The Return of Pytheas

Also by Paschalis Nikolaou

As Editor

12 Greek Poems After Cavafy

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Paschalis Nikolaou

The Return of Pytheas

Scenes from British and Greek Poetry in Dialogue

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Prologue

Poets, Editors, and Seafarers

This study surveys aspects of dialogue between two literary traditions. Most of the poets whose work is explored here have worked between 1960 and 2017, and most of the poems or translations discussed have also been published in this period. However, *The Return of Pytheas* inevitably assumes a much lengthier history of access to texts, going all the way back to the *Iliad*. For the classical past inevitably shadows the present: George Steiner has observed the frequency with which Achilles and Odysseus are addressed by English-speaking poets. Indeed, he explicitly echoes these poets when he affirms that it is '[…] to the "topless towers of Ilium" and the shores of Ithaka, it is to "deep-browed Homer" that English-language sensibility turns and returns, incessantly, as if striving to appropriate to itself, to the native genius, material already, by some destined or elective affinity, its own' (1996: 91). Working more than a century ago, the first Anglophone modernists further intensified a classical imperative in the poetic mind, especially in their use of themes and through their settings and re-settings of translations.

Moreover, among Anglophone writers, there has been a sustained imaginative desire for the two cultures to connect and to validate each other. In *The Extraordinary Voyage of Pytheas the Greek: The Man Who Discovered Britain* (2001), Barry Cunliffe tells us how, around 330 BC, this adventurer set out from the colony of Massalia (contemporary Marseille) to explore the 'fabled, terrifying lands of Northern Europe', landing on British shores three centuries earlier than Julius Caesar, and then moving on to the Baltic regions and to 'Ultima Thule', that is, Iceland. Historical record is certainly more cognizant of the parts played by Roman (and later Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian) incursions and colonisations than of any Greek visitors in Britain's linguistic, cultural and civic heritage. But here, as with similar tales – those about possible discoveries of the American continent far earlier than the voyage of Columbus, for instance – there is a sense of a parallel storyline, one that may serve not only to thicken a sense of heritage and deepen a national consciousness, but also to explain, or at least, contextualise a number of identifications. References to Pytheas and his lost account, entitled *On the Ocean*, are to be found in Polybius, Pliny the Elder and the geographer Dicaearchus, among others.

As a historical personage, this intrepid Greek mariner is therefore both curious and mysterious enough in outline to fire up creative thought, not unlike an Egyptian statue inexplicably discovered, say, somewhere in India. One such example is the poetry chapbook by Lesley Saunders, published fifteen years after Cunliffe's volume and discussed at the end of this study. In the intervening chapters, the figure of the ancient Greek seafarer comes to symbolise a rich panoply of encounters: of a poet with another land and people; of expressions and resolutions in verse of the experiences of travel, long stays abroad, and relocation. We veer from case studies to thematic approaches in cataloguing some recent literary 'moments' and to exploring particular modes of exchange between poets and literary traditions. Even so, *The Return of Pytheas* claims to offer no more than a series of additions to an already voluminous list: in its attempts to understand relationships between Greek and British poetry, it is a discussion, indeed, of particular 'scenes', rather than an attempt at a comprehensive or exhaustive account. These are also ongoing dialogues; and new names and interactions are constantly being added.

In linguistic terms, there has long been a trading of places. In antiquity, alongside Latin, the status of the Greek language was comparable to that of English today: a necessary stage in a civilised education and a common code in mediating between other nations and languages. While this present volume begins with the publication of Christopher Logue's *Patrocleia* in 1962, even the briefest consideration of Greek echoes reminds us of the sheer weight of classical poetry and drama as progenitors of world literature. Productions of the past – written in Greek, English, and in other languages – heavily, and, it seems, inescapably permeate modern poetry. A simple mention of forms like the eclogue or the epigram, the significance of Milton's 'Lycidas' (1637), of Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' (1819), and even the presence of the invented, Cavafy-sounding Phlebas the Phoenician in part IV of *The Waste Land* (1922; see also chapter 3: p. 86 in this book) allow us to intimate durations as well as the range of responses involved. Robert Hass's Introduction to *The Greek Poets: Homer to the Present* (2010) – perhaps the most encompassing account yet of Greek verse through the ages – includes several such realisations: of an entirely fruitful association of poetic traditions, and of literary movements that insistently experiment on and rework what has come before. Among other things, Hass reminds us how, for the early Anglophone modernists, Greek poetry presented a return to 'powerful origins':

> As if to press the point, Pound's *Cantos* begin, notoriously, with an English translation – a translation into almost Anglo-Saxon English – of a Latin translation of a bit from *The Odyssey*, as if to say that there is no setting out without Homer, no setting out without the revisioning in the act of translation. (2010: xxx)

Modern Greek literature is itself intricately linked to the words, modes and thematic inheritance of this past, as is clearly suggested in the very titles of key studies, such as David Ricks's *The Shade of Homer: A Study in Modern Greek Poetry* (1989) and Karen Van Dyck's *Kassandra and the Censors: Greek Poetry Since 1967* (1998). Highlighting this direct inheritance of course also serves to facilitate a quickened understanding of the contacts and connections that recent Greek poetry shares with other literatures. At the same time, such linking can itself lead equally to *mis*understandings, to easy assumptions which may inhibit depiction of the complex, contemporary experience of a nation, as its creative voices process it and relate it. It is perhaps suitable, then, to further track this situation by references to some recent anthologies – and their paratexts – as they attempt to introduce and contextualise Greek poets for an English-speaking readership. David Connolly describes particular challenges thus, in his Preface to a bilingual edition of a collection by Yannis Kondos:

> Translators of modern Greek poets are perhaps further disadvantaged in their efforts to communicate their tradition in the English-speaking world. *The very fact of being obliged to refer to 'modern' Greek poets and not simply Greek poets is indicative of the problem. Experience has taught me that any reference to 'Greek' alone is invariably identified in the mind of the audience or readership with Greek antiquity. Many contemporary poets who have failed to make any impact in English translation have undoubtedly suffered from the legacy of Greece's ancient past and from a particular perception of Greece by Westerners.* The absence in their works of references to antiquity or of the kind of folkloric images of Greece created by a number of popular films conflicts with what the English-speaking reader has come to expect. […] A great deal of modern Greek poetry has been translated but it has failed to make an impact in the English-speaking world and contemporary Greek poets are generally conspicuous by their

> absence from the shelves of English bookstores and from the international stage in general. (2003: 13; my emphasis)

Twenty years before Connolly wrote these lines, in the Introduction to their translation of Elytis's *Selected Poems*, Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard noted 'Greek poets have been labouring under the shadow of their illustrious forbears, a circumstance that has either concealed them altogether or implied that they could not be recognised unless they conformed to an image that in many ways is totally alien to them' (1981: ix). However, two years after Elytis was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, the same two translators had reason to be optimistic: because of a new wave of translations, whereas thirty years previously, '[…] poets like Solomos, Palamas, Cavafy, Sikelianos and Seferis were all but unknown outside Greece, and this in spite of the fact that their work for the most part was completed during the first half of this century and in the case of Solomos well over a hundred years ago' (ibid.). As for Elytis's own perspective, this is featured in the same Introduction, through excerpts from an interview with Ivar Ivask in *World Literature Today* (1975), where the Greek poet precisely addresses some of those expectations. He tells Ivask how he has avoided classical imagery and myth, because of the artificial role that had been assigned to them in the post-Renaissance literature of Europe:

> I have never employed ancient myths in the usual manner […] No doubt it is advantageous for a Greek poet to employ ancient myths, because he thus becomes more accessible to foreign readers. […] I have reacted against this, often quite consciously, because I thought it was a bit too facile. […] Since my chief interest was to find the *sources* of the neo-Hellenic world, I kept the mechanism of myth-making but not the figures of mythology. (Elytis, qtd. in Keeley and Sherrard 1981: xii)

What is more, within Greek poetry itself, relationships between past and present can be highly complex. Not only are felt continuities in the culture maintained over extremely long periods, but the diachronic richness underlying the modern language is often immediately evident to the native speaker, so that ancient texts can be understood, at least to some extent, even without the help of intralingual translation. While such levels of connectedness can hardly be said to function between Old, Middle and

Modern English, in Greek, the multiple 'layerings' of language surface with far greater ease and considerably more varied consequence. Indeed, despite the caution of Elytis and others, contemporary poets often pursue analogies with the aid of a whole cast of characters from both historical antiquity and myth, along with aphorisms and dicta that are directly attributable to ancient sources. That is to say, an entire range of internal recognitions can be relied on to be more or less readily available. Non-Greek readers, however, who may feel the need to pay close attention whenever the adjective 'Greek' is announced, may also be liable to anticipate references and forms that are not necessarily present in any consistency in a poetic text, or at least, have not actually been grouped prominently. From the outside looking in, certain appropriations of Greece and Greekness have long taken hold on readers, often combined with the pervasive and lasting influence of cinematic representations, which in turn tend to militate against an 'uncontaminated' hearing. Inevitably, any such assemblages of voices, which are often disparate, themselves bring their own sets of problems. Before 2010's *The Greek Poets*, a previous large-scale project directed at an English readership took its cue from the millennium, and proceeded, over the course of 1024 pages, to limit itself to only *A Century of Greek Poetry 1900-2000* (Bien et al. 2004). And even though one of its reviewers, Dimitris Tziovas, found the volume successful not only in 'presenting a panorama' of Greek verse in the twentieth century but also in introducing several unknown voices to a wider Anglophone readership, he could not help questioning the usefulness of such publications in general, asking whether

> […a]nthologies are still the best way to introduce the literature of a country to a foreign audience. And from this overarching question, others flow: whether to include fewer poets with a larger number of poems, or more poets with fewer poems; is a thematic arrangement preferable to a chronological one? Can themed anthologies such as the recent one on Greek fantasy writing (*The Daedalus Book of Greek Fantasy*, edited and translated by David Connolly, 2004), appeal more to an international audience? Indeed are anthologies popular with the general public or simply intended for an academic audience? (Tziovas 2005: 408)

Another anthology, *Austerity Measures: The New Greek Poetry* (2016), edited by Karen Van Dyck, not only responds in several ways to concerns

posited by Tziovas, but also confirms them. This book, which is 457 pages long, includes forty-nine poets, most of them writing from the first decade of this century. Featuring selected poems in the original Greek, the volume provides an interesting exercise in contextualising current and developing work, by focusing on an overarching proposition: that sociopolitical strife concentrates the creative spirit. Van Dyck also finds herself wondering whether the poets should be ordered alphabetically, chronologically, around themes, or according to the influences that work upon them. She suggests that some organisation is required, 'not least because many of the poets are making their first appearance in English and will be unknown to most of this book's imaginable readership' (Van Dyck 2016: xx); and she concludes that a division into venues of poetic activity is more sensible. For this reason, she arranges her material in categories such as: 'DIY and Small Press Poets', 'Poets Online', 'Poets in Performance and across the Arts'. Crucially, this editor also realises the nature of the cross-cultural pollination that often enables these kinds of work:

> What most distinguishes the poetry of this new millennium from what came before it is, on the one hand, its diversity – there are no clear-cut schools or factions – and, on the other hand, the cultural conditions that it takes for granted. […M]any of these poets have had ready access to computers and the internet since childhood. The reality they seek to represent […] is infiltrated by, and includes, the virtual. They have grown up with the understanding that vast stores of information and a wide range of different languages are only ever a click away. Even those who have not been exposed to a mixture of languages in their own cities, towns, and villages, even those who have somehow missed it on the radio and television, have inevitably found it on their computer screens; and mother tongue, as such, often doesn't determine the language they choose to write in. Some publish in two or more languages; some self-translate. (ibid.: xviii-xix)

It is far from unprecedented that social upheaval, which is inevitably reflected in the culture, should be readmitted into our consciousness through metaphor and imagery. Yet it seems somewhat ironic that it should take a financial crisis combined with a comment on the cover by Yanis Varoufakis, a controversial economist rather than a literary critic,

for a reappraisal of Greek poetry to appear from a prestigious publisher such as Penguin. It remains to be seen how many of these poetic voices will extend their presence in English beyond this current frame. At this stage, the results are admittedly uneven, and financial infamy post-2008 presents a different set of problems, often in the guise of 'opportunities': Van Dyck is certainly not alone in sensing that the crisis may help with a new situating of Greek poetry. A few months earlier, an anthology edited by Theodoros Chiotis appeared, bearing the title *Futures: Poetry of the Greek Crisis* (2015). The editor, as well as the translator, carries immense responsibility in cases such as these: the line between recording actual developments inside a literature and magnifying certain symptoms, titles and verses in confirmation of a sociopolitical outlook, or an agenda, can be very thin. Chiotis himself seems to be aware of this risk and even warns against it in some of his comments – even though his approach may well indicate an ambivalence that could appear more inviting to certain critical narratives than others:

> It is probably fair to say that the interest of foreign readers for Greek literature has been ignited by the crisis but we should be very vigilant about this renewed interest and in what way it might be appropriated. This is a very crucial moment for contemporary Greek literature regarding its potential promotion to a non-Greek speaking audience; in fact, *this particular historical circumstance might be a once-in-a-generation opportunity for contemporary Greek literature to be diffused outside Greece.* […] *it is therefore very important for all interested parties to rethink the cultural, social and political implications* of the translation of contemporary Greek poetry and what it might ferry across languages and cultures. (Chiotis and Rossoglou 2017; my emphasis)

These brief mentions of recent attempts to anthologise and present Greek poetry to an English-speaking readership lie well within our zone of interest. As has happened with key anthologies in the past, for instance, C. A. Trypanis's *Medieval and Modern Greek Poetry* (1951) and Keeley and Sherrard's *Four Greek Poets* (1966), lasting impressions of Greek poetic production have been engendered and further selections of poets and poems have grown out of them. What is more, the quality of translations also has close bearings on the ways in which influences are then negotiated by British poets – first and foremost, of course, *as readers*.

Equally, well-composed paratexts – and the patronage they often imply – should never be underestimated: readers can be assisted in registering differences in form, in the genealogy of 'voice', and in the varied ways in which this foreign poetry offers enrichment. The earliest readers are often themselves poets – and sometimes, as in the case of W. H. Auden, they are also those who take us closer to a voice like Cavafy's. The very first paragraphs of his Introduction to Rae Dalven's translations in *The Complete Poems of Cavafy* (1961) poignantly observe encounters and processes that have already taken place:

> Ever since I was first introduced to his poetry by the late Professor R. M. Dawkins over thirty years ago, C. P. Cavafy has remained an influence on my own writing; that is to say, I can think of poems which, if Cavafy were unknown to me, I should have written quite differently or perhaps not written at all. Yet I do not know a word of Modern Greek, so that my only access to Cavafy's poetry has been through English and French translations.
>
> This perplexes and a little disturbs me. Like everybody else, I think, who writes poetry, I have always believed the essential difference between prose and poetry to be that poetry can be translated into another tongue but poetry cannot.
>
> But if it is possible to be poetically influenced by work which one can read only in translation, this belief must be qualified. […]
>
> (Auden 1961: xv)

The four chapters in this book often examine similar issues, especially in their focus on the ways in which such influences and dialogues may be possible, often in wildly different forms arising between two literatures, and between original and translation.