

The Greek Poetic Landscape

Poetry looks like a game and is not: a game does indeed bring men together but in such a way that each forgets himself in the process. In poetry on the other hand man is reunited on the foundation of his existence. There he comes to rest; not indeed to the seeming rest of inactivity and emptiness of thought, but to that infinite state of rest in which all powers and relations are active.

Martin Heidegger, "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry"

The problem of poetry is not theoretical or logical but empirical. In the uncertain future (of survival) lying ahead, poetry, like any other living organism, will have to strive for its existence. It will have to defend itself and express its will to live and to persist; one could call it organic poetry. And eventually it will have to confront one basic challenge: truth. Truth not in the sense of confession, honesty toward oneself, or even revelation of the unconscious, but in the sense of necessity. If Idea-Poetry (classicism, *poésie pure*, etc.) had to struggle for an ideal, if Action Poetry (romanticism, *poésie engagée*, even confessional poetry) was and still is frantically trying to capture a passion—or express the lack of it—Organic Poetry will have to seek and find the basic energies of life. This will engender a new nakedness in poetry which will bear no resemblance to the one that we have already experienced in the *ars poetica* of yesterday and today. Object Poetry, for example, is the fruit of a profound despair for the disrupted relationship between subject and object and the resulting confusion and loneliness of the poet who feels turned into an object in the modern world, and yet has to act as a subject when writing the poem. This new nakedness will be focused on a vital minimum, the very few necessities one packs when starting off on a difficult journey of exploration and pain, or when getting ready for a long-term prison sentence.

I give the above indication of what I stand for in poetry not because I feel I ought to have some personal views on poetry, like all poets who respect themselves, but because I will be constantly referring to Greece as a vital space for me, a point where my life and poetry converge and enjoy a strong alliance. What follows is the expression of this indestructible relation and not the thoughts and conclusions of a scholar. I believe that one of the elements that will pass the acid test of truth and necessity will be the

national element in poetry. I am well aware of how unrealistic this statement may sound, since the survival of poetry is doubted at least as often as the survival of national characteristics.

Greekness . . . Hellenism . . . The words make my ears echo with past and present quarrels, controversies, arguments and theories while I feel I step into the shadow of George Seferis, the poet and the man, who through both his poetry and his humanity redefined our Greekness in terms of our present. I know how much I lack his knowledge and his wisdom and it is only because of a few miraculous coincidences of thought and feeling that I dare approach the question. T. S. Eliot says, when writing of Goethe, “. . . probably the language of poetry is the language most capable of communicating wisdom. The wisdom of a great poet is concealed in his work; but in becoming aware of it, we become ourselves more wise.” Feeling a little bit wiser and bolder I will try first to draw the outlines of my Greek space and hope that at some point I shall be able to touch its complex center.

Greece for my youth had been brightness. I have never been either a patriot or a nature-lover, or at least I felt great surprise when I saw that people were attributing such qualities to me. It was the kind of surprise one would feel in the old times if, after having suspected the existence of electricity in a thunderbolt, one would be treated as a romantic of autumn. That is how incapable I proved to be to separate sensation from its object and to show to the spirit all the derivatives from such a sensation.

. . . thirdly, because I have a very organic feeling that identifies humanness with the Greek landscape. I must say that this feeling of mine which is shared, I think, by many others is often rather painful. It is the opposite of that state of ceasing to exist, of the abolition of the ego, which one feels in face of the grandeur of certain foreign landscapes. I should never use such adjectives as “grand” or “stately” for any of the Greek landscapes I have in mind. It is a whole world: lines that come and go; bodies and features, the tragic silence of a “face” . . . We could go very far; but I shall stop here. We arrived at the light. And the light cannot be explained.

I use these two quotations, the first from Odysseus Elytis, the second from George Seferis, as two “xerolithies,” the bright, whitewashed stones that are used in Greece vaguely to mark the limits of a field. My field is the “material body of Greece” which “must be something else and not simply nature” (Elytis). It is covered by an imperceptible web of spell in which I see intertwined my work and life as well as that of my compatriots. Some have

named it Greek space, others Greek duration. I call it simply the Greek landscape.

The Greek landscape, the physical kingdom of light where, as Dionysios Solomos puts it, "every voice in motion was talking to the light," leads one to a "process of humanization" (Seferis). This process at its peak moments generates a kind of eros, as you move toward splendid lines which are both familiar and strange because they are endowed with a magic power of renewal. "The most commonplace truth when it floods the whole soul is like a revelation," says Simone Weil, and here the revelation comes from discovering a place which is beautiful because it is meaningful, meaningful because it exists through itself. Its perfection consists in corresponding to the human capacity for perfection and its pain in reminding one of the human estrangement from it. The Greek landscape is a perpetual flow constantly feeding one with self-awareness. An intense sense of fate springs up from this soil, a sense which eventually becomes an agonizing question: why so *naturally* we are here and what is this *here* doing to us? Or is it that "light cannot be explained?" Nevertheless Seferis himself used this light as a torch in the labyrinth of the Greek conscience of the twentieth century inundated by so many national and international disasters and sealed by so much insecurity. He threw this light on experiences dark as black clotted blood not to alleviate the pain but to search for a continuity from which his—and our—identity would stand out in relief. "The Old Man of the Sea spoke to me: / I am your country; / I may be nobody / but I can become what you want." There is indeed a strong feeling of an endless possibility which does not refer to the feasible (whereas in the United States one feels that everything is possible in the sense of becoming, but not in the sense of being) but to a wide existential opening. What is particular about the Greek landscape is that the space irrevocably includes time. Time and space are not experienced as two poles tearing consciousness apart. Within this landscape one is not crushed by eternity but feels free to be it. What the eye sees and what the mind knows are so near they almost touch, to the point that the age-old split between object and subject is in a way obliterated. I equate time with subject and space with object since time and ourselves are whatever is transient and temporary, while object and space are permanent, i.e., their essence does not change in relation to us. In such a close relationship both time and space express themselves through memory which here is neither factual nor historical—like clothes drying on a line, as Beckett says—but a deep pathos embracing both the personal and the universal elements. "O, sing, little Antigone, sing, o sing . . . / I do not speak of the past, I speak of love." This constant to and fro between a physical body and a nostalgia for an eternity always lost and always present is for me the essence of the Greek landscape. Memory acts as a catalyst of time whose three dimensions merge and converge at the same point while the

light acts as a catalyst of space; it describes the contours of the objects with such a precision that they become hollow, they become holy. "The angelic and black light" penetrates things down to their black kernel, they are so translucent that blackness shines from within. Blackness is the big antithesis, the deadly center which, if touched, metamorphoses the landscape into a metaphysical one. Solomos expresses inversely the same idea when he writes: "And through those bodies let there be expressed in all the parts of the work a nationality as extensive as possible. Thus Metaphysics becomes Physics." By metaphysical I understand not the awe in front of the divine, but the natural transcendence of what is into what will always be. What always is can only go toward an optimum. A place of value is automatically created which includes the place in fact, and so we reach the Greek landscape of Solomos, an essentially ethical world, "angelically created," as he puts it. Surrounded by a nature of such quality, human suffering acquires an even greater acuteness while the deprivation of freedom stands out as the most painful experience. Because men should be "physically free from any oppressor and mentally free to reach the Idea." The struggle for freedom is also a kind of asceticism, a spiritual exercise. "Thus out of the smallness of a country which struggles against enemy forces, the great Essences will come."

The landscape which I have tried to describe where time and space form an indestructible unity and where human existence denounces lack of freedom, suffering and death is for me a concrete point of reference for modern Greek poetry. It is evident that while the great masters from Solomos to Seferis were referring to this space in full awareness and in a desire to evaluate it in terms of its ethical, national and aesthetic values, the poets of today, especially those after the Second World War, meet this point through very different paths of an increasing complexity.

Solomos died in 1856 and was practically forgotten for a long time. Modern Greek poetry was busy importing foreign influences—mostly from France—and transplanting them to Greece. But the urgent problems of the country and especially the complexity of the language question transformed a lot of the foreign movements and schools from aesthetic propositions into vigorous challenges and a quest for a national and cultural identity. In the 1920's three events had a tremendous impact on Greek life and poetry.

In 1922 came the Asia Minor Disaster: the tragedy of a nation misled and betrayed in its expectations, which saw the Great Idea rolling like a severed head at its feet and Smyrna, "the pearl of the East," submerged in blood and horror. From this carnage Seferis derived his acute historical sense, and saw the necessity for the reevaluation of our past and present in the light of so much pain, "the ancient statues and the contemporary sorrow" (Seferis).

In 1927 Kostas Karyotakis, one of our best and most idiosyncratic poets,

committed suicide in Preveza. Despair, loneliness and anxiety erupted into Greek poetry with a shot. Karyotakis' poetry, naked to the bone, without any ornaments, expressed a deep existential sadness very close to the western angst. The futility of life and creation against the unimaginative background of a Greek provincial town— "O, if only someone would die from disgust / we would all have fun at the funeral"—and the deep dissatisfaction under the subtle mantle of irony appear maybe for the first time in modern Greek poetry.

In 1924, in Paris, the official birth certificate of surrealism was issued by André Breton, and it may be useful at this point to be reminded of a few lines from the Manifesto: "Everything suggests the belief that there is a certain point of the mind where life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the high and the low are no longer perceived as contradictions. It would be vain to look for any motive in surrealist activity other than the hope of determining that point." This statement draws in my mind a landscape similar to the Greek one and this parallel partly explains the fact that the seed of surrealism found in Greece a very fertile soil. Contrary to appearances, surrealism is not a movement of form but of content. It questions the relationship between reality and possibility, between changing and interpreting the world, while by the abdication of the rational in favor of the subconscious the real powers of individual freedom are released. More concerned with this latter element of freedom, Greek surrealist poetry never stuck too much or for too long to the letter of surrealist methodology (automatic writing, Freudian symbols, etc.) but tried to touch the deep forbidden areas and hiding-places of the libido of the race.

Nikos Gatsos, intoxicated by a kind of race-drunkenness, discovered surrealism in Greek folk poetry and wrote "Amorgos" in one night (1943), while Andreas Embirikos, the father of Greek surrealism, had already in 1935 marked Greek poetry with his Doric sexuality and the timeless space of his dreamed realities. "We are all inside our future. When we sing, we sing in front of the expressive paintings of painters . . . because whatever we may pursue we cannot say no say yes without the future of our destination . . . We are all inside the silence of a falling pain the crystalline tricks of our future." Odysseus Elytis, who has been influenced by Paul Eluard, practices a hardly recognizable surrealism when he plunges into the Aegean Sea and emerges holding seaweed and stars, white and blue suns and a girl. There is so much light in Elytis but it is so different from the light of Seferis. The first's light is experience turned into nostalgia, the second's experience turned into knowledge.

"After the Second World War the Mad Pomegranate Tree of Elytis became the Mad Hare of Miltos Sachtouris." The surrealism of Sachtouris is an orgy of color projected on a black screen, a scream of pain muffled in

feathers. "The earth turned over from the side where things used to blossom." And from above this overturned reality Sachtouris says, "I the heir of birds / must / fly even with broken wings." That is how surrealism moves more and more towards the essentials and becomes a specific way of penetration and mystification. Nikos Karouzos is a good example of this. He mystifies everything, from the humble worm to the unknown angels, and "rages against the dying of the light," a light slightly different this time, resembling the golden robes of a Byzantine emperor. He depicts the richest world in order to describe his own death.

By now surrealism has lost its angular excesses and merely flows in the mainstream of poetry. Softer voices of pain and loss are heard which relate also to the Anglo-Saxon poetic vision. "Naive wonder of mine, what shall I do with you? Will we ever find ourselves not only in an early afternoon dream, will we really find ourselves in such a place, sun-drenched and beautiful, by the sea—without our defeats?" writes Nikos Phokas. One cannot help noticing the elegiac character of all this poetry. A backbone of nostalgia, of loss, of lamentation runs through the Greek landscape. But one can also say that the sense of defeat of the postwar poets has been replaced in the poets of the sixties and seventies by fear. They are young but they have seen a lot. What they have experienced may not claim to be as traumatic as a world war, a civil war or the Asia Minor Disaster, but it certainly had a cancerous quality of its own. For seven years young poets made their first appearance under a poisoned light; a threat hung constantly over them. "The light here at the clearing / bites whoever it does not know" while "fear has become a domestic animal" (Yannis Kondos). This new confusion and alienation is expressed through the same landscape. Trapped or disfigured, the place is still recognizable, but "a dumb white color covered us hard as a stone" (Kondos). In the midst of so much light, existence seemed something opaque and blind.

Some Greek critics have often claimed that the younger poets of today have not done anything spectacular in terms of renewing modern Greek poetry but merely rely upon the accomplishments of the postwar poets. I shall express my complete disagreement with that through the words of Seferis once more: "The question is not who makes really great art or who does not, but who keeps art alive." The aliveness of Greek poetry today is for me an indisputable fact. Here are four examples of poetic idioms and of modes of witnessing. They all made their presence manifest at the end of the sixties, the beginning of the seventies.

Lefteris Poullos (b. 1944) is one of the most discussed poets of the younger generation. His poetry is a peculiar and powerful blending of Greek elements and the successive waves of foreign—American of late—influences which have inundated Greece. He writes in the foreword of his first

book: "As our circle of expression becomes narrower and narrower, and as the possibility of escape gradually disappears, while time constitutes a new element of tragedy, poetry or what we would like poetry to be remains the ultimate gesture toward life, toward the moment where you come out from a cloud of darkness to a landscape which reminds you that you are not dead. I accepted poetry as a code of life. If poetry accepts me as well, this will mean that my last possibility to be justified is not lost." His exuberant imagination is geared around a double crucifixion, his and his country's. His identity is clearly specified. "I, a Greek, find myself in Greece. / I sit on a chair hammering myself / as if I had died just before it was born," he writes, and further on, "What am I doing in this country / in the most cursed of all times?" A feeling of an existential and a concretely historical impasse is violently expressed in Poullos' poetry. The violence of his poetic language, which is something quite new in modern Greek poetry and is sometimes reminiscent of Allen Ginsberg, transforms the Greek landscape from a source of consolation to a source of pain. The sun and the blue hurt like a surgical operation by which one is stripped of the protective flesh and is left with one's bones exposed to a slow death and to the same old unanswerable questions: "Before you have time to think, to judge / everything appears and disappears in the blind / light and the seeing light. / Who elaborated the forms of all things? / You are a peculiar thing in the world / which is both a cradle and a coffin / almost a madness you are." A continuous movement—something like a heartbeat—constantly goes from the particular to the general and from the general to the particular, from the poet to Greece and to the cosmos. The movement of Poullos is poetic, national and cosmic conscience, violence and contemplation, revolution and renouncement, self-assertion and self-annihilation.

Vassilis Steriadis (b. 1947) is a genuine and at the same time a disobedient child of surrealism. Surrealism for him is not a tool to express a reality but to fabricate one. The fabrication is called for by his idiosyncratic psychology. His rebellion consists in showing through his poetry how different *he* is, how surrealistic *his* approach to life is, and not in expressing the inherent surrealism of life. Thus surrealism is transformed from a way of writing poetry into an absolutely personal idiom. His poetry contains something like the surprise of a schoolboy who discovers that his playmate is death and continues to play. His world—a construction of apparently naive elements—covers anything from cartoon strips, Ian Fleming, John Le Carré, to the dull suburban afternoons of Athens: the football game next to a building site, a sip of ouzo making the girl shiver even more in the middle of his dream. Playful fantasies often turn into nightmares just as games sometimes turn into real violence. "Then my head was suddenly cut off / as I was shaving, there was a noise / and I enjoyed the fall of dishes / of the clothes-hanger / of the heater . . ." An innocence is constantly

confronted with evil, evil suffered and evil imposed on others. Life is unbearable from a very early age. His poems resemble a pile of jigsaw-puzzle pieces, but the image is there, one can remake it.

Anguish is spreading like a stain on the Greek landscape. This anxiety does not belong only to the private psychological area of the poet but is sometimes a social expression of man's inability to partake of the formulation of his future which is the only catharsis for a difficult present. "There is always among us / (I suppose) / a delicate protuberance of beauty / a noble predisposition toward uniqueness . . . / Who indeed wouldn't like / to win the football pools even for one Sunday," writes Yannis Patilis (b. 1946), whose poetry is tinted by a biting, dry humor. Still, women seem mostly concentrated on confessional poetry.

Nana Isaia (b. 1934) appears to be confined in an abstract room from which she sends detailed accounts on how nothingness can be experienced. Her landscape is a practically inhuman town made of concrete and loneliness. She is one of the least "Greek" poets of her generation, but the Greek element can still be felt like a residue at the bottom of her poetry. Disturbed with life, she transforms her malaise into a constant confrontation with nothingness through endless hollow hours, counting the "unobserved time." Her nostalgia is clearly defined, it has an abstract shape, it refers to something lost but which never existed; reality is questioned by nothingness.

The nostalgia of Zefi Daraki (b. 1939) is full of shades and tints; it feels like a huge warm bird and occupies the center of her poetry. It is a poetry—especially in her last two books—completely turned toward the past, a concrete past, with its landscapes, tastes, touches, lamps, shells. Everything she experiences, even a wild expectation, is automatically transformed into this vital past which is not a motionless fiction but has the mobility of all three dimensions of time. Her poetry does not come out as a confessional delirium but as a conscious penetration into the depths of a very personal area.

The names and cases I have mentioned are but a few sprinklings of water on a dry summer yard. Huge areas remain untouched, such as the enormous consequences of the language problem, the spiritual heritage of the Orthodox faith, the origins and development of socialist poetry in Greece and the range of some very important poets that it has produced. But rather than cover all the aspects of a manifold reality, what I have tried to do here is to describe a personal approach illustrated by some equally personal experiences in modern Greek poetry. The Greek landscape is the vast container of all these experiences. It consoles me for the long years of physical decay ahead. It fills me with hope that I may discover one day in those soft and dry lines of hills the secret of Eleusis or how to transform passion

into wisdom. Knowing oneself comes probably from abandoning oneself into the objective world. The more distant and remote the voices of life become, the more I shall find myself concentrating on this landscape which has fed me for so long. Then, perhaps, there will come a moment of understanding, in the midst of so much light—the hollowness and holiness of things, a moment when I shall touch their center and split the black membrane of death covering it.

But until then, the landscape surrounds us Greeks; it is in us, and keeps its secret. So much pain with every step we take in history, so much helplessness, so much cement blocking the horizon and endless barbed-wire around the magic sites of the gods. But still we feel somewhere this exchange of glances between it and us, glances constantly welcoming and saying goodbye at the same time.

Because the pines will go, and the mirrored mountains
And the chirping of birds.
The sea will empty, shattered glass, from north and south.
Your eyes will be emptied of the light of the day
As suddenly, of one accord, all the cicadas cease.

George Seferis, "The Thrush"

ALEJANDRO GONZALEZ / COLOMBIA

A Country of Poets

Colombia is a country of poets.

In one form or another the whole world is related by marriage to poetry.

The best part of that poetry is taken directly from life.

A country with 23,000,000 poets.

To try to make a selection would be a task like the pyramids of Egypt and it would take centuries. A task for a "colossus," which is not one of my natural attributes.

Many things influence the soul of our people (and as there are people who sweat oil; ours sweat poetry), in order that the miracle of the multiplication of bread and fish in the Gospel be repeated through the miracle of converting words into verses. Many magical things are mixed up there.