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THE METAPHYSICS OF DARKNESS: THREE RHYMED POEMS BY ANDONIS FOSTIERIS

Andonis Fostieris was born in Greece and studied Law at the University of Athens and the Sorbonne. One of the younger poets of the Generation of the Seventies, Fostieris made his first appearance in 1971 at the age of eighteen with his collection *The Great Journey*. He was the editor of *The New Poetry*, one of the first post-dictatorship journals, already in 1975. For the last thirty years he has been co-editor of the esteemed literary journal *I Lexi (The Word)* together with Thanassis Niarchos. In 2004 he received the Greek State Poetry award for his 2003 collection *Precious Oblivion* and in December 2010 he received the prestigious Ouranis Foundation Award of the Academy of Athens for the sum of his poetic work.

Fostieris’ poetry carries many features of his generation, but there are more that set him apart. His fellow poet, the late Giannis Varveris, wrote: ‘if classifications are valid, Fostieris […] holds an eminent place, entirely his own, in the Seventies Generation’.¹ In his poetry, we find what Karen Van Dyck has defined as the concern of his generation to

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make the readers constantly aware of the ‘materiality of the text’ and the mechanisms of writing. In his early collections we also find more obscure language, despair and disbelief over the possibilities of communication common among his peers. In *Dark Eros*, Fostieris’ first notable collection (1977), the post-war poet Tasos Leivaditis discerned the features of an extended adolescence: ‘complacency for pain, desire for tristesse, wild masochism and, at the same time, an elitism full of despair. The ephebes are the centre of the world and thunder’s chosen ones.’

What sets Fostieris apart from his generation is the near-absence of poems that overtly respond to social and political events. In his work, the doubt that characterizes his fellow poets is not aimed at historical circumstances. It goes deeper. It responds to innate existential questions. In his attempt to fathom issues like the nature of time, the limits of reason and the pitfalls of perception and knowledge, Fostieris goes back to the Pre-Socratics and the sources of philosophy, developing a style unrivalled among his contemporaries. As a critic recently remarked, his poetry acquires ‘a wisdom descending from the ancient agora, the Byzantine hippodrome, the village coffeehouse, the shift of

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the gas station and the stroll of prisoners in the courtyard’.\(^5\)

The translations presented here belong to a group of five poems similar in form and tone of voice. The poems’ strict rhyme and typographical layout, hitherto ignored by translators, makes them wonderfully melodious in the original: no wonder two of them, ‘Harmonica’ and ‘Take-off’ have become popular Greek songs set to music by Giannis Markopoulos and Thanos Mikroutsikos respectively. Four out of the five poems are carefully dispersed throughout *Dark Eros*, a large part of which was translated for the first time into English by Kimon Friar in 1984, but omitting the rhymed poems. Of these four I have translated ‘Take-off’ and ‘Dark Story’, while ‘Broadcast’ comes from *The Devil Sang in Tune* (1981), which Kimon Friar first translated almost in its entirety.\(^6\)

The musicality of these poems is in contrast to the nightmarish images, from the cannibalistic ‘I eat you and you eat me with candles at dinner’ in ‘Harmonica’, to the ride with the Devil’s motorcycle in ‘Broadcast’. Vehicles and machinery highlight the ominous tone with sound functioning as a binding symbol, although broken and dislocated. Here is an example from ‘Silence’ (*Dark Eros*, 1977):


\[^6\] Twenty-one out of twenty-two poems.
Η σιωπή μητέρα αγία πόρνη που κρατά
Στη μήτρα της απ’ την αρχή το νόημα του τέλους.
Απ’ το παράθυρο κοιτώ ’στον ουρανό ανοιχτά
Αεροπλάνα διαμελίζουν αγγέλους.

(Σκοτεινός Έρωτας, 1977)

Silence; mother sacred whore that holds
From the beginning in her womb the gist of ending
In the open sky from the window I behold
Angels that the airplanes are dissecting.

(Dark Eros, 1977)

The poems are post-symbolist in the way they present the failure of the medium to convey anything but a nightmarish message, reminding us of Karyotakis’ ‘broken guitars’ and ‘awesome antennas’ (1927). But the way these rhymed poems function, spread out among free verse poems, is curiously post-modern in a threefold manner: 1. Rhythm is employed to convey the absence of rhythm, 2. Machine-operated apparatuses challenge divine intervention, and 3. Rhyme, rhythm and layout are used to turn the reader’s attention to the ‘constructedness’ of poetry.
One should be cautious, however, about putting a post-modernist label around Fostieris’ neck. As Alexis Ziras rightly notes, the kernel of Fostieris’ poetry remains the same throughout his production: only his means have been refined. His journey to the sea of the intertext is one of depth, not superficial breadth. From 1971 up to his most recent collection in 2003, Fostieris has been going deeper, not further. In this journey he develops what I would call a \textit{metaphysics of darkness}, a foretaste of which we have in the poems translated here. These works are a powerful response to the Nobel-winning Odysseus Elytis and his poetry of solar metaphysics. Elytis said that ‘poetry begins where death is robbed of the last word’. As the titles of his collections suggest — \textit{Dark Eros} (1977), \textit{The Devil Sang in Tune} (1981), \textit{The D ’n A of Death} (1987), \textit{Thought Belongs to Mourning} (1996), \textit{Precious Oblivion} (2003) — Fostieris’ poetry begins at exactly the opposite point. The growing philosophical meditation on mortality and sorrow in Elytis’ collections after 1978 has much to say seen in this light.

As the contemplative tone increases in Fostieris’ poetry, a growing relation to Cavafy’s rhetoric is revealed that balances his inherent lyrical grief. The translations that follow are revealing in this respect. They help emphasize the lyrical underpinnings of Fostieris’ later philosophical poetry.

\footnote{Alexis Ziras, ‘Rituals of nothingness’, \textit{Enteuktirio} October-December 2010: 56-59.}


\footnote{This is the title Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke gave to her translation of the homonymous poem. The 1987 and 1996 collections have not yet been translated into English.}
As readers will notice, the translations presented here take the form of the original seriously. The alternation of feminine and masculine endings is reproduced in translation together with the typographical alignment of the poems on the right. The line length varies as in the original and the emphasis is on the endings which are aligned as if against a wall, giving a visual re-enactment of a relentless knock upon a closed door.

Η ΑΠΟΓΕΙΩΣΗ

Είσαι στο βάθος και σ’ ακούω που τραγουδάς
Είν’ η σπασμένη η ξεχασμένη πια φωνή σου.
Τις νύχτες έρχεσαι στον ύπνο μου αγρυπνάς
Χτυπούν οι έλικες στην απογείωσή σου.

Σε σάπιο φως πετούν πουλιά που είχα πολύ
Στον πρώτο θάνατο στην πρώτη μου ζωή αγαπήσει.
Κι είσαι κι εσύ μαζί μ’ αυτά η ανατολή
Που είχα ελπίσει πίσω από τη δύση.

Αφρός σκοτάδι κι αίμα χύνεται απ’ το φως
Χάνεται ο ήλιος κάποτε που λιώνει.
Στις ζωηρές φωνές μας ο καιρός είναι κουφός
Και κάθε ποίημα αρχίζει και τελειώνει.

(Σκοτεινός Έρωτας, 1977)
TAKE-OFF

I hear you singing, you are far below

It is your broken voice so long not thought of.

Into my sleep at nights wakeful you show

The clatter of the rotor blades during your take-off.

In a putrid light fly birds I had so much

Loved through my prime death and my prime existence.

And you with them are the dawn as such

All I had hoped for behind the sunset in the distance.

Seething darkness and blood spill forth from the light

The sun spills over at some point now, melting.

To our ardent voices time is deaf alright

And every poem has a beginning and an ending.

(Dark Eros, 1977)
ΕΚΠΟΜΠΗ

Είσαι στο βάθος και σ’ ακούω που τραγουδάς

(Έτσι όπως κλαίνε, με λεπτές φωνές, οι λύκοι)˙

Οι μέρες άδειες κι οι βδομάδες της σειράς
Μες στην καρδιά τους κατοικείς, κακό σκουλήκι.

Θόρυβοι, γέλια, που μπερδεύονται σφιχτά
Με των ανθρώπων τις φωνές και των αγγέλων˙

Τηλεοράσεις, ραδιόφωνα ανοιχτά
Μ’ ανταποκρίσεις κι εκπομπές από το μέλλον.

Τι θέλω εγώ σ’ αυτόν τον ψεύτικο ουρανό;
Κλείνω τα μάτια μου, νυστάζω και φοβάμαι˙

Βαθιά στα φέρετρα, σε δρόμο αδειανό,

Βάζει ο διάβολος μπροστά

τη μηχανή,
και πάμε.

(O Διάβολος Τραγούδησε Σωστά, 1981)
BROADCAST

I hear you singing, you are far below
(sounds like a wolf’s thin-voiced wailing)
Empty the days and the weeks in a row
Wretched worm, in their hearts you’re dwelling.

Noises, laughter, tangling
With cries of angels and of earthly creatures
Televisions and radios blaring
Reports and broadcast from the future.

What do I want in this false skyway?
I close my eyes, I’m scared and sleepy I grow;
Deep in the coffins, on an empty highway,
The devil turns
the engine on
and off we go.

(The Devil Sung in Tune, 1981)
ΣΚΟΤΕΙΝΗ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑ

Είσαι στο βάθος και σ’ ακούω που τραγουδάς
Ένα τραγούδι εξαθρωμένο δίχως φθόγγους.
Ένα τραγούδι από κείνα που αγαπάς
Τα ματωμένα με αποστήματα και όγκους.

Το πρόσωπό σου το δαγκώνουνε πουλιά
Και μες στα μάτια σου τώρα κουρνιάζουν φίδια.
Θα ’ρθώ να πιώ τ’ αρρωστημένα σου φιλιά
Να σε κεντρίσω μ’ αποτρόπαια παιχνίδια.

Ξέρω ένα τραίνο που δεν πάει πουθενά
Έν’ αυτοκίνητο που πέρα θα σε πάρει.
Μια μουσική που ανατινάζει τα βουνά
Ξέρω το κόκκινο που θα σε φάει ψάρι.

(Σκοτεινός Έρωτας, 1977)
DARK STORY

I hear you singing you’re far below
It is a soundless dismembered singing.
One of those songs you have a taste for
With tumours abscesses and bleeding.

The birds are nipping on your face
And in your eyes the snakes are nesting.
I’ll come to take your sick embrace
And poke you with atrocious wrestling.

I know of a train that goes no place
A car that will carry you straight through
I know a music that blows mountains into space
And the red fish that will devour you.

(Dark Eros, 1977)