Greek Poetry in the Late Twentieth Century

Pantelis Boukalas

“Και ο ποιητής αρχοπορεί ...”
G. Seferis, “Ο βασιλιάς της Ασίνης”

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

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

Όχι
Δεν είναι το “art pour l’art”
Η αυτόνομη εκδήλωση των ποιητών και των ανθρώπων

33
Όπως ο σοσιαλιστικός ρεαλισμός που είναι απλώς πολιτική
Όπως η τέρση τάξεων προσωπικών
Δεν είναι απλά της προσωπικάς των ποιητών
Γιατί δεν είναι δινητά
Με την αφηγημένη μόνον ομορφιά
Τη με τη συμβατικής παραστάσεις
Τη με το "όπως έδειξε δεξίον" μόνον ή το "γαμό"
Να αντικαταστάσει πολλά ή να πληρώσει των ενοριακών οι ώσεις
Αριστούργημα δεν είναι λογική
Αριστούργημα δεν είναι ανθρώπινη
Το κείμενο δεν είναι ηθοποιήσις
Αριστούργημα "un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard"
Αριστούργημα σε εμπειρογνωμονικό μονόθερο αρχαι
Να γνωρίζουν η νικαι 
Αριστούργημα τον θάνατον νικά
Θέλω να ποιήσω στη διάρκεια
Απόλυτη ερωτική
Τη δεν θα υπάρξει3

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

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

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

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

The first of the poetically active generations (perhaps to confirm Vyron Leondaris’s verses: “έτιμασε ο μεσοπόλεμος σον λέον / ανίστα το μεσοπόλεμος“5) is the legendary or even fictionalised generation of the 30s, many members of which still form the “canon”. A detailed mapping is not feasible here, so I will focus on
two important names that, during the period in question, reinforced or reversed their image. Thus, Elytis, very actively present and substantially political through his art, publishes a major part of his work after 1974 (major as to its extent, diversity, importance and objectives). In particular, he publishes the following collections: Επεφώνηση [Step Brothers], Τρία ποιήματα με σημαία ενημερίας [Three Poems with a Flag of Convenience], Μαρία Νεφέλη [Maria Nefeli], Μιχάλης Ναύτιλος [Young Nautilus], Η μελετήτων ενός αθέατου Απριλίου [Diary of an Unseen April], Ιδιωτική οδός [Private Road], Αποκάλυψα και Ιδιωτικά [Public and Private], Ελεγεία της Οξώπετρας [Elegy of the Stone Outside], and posthumously Εκ του πλατών [From the Near-by].

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

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

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

The second postwar generation, now in general lines mature, powerfully controls its Karyotakian nature, deepens its elegies, technically processes its material and stands at a greater distance from the patterns of the (political, social or personal) annulment and vanity which organised its thought. Therefore, it lays
claim to a genuine share in the image of postwar literature, a far greater share than the one it managed to have, squeezed as it was among its immediate, acknowledged precursors and the “generation of provocation”—a generalising and exaggerated title for the generation of the 70s, due to the high reactionary tones of some of its members, especially those who gained fame before they turned to poetry. Thus, the contribution of the generation of the 70s to contemporary poetry has not been negligible. However, it falls short of expectations after the first, probably hasty, positive evaluations; after the initial enthusiasm, some of its members turned to fiction, others were consumed by their theoritized aggressive spontaneity, and still others chose the relative security of self-confirming repetitions. As for the generation of the 80s, my generation, already followed by its successors (notably fewer, perhaps because the seduction of fiction proved irresistible), I can say that the characterisation “generation of the private vision” does not sound convincing, perhaps because it mismatches privacy with vision.

***

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

1. The so-called politically engaged poetry is particularly popular during the first post-junta period, when the fresh anti-junta feelings play a regulatory role. However, it is later judged with severity, that is, from a literary perspective, and its demagogic hyperbole and emotional style are denounced. Its seeds are scarce, almost non-existent.

2. However, the radical receding of the politically engaged rhetoric in poetic form does not mean that political poetry is deemed unimportant. Its gaze changes direction, distances itself from the large historical complexes and focuses on the individual face, since visions are blooded and annulled. Poets are not loud-speaking prophets and prime movers anymore, but melancholic confessors and visitors on a tour around remnants. They do not bear the torch or the flame but rummage in ashes—and the word ashes, with its synonyms, is the connective link that brings together the verses of three or four generations of poets, since the feeling of defeat that is handed over from one generation to the next has now become more painful. Every generation of poetry, if we accept the conventions of genealogies, is a generation of defeat, since poetry is always exercised in a “petty time”—to reach the point of saying, in Katsaros’s pen, “Τι τη θέλετε την ποίησή μου, / Δεν παμπίτε ηλικιωτικά.”

3. We are witnessing an increase of self-referential poems; verses focus not only on poetry itself, but also adopt an acutely ironic and bitter stance towards poetry. It is a self-reflexive poetry, which at times becomes narcissistic and
collapses. Narcissism, according to its mythical model, is all too dear, but it does not necessarily promote self-awareness. “Τ’ ἀσπρο χαμηλός καθορίζει / επιτρέπει μόνο εσένα που ήσουν”7 – Seferis’s words are always true.

4. Thus, more poems that invest in intertextuality continuously make their appearance, since they converse with their predecessors, either to celebrate them or to deny them. The fact that we rely on foreign techniques of intertextual dialogue, those of Pound for example, without knowing how, why and when the axes of these techniques were formed, merely reveals the superficial approach of our education.

5. We see poems which focus on language, especially from the younger generations. This is a sign of introversion if not bewilderment, and at times a frustrating paradigm of joining poetry with theories and disciplines, or even its subjection to them.

6. The enforced demotic language of the cities causes a decrease of loans from puristic Greek (in case we have such loans they serve the purpose of parody) and from rural idioms. At the same time, the texts host more words and images from technology, science, even football (mostly in the generation of the 70s), and of course foreign words and slang, typically crude, aiming at producing a provocative or shocking effect. Quite often, however, the arrows miss their target, because provocation is identified with its preconceptions or its attempt to create sensation.

7. I can also see a decrease in the loans from ancient Greek literature or history and their use is reduced to the formation of a distinct identity. The voice of poetry is gradually denationalised, because it follows side routes to reach its socialisation—evidently following the western societies of isolation, hostility and consumerism. We are heading towards a homogeneous and almost universal poetic idiom, easily translatable, because the poet has denounced his/her linguistic specificity. Poets do not see their involvement with language as a challenging and dangerous condition of their poetic undertaking, thus they do not risk a defeat.

8. Long pieces, lengthy durations, operating as functional background of poetry, do not enjoy their previous frequency; similarly, complicated poems are rare. The lens of poetry focuses on the instantaneous, on individual psychical shots, on “experiences” that are exhibited without any reshaping or transformation in the name of a certain fashionable trend.

9. The “canon” is not only aggressively negative to the lyrical attributes of the earlier poets, but also degrades any existing lyrical attempts, without “reading” them. This is done in the name of a simplicity which, from a mode or an objective was transformed into a “theory”, willing to convert weakness into power, and enforce negligence as a self-evident, mass obligation.

10. One starts sensing, at least if one does not choose to become a passive follower of doctrines, that free verse, in its present unmusical and very prosaic manifestation, threatens to eliminate rhythm and form altogether. So, we
come to realise what we misunderstood in the past: that there is no meaning without form, no poetic discourse without metre, whether assimilated and unobserved or manifestly present; and also that we can have tradition only as long as we have recovery.

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

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

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

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

Αιωθόνομαι ωςάν τρελλός
παραπαράσης του Γηγενθαί
γράφοντας διψαλέα ποιήματα
(της κοιτίδας μου
κάλυσκα χορτονομοσμένα).
Γιατί η γλώσσα είν η αχόρταγη
μοιχαλίδα του Πραγματικού
με αρίθμητα ψέματα προσπαθώντας
να περισώσει το γάμο της.
Κάθε τραγούδι θλιβερό χαρέκλομα
ενάντια στη μουσική
κάθε μορφή ζωκλάκιωμα
χωρίς ελήθνια σταφυλία
δίχως χρώατικού να συμπληρώσει
απ' τα φανόμενα κλήματα.
Είναι αυτά μονάχα τα άρχημα
της καρδιάς τ' αναστήματα.8

Now, Engonopoulos’s poem “Ο υπερφεσιολογός της ατέρμονης ζωής” [Hyperrealism of an Endless Life], dedicated “to Tristano Tzara”, depicts a poetry that unwinds like a spiral:

η σαμαρίντα του ποιητού
είναι το νεκρό χιονί
του
και η κουσουνίστρα που βάζουνε
στα βρεφικά του χέρια
είναι το καταφύγιο που θα φυτρώσει
πάνω στον τάφο του

γιατί
— παρ' όλες τις πικρίες που τονέ ποτίζουνε
ο ποιητής
την άρνησή του θανάτου φέρνει μαζί του
και ακόμη είναι αυτός τους
του θανάτου η άρνησή
και έτσι
το νεκρό χιονί
θα γενή πάλι η σαμαρίντα του
του τάφου του το καταφύγιο
πάλι η κουσουνίστρα
που θα κραδαίνει
στα φωτεινά τα χέρια του9

***

“Μόνο διά της λύπης είμαι ευεργετής”,10 as Vyron Leondaris states with his sharp self-knowledge. He goes on to present his view that “η Τέχνη [είναι] ε-
νας πανικός μπροστά στην πραγματικότητα”.11 The poets’ sorrow, their only
property, sharpens words, composes stories, confronts the justice of history with its own justice and, of course, contradicts the sophistry of news-stories, disturbs our bliss, envelops and concerns us—either as our dowry or as a fear.

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

9. The sarmanitsa [folk dance] of the poet
is his
death coffin
and the rattle placed
in his baby hands
it is the cypress tree that will sprout
on his grave
because
– despite all the bitterness he is given
the poet
carries with him the negation of death
and he is even himself
death's negation
thus
the death coffin of the poet
will become again his sarmanitsa
the cypress of his grave
again his rattle
that he will grip
in his bright hands

10. "Only through sorrow am I still a poet"
11. "Art [is] panic felt before reality"