas shifted from "we" to "I." From the point of view of English—though as I said the poem seemed to adopt a Greek point of view—the speakers were a group; for the Greek, apparently, it's one member of the community who visited the land of the tall runners. This isn't a change I thought about at the time; apparently it happened automatically in writing the Greek poem.

From one perspective all this fiddling is insignificant, merely the floundering of any new student of a language. But the result was that I found myself writing and recognizing a different poem in Greek from the one I had written in English. This experience seems to have shifted the focus of my ambition. Rather than trying to translate my poems into Greek, I began wanting to write Greek poems. My second, like the first, began (before "Island") as notes in English; but when I returned to them, I switched immediately to Greek, long before the poem's end was in view. The transformation may have been helped by the title—"Foreign City," which went directly into Greek as Ξένη πόλη—to whose irony with regard to my linguistic situation I may have been attuned by "Island"/Νησί.

The question arises, of course, whether all of my Greek poems have in fact been translations, phrase by phrase. Surely I wasn't "thinking in Greek," but searching out Greek versions of English words—perhaps before writing down any English, but hardly without using it as a steppingstone. Yet my own experience of the poems diverges from the language-learning paradigm this suggests, because

my relation to *any* language while writing a poem is not one in which "fluency" has particular merit. A line may begin from a pre-verbal image or idea, in which case its linguistic embodiment is a noticeably later stage, no matter what the language. The opening of Ο Ραφτης μεθυσμένος ("The Drunken Tailor")—

Τα πράγματα πρώτα είναι πράσινα, / έπειτα μαύρα
 (Ta pragmata prota ine prasina, / epita mavra)
 Things first are green, / afterwards black

—arose from an image of all-encompassing washes of color; coming into Greek it took advantage of alliterations and rhythms the language offered; no English intermediary contributed much, as my rough drafts confirm. Or a line may grow directly from a rhythmic tune or a verbal sound, and then it does begin in Greek. Thus in Ξένη πόλη a line about the sidewalks' "strange hospitality" started with my noticing the chime between the words παράξενη ξενία (parakseni ksenia), and of both with the title (Kseni poli). (I'll return to this phrase, with a twist, later.) Similarly, in another poem, having come across those four monosyllabic nouns I simply had to work them into a sentence: the bells declare "that the light, / the mind, the son, the earth, little by little / fades, and we can do / nothing"—

πως το φως,
 ο νους, ο γιος, η γη, σιγά-σιγά
 σβήνει, και δε μπορούμε να κάνουμε
 τίποτε
 (pos to fos, / o nous, o yos, i yi, siga-siga /
 svini, ke dhe boroume na kanoume / tipote)

Later in the same poem, one pentameter arose from two purely Greek discoveries: that there's a lovely idiom for "disappear into thin air" which means "become smoke"; and that (as I learned through Ritsos) πάντα can mean either "always" or "everything." The line points this out by repeating the word, so that it looks at first like one of the reduplicated adverbs (the reader knows which is which because in the "everything" sense it's preceded by an article):

μα τα πάντα πάντα γίνονται καπνός
 (ma ta panda panda yinonde kapnos)
 but everything always turns to smoke

This is also to say that my way of writing poems in Greek rather closely resembles my way of writing them in English: long toying with alternatives of sound and sense and register, obsessive hours over the dictionary, and so on. It isn't even clear that the process is much slower in Greek; eight poems in ten weeks are more than I would normally have written in English.

Nor are they the same poems I would have written. For one thing, almost half of them are metrical. In English, though I've always written both metrical and nonmetrical ("free verse") poems, in recent years I have mostly kept away from meter, or at least from conventional meters, partly because they had come to seem too numbingly easy. But the same reasoning dictated that I should try to make my feeble Greek perform the same school figures I'd abandoned in English.

Yet this was more than "the fascination of what's difficult," in Yeats's phrase, more than the puzzle appeal of palindromes or double acrostics. The task of squeezing sensible Greek into iambic pentameters, and tetrameters, entails still more careful scrutiny of the language than the attempt to make (as Auden says) "memorable speech." Phonetic and etymological details determine whether the attempt succeeds or not—is this pair of adjacent vowels heard as one syllable or two? the answer may depend on whether the word is ancient or recent—and attending to these things sharpens one's ear for a language. The need for a word of a certain rhythm and length incites further searches for synonyms, and so an additional increment of vocabulary. More generally, trying to write in meter begins to make clearer the rhythms of a nation's speech, not because the meter simply embodies them but because the quarrel between the two emphasizes the essential character of both.

One of the metrical poems takes its title from the "dream-books" common in Greece: lists of things with thoroughly pre-Freudian interpretations for dreams that contain them. (Ονειροκρίτης means "dream judge.") The prose of the books is stilted and formal, but highly formulaic, so that though reading them is hard at first it quickly becomes much easier. The poem takes notice of the formulas ("If you see that...", "If you dream...", "You will confront...", "It will be a foretelling..."), and may have begun from my realizing that the last of these is itself a one-word iambic tetrameter: θα αντιμετωπίσετε (tha andimetopisete). Naturally the dreams and interpretations in the poem are stranger than in the books, which are largely concerned with young women's desires for marriage. This prose rendition is deliberately distorted to indicate some of Greek's rich options of word-order:

If you see that there lies in your hand the heart of your father, and that it beats: success in work. If you dream ants, you will confront the walls, unscalable, of your tomb. Do not fear. If you see that the number they have erased from your house with razor-blades, and written a new address

there, it will be a foretelling that you will travel to Hades; you will meet a person who used to hate you. If that you are dreaming indeed you dream, the second dream will turn out more true than your life. In your sleep if you walk on the street strewn with diamonds, yet you cannot pick them up: in the morning surely you will die. And you must wake up. Or enter the third dream now with open hands.

Whatever else this may be, it's clearly not a poem I could have written in my own voice, or my own language.

So these poems are different from mine in English, also, in what they say. One dubious reason is that Greek represents an escape from what Walter Jackson Bate calls "the burden of the past on the English poet." Over many years one writes poems more and more in the context of other poems, including one's own, but especially all the poems new and old that one reads. At least after some initial period of apprenticeship, if that ever ends, it's not so much that the great dead daunt the poet in the act of trying to make something new; rather, they and the daily speech of people and radio and newspapers have combined to make a huge, articulate beast called English that always bends over one's shoulder at the desk.

In evading this presence, there's something of the cliché of the Englishman with the French lover with whom he can talk simply about things he would shy away from saying at home. My poems in Greek deal with topics (such as my father's death) that hadn't much found their way into poems in English. Their language is generally more direct and clear. This is due partly to my pathetic vocabulary, but also to my having as a model, half by default, Ritsos's bitter, blunt, and gruffly witty language.

When a capital *rho* can still strike the eye as a P, Ροδοδάχτυλος έως can register for a moment as "the foot-fingered dawn." Writing poems in such a constantly interrupted way, sometimes character by character, clearly argues for poetry as construction—a "machine made of words," as Williams has it—rather than as spontaneous expression. Can the poet really *mean* what he can barely *read*? The poems scorn the sorry conviction that what's thought-out can't be heart-felt. Nearly the opposite. It may have been just the mind-dominating difficulty of Greek that allowed topics and opinions to issue without my having the available attention to suppress them; several times I had the experience of noticing what I'd written with surprise and even alarm—just as I sometimes knew what word to look up next without knowing how I knew.

Of course the linguistic escape is temporary, my work on Ritsos an opening wedge. Part of the absurdity of the whole project is that poems can't be made in a vacuum. Until I've read more or less the rest of Greek poetry, how can I

know whether a play on words is novel or tired? My effort and ingenuity in discovering it may be the same in either case, but the response of a reader will be utterly different; the familiar joke will annoy, or escape notice, and so change the pace of the poem. In speech, immediate feedback tunes our ability to sense this; when I tried my first Greek pun, referring to a cranky copy machine as χαρτοφάγος ("paper-eater"—"vegetarian" is χορτοφάγος), and my interlocutor laughed, I knew I'd succeeded. As I learn more about Greek poetry, and about Greek speech, this language too must acquire some of the ponderousness of English.

Yet there are objective differences between the two languages in this regard. If Greek is far older than English, it's also far newer. So-called Standard Modern Greek dates, in one sense, from 1976. A battle had raged for a century and a half between puristic revivals of the ancient language—the modern version, called *katharevousa* or "cleansed," was a nostalgic favorite of right-wing governments, but is also fondly remembered by some intellectuals—and the desire, urged first by poets and felt last by lawyers, to use the *dimotiki* that had developed slowly and naturally in the countryside throughout the centuries of Byzantine, Venetian, and Turkish rule. When the regime of the colonels was overthrown in 1974, *katharevousa* was abandoned for good, not only in literature but in education and most of the daily press; the hundred-and-fifty-year-old "language question" was settled. Some form of the demotic (though not exactly what the purists of the demotic wanted) is the Greek that's here to stay. Not until 1982 did the ancient system of diacritical marks—rough and smooth breathings and three different accents, distinctions with no surviving phonetic function—give way to the monotonic system (a single acute accent on each polysyllable). This is a boon not only to the foreign learner but to Greek children; as Mackridge reports, "it had been estimated that out of the 12,000 hours which the average child spent on grammar during twelve years' schooling, 3,000 were spent on learning how to use the accents and breathings."

Yet most of the people I know in Greece were educated under the pre-monotonic system, and for them the old marks are still a fact of the language, their presence or absence in a printed text significant at least of vintage if not of social or political register. Many were brought up learning three different versions of their language: demotic, purist, and Ancient Greek. The written and spoken language has for them not only an immediately felt historical weight but a political vividness as well. Greek is Greek because it's not Turkish, or French, or *katharevousa*. Poetry has had a central role in the politics, leading the struggle in the arena of language.

For Americans English has almost none of this urgency, or not in the same way. Recent hysterical moves to ban (mostly) Spanish from official transactions by

declaring English "the national language" represent a reactionary effort to preserve the status quo, not a declaration of independence. Even early in American history, we never much felt the desire, so common in the rest of the world, to establish national identity through language (though I vaguely recall that one of the Founding Fathers proposed that we do so by adopting, of all things, Ancient Greek). Noah Webster's campaign to distinguish and modernize our spelling—"harbor" rather than "harbour"—was a tepid and petulant move compared with the wars, civil and otherwise, that Greeks have very recently waged in language in parallel with armed conflict.

This strident history inconveniences the foreign student in at least one major way: it has left Greek lexicography in a state of chaos. As far as I can learn there is no comprehensive, authoritative dictionary of Modern Greek—certainly nothing remotely comparable to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. More to the point for the beginner, the bilingual dictionaries are full of difficulties, to put it politely. The best may still be the *Oxford Greek-English / English-Greek Learner's Dictionary*—both volumes obviously meant for the Greek student, not the English or American. Aside from the limitations implied by *Learner's* in the title, it quickly emerges that the *Oxford's* two volumes not only differ with other dictionaries (and with my textbook, and with Mackridge), but disagree with each other on details of spelling and diction. (Stavropoulos is the Greek author of both; their different dates explain the disparity.) The *Greek-English* (1987) renders "still-life" as νεκρή φύση, but the *English-Greek* (1977) gives νεκρή φύσις, which is archaic and a remnant of *katharevousa*. While the *Greek-English* translates Τι έγινε μετά as "what happened next," the *English-Greek*, offering Τι συνέβη μετά for the same phrase, in its entry for "happen" doesn't even mention γίνομαι, the demotic and common word. The careful user, constantly double-checking one volume against the other, experiences a continuous cognitive dissonance.

But Greek speakers in Athens and Thessaloniki also disagree, not only in accent but on the conjugation of verbs. My mentors repeatedly differed with each other and with all my dictionaries on word-choice. And it's understandable that the dictionaries omit many of the dialect and demotic words in which Greek literature delights. Even after settlement of "the language question," the vocabulary is in flux.

At times all this liveliness invites despair. I mentioned earlier my gleeful discovery of the phrase "strange hospitality," παράξενη ξενία. Only at the end of my stay did I learn that ξενία—a word offered not by the older *Oxford English-Greek* but by the apparently more reliable *Greek-English*—registers on the contemporary educated Athenian ear as blank nonsense. The current word for "hospitality" is φιλοξενία, which is a perspicuous compound of the old word and

a prefix meaning "love of"; yet much of the poem grew out of the original phrase, and at least needs to be rethought.

Yet chaos is a lively state. In describing the difficulties, I've also been piecing together some answers to the obvious question: Why am I doing this? A poet had surely better be an *amateur* of language, and a new language is a perversely simple way of renewing that condition. One summary of much I have said is that after a certain point the poet may have difficulty making the language sufficiently other, sufficiently *out there*, to serve as a medium; to be susceptible to manipulation beyond mere expression; to provide a place to put things; to become bigger than oneself. Writing in Greek is an admittedly baroque solution. At this dawn stage of my acquaintance, I can still say where I learned almost every word I know: ανάμεσα ("among") from Ritsos; πλευρό, ("rib" or "side") from "Rosa"; χορτάτος ("full") from a waitress; ενδιαφέρονται ("to be interested") from the textbook but ενοχή ("guilt" or "contract") from the *Oxford* dictionary; μονομερής ("one-sided") from our guide in Crete; and so on for hundreds of others.

There's also a great deal to love in the particular language of Greece. The elaborate logic of its grammar appeals at least to someone with a compulsive streak. Some of its very limitations are refreshing. Modern Greek has no infinitive; it's impossible in Greek to name an action divorced from any agent. As everyone soon realizes, "To be or not to be" simply can't be translated. The language calls to task an actor for every motion and state of being. Again, though Greek does have a present participle, its use is narrowly constrained; it can refer only to the subject of the verb in its clause. This forecloses certain lazy habits that English encourages. Student poems may abound in free-floating participial phrases with little allegiance to person or time ("floating free / watching the clouds rolling / your hand resting in mine," etc.); but we're all guilty sometimes, as witness recent decades' landslide of poem- and book-titles on the model of *Making a Place* or "Killing the Bottle." Greek would demand to know who does the killing.

But perhaps the most intimate reason for reveling in Greek—as in Greece—is the sense of being *legitimately* a foreigner, rather than feeling alien when supposedly at home. This may be merely personal neurosis, uninteresting if not distasteful. Yet I don't seem to be unique in this condition. America is, among other things, not friendly to poetry or poets. It's less a question of hostility than of contempt. America doesn't suppress poetry, but ignores it. I'm reminded of the slight wistfulness I heard in the voices of writers in Moscow recalling the days of *samizdat*. There are many readers and writers of poetry in America; from a certain perspective the art is vigorous; but poetry, and art in general, seems peripheral to American culture, which is primarily obsessed with money, anxieties about power, and the notion of comfort embodied in the idea of a "standard of living."

Greece appears to have as much trash in its culture as most other places, and by no means all of it is American or other European trash. But when the baker next door asked what I did, and I answered that I was a poet, or that I was teaching poetry, he said, "Ah. Poetry. That is very important"; I could detect no irony in his manner. Perhaps I've been looking in the wrong places, but I cannot imagine having this conversation in America. Greece has, at least according to a study I saw cited in a magazine, a higher proportion of readers of poetry than any other country in Europe.

Then again, perhaps the feeling I'm referring to has less to do with conditions in a particular place than with the personalities of artists, or some kinds of artists; there is certainly a tradition of the artist-outsider. The situation for a poet may be additionally complicated by his or her having the artist's relation to a medium—fascination, love, exasperation—while the medium is one that everybody uses all the time, and that binds social groups together (and divides them), and that most people would rather *not* be too fascinated by, as many of us shy away from compulsive punsters.

One may by definition be at home in one's mother tongue, and being isolated from it (as I often was during a month in Moscow, but not in Athens, where most people speak at least some English) is a notoriously lonely experience. I once knew a woman whose parental languages were Finnish and Hungarian, who went to school in Switzerland and in America taught French and Italian, and was always lonely for at least two languages. Yet home isn't the only or always the best place to be, as the families of our births don't for all of us include the best or only people with whom to spend most of our time. Identity, to put it grandly, is confirmed by the familiar but shaped by the new.

It may follow that I found some pleasure in encountering the problem of my name. "Hartman" will go into Greek all right, though the *h* becomes a velar fricative and is spelled with a *X*. But *ch* is not a phoneme in Greek, and though it can be rendered by *ts*, the combination *Τσαρλς* is unpleasant to the eye and ridiculous on the tongue. I experimented with the closest semi-Greek equivalent, *Κάρλος*, by which I was known in class, but never much took to it. On the other hand, I've always been bemused by my middle name, Ossian—savoring being named after the most famous literary hoax in English, though in fact it was a German great-grandfather's name, bestowed during the European rage for the so-called *Fingal* perpetrated by James McPherson. The old Gaelic name (itself historically legitimate) slips smoothly into Greek phonology and orthography, producing the odd initials *ΩΧ*; I found myself signing poems *Ὠσσιαν Χάρτμαν*. It doesn't look or sound Greek to Greeks—nor particularly American or German or Gaelic.

That there's something childish about this I readily admit, like having a secret name in a club with one member. (I haven't addressed the question of a plausible *audience* for these poems, though as I mentioned their handful of Greek readers have been apparently more than politely intrigued.) In my twenties, reading Fowlie's translation of Rimbaud and recognizing the language that English translators of French poetry use, I realized that poems could be written directly in that peculiar version of English; I wrote several and assigned them to one Alexandre Duchaconne, a person of my invention. Eventually their style fed into the developing stream of my own, and the fantasy went into remission. Perhaps all I've been describing here is an elaborated phase of the same neurosis, in which I now feel called upon to produce, as McPherson never could, the originals.

I don't believe so. Though the problems ahead daunt me as the problems ahead would daunt any beginning poet, if not for the merciful myopia of youth, I don't see much choice about going on. During my last two weeks in Athens I wrote my ninth and tenth poems; since then, more slowly, two more. As for the ambiguous phrase "Greek poet," the habitual awkwardness of "American poet" and "English-language poetry" may be some preparation; and the enigma is no more fraught than the notion, so puzzling when one looks up from the page for a moment, of "being a poet."

Afterword

I offer no conclusion to this essay. But I would like to end by expressing my thanks and affection to a few of the many people who made my Greek journey—in all senses—so profoundly happy. The archaeologist guides I mentioned at the beginning are Iphiyenia Tournavitos and Steven Diamant; both became valued friends. My patient and generous Greek teacher was Dmitra (Mimika) Dmitra, who also co-authored the well-organized textbook. The staff of College Year in Athens, particularly Brenda Conrad, Mimika Kriga, Nadia Meliniotis and Rhea Scourta, gave me so much help with the logistics of teaching and watching over a dozen students and living in Athens, that I was able to steal unconscionable amounts of time to read and write. CYA's Director Alexis Phylactopoulos, and Kimon Giocarinis, Director of Studies, beyond the service they provided simply by running the program so conscientiously, also offered warm encouragement I could hardly have done without. For the time being, I will miss them all.