

## ΜΟΥΣΑ AND ΜΟΥΣΗ: TRANSLATION AS COLLABORATIVE ACT

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This year marks an anniversary in Greece. Twenty-five years ago this July, democracy was restored after seven years of military dictatorship, and many more of political turmoil and curtailed liberties. The past twenty-five years have been the most stable and liberal, not to mention prosperous, in the history of the modern country; one might even say they represent its maturity. 1974 marks a very different anniversary for the Republic of Cyprus, to which I will come in a bit.

For the moment, however, I'd like to note that this year marks a significant personal anniversary as well. Twenty-five years ago - possibly this March - I was sent to Greece as a sullen adolescent - an economical alternative to counseling - then avoided returning home for nearly six months. Eventually, I'd holed up rent-free in a vacant farmhouse on Crete, in the Hania citrus belt, teaching myself modern Greek with a pocket Teach Yourself Modern Greek, and trying to feel less like a tourist in an already touristed land. My signal that it was time to go home came when I was evicted from my farmhouse, which was to be used to sweeten a daughter's dowry. But I had one last stop to make before boarding a plane in Athens.

At that time, you could reach the island of Delos only by taking the single caique from Mykonos that motored over in the morning and back in the afternoon. You could also, in the absence of any accommodations to speak of on that archeological preserve, stay over in a sleeping bag, which is what I planned to do. So, having taken in the highlights - stone lions, the House of the Dolphins - I watched the caique return to Mykonos, taking with it the party of extrovert Parisians I'd pitched and yawed over with. This was the moment I'd been waiting for. I would spend the remaining hours of daylight communing with the stones and the ερημιά. A landscape emptied of people, but nevertheless littered with their relics. For me at that age - an awkward, private age - it was the ideal. Could I, with my limited knowledge and imagination - but with *Blue Guide* in hand - induce these stones to speak?

Unfortunately, before I could begin my interrogation in earnest, a ship appeared on the horizon, and grew larger, and larger. It wasn't one of those tin cans that ply the islands, but a brilliantly white floating citadel, from which a drawbridge lowered and - the horror! - debouched throngs of foreign tourists. Now, as I wandered up and down the ancient streets, I was just going through the motions. My real design was to be where these interlopers were not. Finally, a hardy, middle-aged woman caught up with me. It was from her lips, and in her accent (fittingly British) that I first heard - *really* heard - the word "Cyprus." Before that it had been for me only the most furtive of presences on the evening news, along with, say, Ceylon, or perhaps the Maldives - "hot spots" that provided a vaguely exotic backdrop to the more prominent troubles of the day: principally The War, meaning the Vietnam war. Now it took on flesh as a Greek phenomenon. Their cruise liner, my informant told me, bound for Cyprus, had been forced to turn back. There'd been a coup, and the President - one Archbishop Makarios - had been assassinated. (This turned out to not be true - he had in fact slipped out the back door of the Presidential Palace, then

under attack, and hailed a cab.) It would be a few days before Turkey invaded the island on the pretext of protecting its Turkish minority.

It is one of the blessings of my life that I happened to be in Athens when, that same week, the Greek junta fell. That night I joined the celebrations in Constitution Square - singing and dancing, along with chants of Εξω οι Αμερικάνοι—Greek for “Yankee Go Home”—I did my best to not take personally. Though I did comply soon enough, taking along my Teach Yourself Modern Greek and an attachment to the country that proved impossible to shake.

I'd like to say that such early experiences of a place shape one's later dealings with it, but it's probably more that they simply give us some terms for talking about it. In any case, some time later, when I came around to translating modern Greek poetry, my habits and preferences did not differ greatly from my preferred mode of viewing archeological sites. The fewer people involved, the better. Here I've been fortunate in my choice of writers. Either they were Timon of Athens types, like the surrealist artist and Athenian hermit Nikos Engonopoulos, or world celebrities like Yannis Ritsos with little time for small fry like me; or - as unfortunately is now true for both these poets, deceased. This left me relatively free to follow my own path: to choose the poems I wanted to translate, and to translate them as I saw fit. The poet Stanley Kunitz says that translating is like rebuilding a ruined city. If, walking the streets of Delos alone, I was free to re-imagine the Greco-Roman city in its glory, alone with a Greek poem, I was free to re-imagine it - if not into an English poem - at least into what I took to be a meaningful verbal event in English. Context and instinct - and a Greek friend with excellent English - served me well in negotiating the tricky bits. (It's usually what you *think* you know that gets the better of you.)

Translation is once again very much alive and contested in academic and theoretic circles. The main point of attack - in my sense of it - has been the so-called fallacy of “the transparent translation” - in Laurence Venuti's phrase. This attack, which is related to the more general assault on empiricism - has been launched from linguistic, post-structural and, more recently, postcolonial perspectives. I'm not sure it is to the translator's advantage to dwell on such matters - I remain a pragmatist when it comes to translation - but it was probably my awareness of these discussions, and their arguments against complacency, that made the idea of collaborating with a living, sentient author seem experimentally interesting to me. It was the Program in Hellenic Studies at Princeton that offered me the opportunity to act on this idea. And it was Lily and the Classics Department here at Virginia who, through their invitation to speak today, who given me the chance to present a few preliminary reflections. However, since this is still very much an experiment in progress, I decided that the best way to convey my findings would be in the form of a journal that I've been keeping over the past two months. Any attempt at conclusions or summing up would, I think, be premature.

The real impetus for undertaking this project, however, was the poetry of Kyriakos Haralambides. I had wanted to work with Kyriakos' poetry for some time - ever since Greek scholar George Savides recommended him to me fifteen years ago. It was a poetry that spoke with great authority, that had obvious ambition, and that addressed itself not just to Cypriot or Greek readers - and certainly not just to Athenian circles, which seems the case with much mainland Greek

poetry. It was also an uncompromising and at times baffling poetry. I think this must be true to some degree for all truly original poetry - and I've come to believe that Kyriakos' poetry is something new - though you'll have the chance to decide that for yourself at the reading this afternoon. For now I'd like to suggest some of my original uncertainty by reading a journal entry dated 2/13/99:

*I've just begun his third book - "The Figured Vase" - a book twenty-five years old, but nevertheless his mature style is beginning to take shape, and along with it, my anxiety, the anxiety his poetry has to some extent always provoked in me. The anxiety that somehow, I'm not getting it. That I am in some ways closed - as Cavafy would say "από τον κόσμο του έξω." For instance, I can't help but feel that these poems connect at some subterranean level with a variety of traditions in Greek poetry in which I am woefully under-read: the poetry of nineteenth-century writers like Dionysios Solomos, of δημοτικά τραγούδια, the world of Byzantine hymnists like the sixth century Romanos, who Kyriakos has recently translated. This in addition to the fundamental lexical challenge of Kyriakos's language, which incorporates scraps of Cypriot dialect, Κοινή, along with bits of patristic and Homeric Greek.*

*They're like a Byzantine church - for all their incorporations from earlier eras, not always dazzling on the outside, with their dusty bricks or gray stone, virtually windowless - like the Church itself not overly concerned with attracting the casual passerby. Yet like these churches that have stood so many hundreds of years, Kyriakos' poems are fashioned with a sure hand: the hand of a τεχνίτης - craftsman - and are not without satisfying verbal patterns (think of the decorative Kufic brickwork indulged in by later Byzantine church builders). It is their solid construction and sturdy materials that originally convinced me, for all my perplexity, that these were structures worth getting inside of.*

As so often with the churches in Greece, however, I found the doors locked. The question was how to get inside. The first thing you do when you want to get inside a Byzantine chapel is go looking for the villager with the key. Which, with the help of Princeton, is precisely what I did. Kyriakos was good enough to agree to come over for the month of March and work with me. I spent February reading his work, selecting poems, and doing a few preliminary sketches. And I also began my journal, which I continue with here.

2/22

*I am eager for Kyriakos' arrival. I imagine setting him down in front of his books - seven of them to date - now annotated with a rash of question marks and queries - with the command: Μίλα! (Speak!) Surely then the divine logic of his lines will shine through. But here my academic schooling kicks in, and I experience a moment of doubt. Am I not falling victim of the well-known fallacy of authorial intent? Has not the author been declared dead on arrival? Therefore is not my imagined interview a kind of necromancy, a sort of postmortem table-tapping? Of the three poets I am writing about in my doctoral work, two are safely in the grave, but one is alive and well in New York City. Did I have any plans to query him on exactly what he meant in this line or that line? And was I right to say that his work represents, etc., etc.? Not a*

chance. Here I invoked the universal law of academic privilege. Texts must speak for themselves.

And yet the problems was that on some level these texts were not speaking - or at least not speaking "my language." Who better to initiate me into their mysteries - necromania or no - than the poet himself?

Was I here approaching a crucial distinction between how a critic reads poetry, and how a translator reads it? (Something, perhaps, to be developed later.) On the other hand, wouldn't I be limiting my choices by allowing his postmortem - or at least postpartum - remarks to guide me? Alternately, was it fair to press him to explicate his own lines? And would my questions out of a different language, different culture - different hemisphere - make any more sense to him than his denser lines and longer leaps to me?

3/3/99

Kyriakos has arrived, and we've been busy getting him settled. But there's something else, too, tugging at me, holding me back. Should it be a guilty secret that when I translate a poem it becomes, in a sense, mine? Is there translation without appropriation? Without the yeast of human ego, how can a poem become alive in another language? As I listen to Kyriakos pronounce on the plurality of meaning, it's clear he intends to preside over this process.

This must be what a stepfather feels like, faced with a visit from his children's natural father. Suddenly his own rights, his own role, are thrown into question. (I have a crazy idea - something, indeed, that might occur to a parent on the eve of losing a custody battle: what if I keep my translations hidden, and only spring them on Kyriakos on the night of our first reading, when it's too late to interfere?)

But is it really a question of the ego? Isn't it more the English language acting through me, its hollow reed? Am I anything more than a butler to its prodigious appetite? Languages are cannibalistic. I can feel the English snap up the Greek words like the four-winged, six-legged bug that finds its way into one of Kyriakos' poems. Languages recognize no secondary masters. I don't believe those who say translation must inhabit some extraterritorial middle ground. Isn't it more like the farmers' combine that, in another poem, Kyriakos sees mangling his native city: the translator's language chews up the foreign original, and spits it out to the side of someone else's field.

Which raises another question. As yourself, as you read these poems from occupied Cyprus, how is translation like an invasion? Think about it, Yankee. Are you occupying these poems from a small island the way the Marines occupied Granada, Panama, etc., etc.? Rebuilding a ruined city, says Kunitz. But of course, it's our own cruise missiles that pummeled that city flat in the first place. And all in the name of freedom and independence. Because how else is that "text" to lead a healthy, independent life in English? And isn't that the point? To create a significant verbal experience for the reader who has no Greek - like the woman who looked over my shoulder on the bus and asked, "So what is that, Chinese?" No, more like Siamese, I think

*afterward, as in twins who must be surgically separated in order to survive.*

*I talk with my friend Peter, a writer and translator from German. "I like my writers dead," he tells me - in the case of his most recent author, half a millennium dead. Because, he goes on to explain, at some point translation comes down to betrayal. Death, however, is no guarantee, as he discovered when he translated Musil and found himself in endless tussles with the German executors. But his admission - "I like my writers dead" - has provocative Freudian, or rather Bloomian implications. In what way is the original poet like a strong precursor who, encountered at the crossroads of language, must be figuratively slain, or, at least, creatively misread in order to make room for his rival version? Call it the Robert Lowell school of translating.*

*Or is it more a mother thing? At some point the poet Robert Bly, at the height of his Iron John phase, blamed his early desire to translate on over-attachment to his mother. As if the original were a "mother" poem to which a translation were attached by an umbilical cord or apron string. Is the translator, in attempting to create something that can stand alone in English, exercising a psychological need to separate from the mother? Kyriakos, I am happy to say, bears no resemblance to either of my parents. But I still can't help worrying how these restagings of the family romance might work themselves out in the close quarters of our collaboration.*

3/3/99

*Our first interview is promising. In fact, it's nice to hear Kyriakos extemporizing on his own poems. It gives me new handholds on the bare branches of the Greek. What this means in practice I don't know, but it dawns on me it may raise ethical questions. When I come home, and while doing housework, something he said earlier triggers a thought, a new solution to what had been a weak ending - in English - of an otherwise powerful poem. And yet my new variation - an elaboration, really - involves an element that is not textually present in the poem, that derives from something Kyriakos happened to say, in conversation, some fifteen years after writing it. At the very least, I can hope it's in the spirit of the original.*

*And "spirit," I decide, is really what an author has to offer his or her translator. The aura that, for him at least, and presumably at the time of creation, surrounded and surrounds a word. This notion of spirit, I find, is the first thing to be jettisoned in current critical practice. Words are pried up from their context, and made to attest to all sorts of dubious allegiances. This is something I know about first-hand, of course, and not only from my academic work. There are times when polysemy is a translator's best friend, his ticket to freedom.*

*But at other times, when you're stuck, it can be a relief, liberating even, to suddenly have a word come clear that previously sat oddly in its context, or hazily in your frame of reference. It's as good as having a Deus Absconditus coming back to explain all of Creation for you. Only be careful: a long while has passed since creation day - for Kyriakos, sometimes as many as thirty-five years. He thinks he remembers, but what makes you so sure? Once or twice, I find myself correcting him. It is exactly that - the spirit - that he has forgotten. The context, the associative*

string. This forgetting is what leads poets to mangle their own poems in the course of revising them, all in the name of perfection - Keats' "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" being a case in point.

3/5/99

At a table in a noisy cafe, I am asking him about "The God-Wind," a poem over twenty years old. There's a note of excitement in his voice as he responds to my questions - the excitement of rediscovery: nuances, hidden pockets of meaning he'd forgotten were there, spring back to mind. He saves me from one or two gaffes. He points out details that will most likely be impossible to get across in translation: the word play on Constantia, the Roman name for Famagusta. Another word that looks Greek but which has particular Cypriot investments. Words that carry with them the music of folk laments for the fall of Constantinople. He unbraids images that are at times as difficult and rich as those of Derek Walcott. Then he launches into an exegesis of one passage I especially like - in fact, my very reason for translating the poem - and I have to ask him to stop. I love those lines. I've taken them inside of me, attuned my ear to their particular resonance. I don't want to understand them, or I want to understand them in my own way. His interventions make for an electronic noise as harsh as sent by fax machine through a telephone receiver.

3/6/99

I think we had a breakthrough last night, consulting over a couple of beers. Earlier, at my place, responding to a question of mine about a six-line poem, Kyriakos shot off onto a dozen other subjects, and I waited in near despair as that delicate little poem slipped farther and farther out of reach. Kyriakos swooped off on another fine digression, never losing the thread. When I gently nudged him back to the poem, he said, "Yes, but to finish what I started to say..." and plunged back at precisely the point where his digression began. I think of Henry Miller's ecstatic description of Katsimbali - the Greek raconteur and philologist he dubbed "The Colossus of Maroussi" - and feel terribly guilty. Never has the famed Greek art of conversation had a less appreciative audience.

A bar is different from my borrowed efficiency's tiny coffee/kitchen/dinner/work table. In a bar, you don't face your interlocutor. Gazing off into smoky space, you address yourself to a riveted audience of half-empty bottles. The same principle, I suppose, as the analyst's couch, or the screen and averted face in the confessional. Tonight, anyway, the system works. And then, of course, there were the beers.

Talk evolves from my terse questions about another of his terse early poems to a discussion of the more expansive and challenging poems of Αμμόχοστος Βασιλέυουσα, a sequence of over 130 pages apostrophizing his πατρίδα Famagusta, since 1974 in Turkish hands and therefore a forbidden city. The book's reputation, its bulk, and its associative leaps have daunted me. Aside from the skimmings and dippings of an earlier date, I'd only made it through the first third by the time Kyriakos arrived. I have selected one poem to translate because it is short, direct, topical. In it, he imagines himself, longingly, as a dog sniffing and scavaging about the courtyard of his family home in occupied territory. We then turn to other parts of the book.

*Now, as he holds forth on this or that poem about the Cyprus debacle, I listen intently, and am caught up. It's not so much any specific remark or elucidation, more the very motion of his words, the pattern of his thoughts, his energy field. I am beginning to experience them from his perspective and, unexpectedly, their wild cartwheels and tumbles make sense.*

3/8/99

*I'm going to run an experiment. I had seriously debated keeping my translations to myself until the last possible moment, then I remember the purpose of his being here. Of my being here. And decide such a stratagem would be in bad faith. So I have decided to test the waters. I choose the poem carefully: a minor lyric, in a way, characterized by the same λιτότητα - spareness of means - that characterizes the volume Θόλος [Dome] as a whole, and perhaps for that reason all the more demanding of rigor. In any case, not a poem, and thus not a translation, that I am as invested in as in some others. In some sense, therefore, "safe."*

3/9/99

*I've just had my interview with Kyriakos. It's clear he's going to be a pushover. All my control-anxiety was wholly misguided. The "interview" took place on the bus back from Quaker Bridge Mall where I had accompanied him on one of those shopping safaris that are de rigeur for any Greek traveler in the States (and not all that different from my own buying binges on the eve of leaving Greece).*

*There could have been no more propitious time to approach him. His eyes have the slightly glazed look of a panther fresh from the kill. I hand him the poem, and explain the words I've had to change, elements necessarily left out, or added in. He approves of everything. This, he explains, is exactly what a translator has to do. Frankly, he seems only passingly interested in the translation itself. A great relief. Our collaboration, it appears, will consist for the most part of my consulting him on semantic, philologic, and referential questions, and less of him judging the sufficiency of my English. And it is precisely in this capacity that Kyriakos come through, in the course of our homeward journey, when he mentions the New Testament provenance of the line, "and the ox and the foal of an ass / warm his straw bed with their breath." This poem comes alive for me in that line, and I realize it is no longer quite so easy to view it as something of a lyric trifle.*

3/17/99

*First warm day in a month, and we are sitting in the sun in a quiet patio - it's Princeton's spring break, there are few people around. I am trying something new: translating with Kyriakos physically present. I am working on a poem he has just written, in fact working from his handwritten manuscript - Kyriakos doesn't type - which means I'm doing two things I would not have thought possible. It does have its drawbacks. At one point Kyriakos pulls up his chair and is reading over my shoulder, glossing details that need no glossing, anticipating nonexistent questions, elaborating at length on simple answers, and generally keeping me from having my own thoughts. Finally, I shoo him away. (Fortunately, Kyriakos is mild of temper and doesn't take it amiss.) But even from the other side of the table, I have to half tune out his Greek*

*perorations, because it's English that I need to be hearing now: its own resonances and pitch that have nothing to do with the Greek. At moments, I think it is hopeless. At other times, however, I recognize that I am hitting on solutions that I would never have come up with on my own. There is a sense of synergy here, of the two languages whirling around each other like gusts in a dust-devil, kicking up some wholly unexpected but to my eye quite felicitous solutions. It remains to be seen whether any of these survive the substantial revisions down the road, when I inhabit a more exclusively English realm.*

3/18/99

*I guardedly observe that Dome, a book principally about the legacy of the Greek-Cypriot "missing" of the Turkish invasion - over 1600 - might be too heavily tendentious for my tastes. (I don't try to explain to him its unfortunate cognate in the issue of American MIAs in Vietnam.) He demurs, however, saying that on the contrary the book has been criticized in Cypriot circles for not being polemical enough. And he mentions the last poem in the volume, "Εν Γαστρί" ["In Thy Womb"] which according to one Greek commentator ought to be required reading for every Greek schoolchild. When I arrive home, I open to that poem tucked away on an uncut page at the back of the book. And soon find myself with tears in my eyes.*