NEOLIBERAL AUSTERITY AND LEFT MELANCHOLY

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Since the very start of the Trump Presidency, American poets have rapidly mobilized in news-making numbers and noises to participate in protests across geographical and generational divides. With a remarkable sense of urgency (witness *Boston Review*'s collection *Poems for Political Disaster*, published in January 2017), they have been repurposing old media and creating new modes to reach a public eager to harken to verse again. Many of these poets are experiencing for the first time what it means to write under national emergency and uncertainty, what it takes to join forces and raise your voice in defiance. This dramatic experience may make them particularly attuned to the voices of the Greek writers assembled in the splendid anthology *Austerity Measures: The New Greek Poetry*, edited by Karen Van Dyck (New York Review Books 2017):

> We stayed awake
> in the quiet of our small room
> stubbornly, whining
> like children treated unjustly
> waiting without dinner
> to grow up all at once
> in one night
> and finally receive
> the explanation for their unjust punishment
> and the world.
> (Danae Sioziou, 189)

The predicament that American poets fear will hit their country is similar to the infamous socio-political "crisis" under which Greeks have been living since the late 2000s, when the condition of precarity became normalized following the collapse of their economy. The consequences of public debt are more devastating than any foreign occupation:

> In the land of shadows
> naked things wait.
> Not to jump you or rush you.
> They have softer ways
> to break and tatter you.
> With indiscernible sounds,
> imperceptible movements
> they inhabit you.
> They learn you so well
> you become a passage
> you will never be able to pass.
> Their anonymity is the poison of this world.
> (Katerina Iliopoulou, 81)

Austerity measures are both suffered and counter-taken by numerous irrepressible writers. This expertly curated anthology is a record and measure of their endurance as captured in the work of younger people who feel that "height has vanished/from the height of circumstances/now we deal only in circumstances" (Kiriakos Sifiltzoglou, 323). Karen Van Dyck, the Kimon A. Doukas Professor of Modern Greek Literature at Columbia University and the preeminent translator from modern Greek of her generation, has collected 135 poems (nearly all of them from this century and some unpublished) written by 49 poets (most of them under 50 and some of them immigrants to Greece) and rendered in English by 28 translators or their own authors.

The etymology of the two words in the perfect title says it all. "Austerity" comes from the Greek *austeros*, whose meaning expanded in antiquity from "what makes the tongue dry and rough" to "harsh, severe." To cope with austerity, poets need to consider possible measures they may take (both in actions and in verse), in the quantitative, qualitative, poetic, musical, scientific,

and other senses of the word. That is, they need to estimate the meter, rhythm, beat, size, degree, and extent of what really matters when a people's tongue is rough and they need to speak under extreme adversity: "What fucker promised me to the moon/and I've become the gate that opens onto slaughter?/To fight your elements with poetry/— that's what devastation means!" (Yannis Stiggas, 53). Let us also recall that "meter," from the Greek *metron*, refers to a metric unit, a basic pulse, and a measuring instrument.

The contemporary Greek equivalent to the economic meaning of "austerity" is *litotis*, which comes from an adjective meaning "plain, meager." The English *litotes* is used in rhetoric to signify denial of the contrary, an affirmative expressed by the negative of the opposite (as in "not too bad"). It is a laconic and ironic understatement that intensifies. This rhetorical device is a fitting definition for a poetry constrained by conditions of austerity measures, which, in order to be effective, takes its own counter-austerity measures and, with tremendous resourcefulness, mobilizes rhetorical austerity (namely, litotes) to turn limited resources to creative ends:

> Learning that what is scarce is what takes charge
> Learning how Π and T lose their flat roofs
> How ζ and ξ dry up at the roots
> How vowels get murdered
> How language bubbles up
> An offering of the silent
> For those who grew silent
> (Thomas Tsalapatis, 219)

Technique functions as critique too.

It is particularly interesting that this poetry does not refer directly to the ongoing crisis, though it has been composed in its midst. It does not work as its mirror or commentary. After all, since its very inception, the Greek state has been placed repeatedly in debt by the West: "Gentlemen, don't let anything,/anyone, deceive you:/we were not bankrupted today,/ we have been bankrupt for a long time now" (Stamatis Polenakis, 231). Instead, poetry negotiates a far broader crisis, which permeates linguistic, topographic, and political representation, and is evident in other cultures as

well. The anthology is organized in a very creative way that helps the reader grasp all three kinds of crisis.

First, on the level of linguistic representation, "translation" is used here both literally and metaphorically. This is a bilingual "anthology of poems as translations" (Van Dyck) that boldly treats today's Greek poetry as already translated between various codes such as languages, registers, genres, and meters: "Play Grand Theft Auto./Lie on the ground./Don't cause trouble./An invasion, described in a once familiar language:/'If you are not contributing to (the) movement/then why are you here?'"(Theodoros Chiotis, 353–55). In addition, within this poetry Greek and English echo each other, as the latter is a major horizon of communication for most writers. Thus, although almost all the poems were originally written in Greek, their Greek was never pure in some unadulterated way since "language draws its every twist,/threshold, and tale from its own end." (Stathis Gourgouris, 395). In addition to hearing it vertically in terms of its diachronic trajectory of the last three millennia, we also hear Greek horizontally in terms of its mingling synchronically with all the languages with which it is conversing today. Moreover, all translators are writers with mixed linguistic identities who inhabit Greek in different ways, be they native, diasporic, literary, or scholarly. Broadly speaking, translation, viewed as a cross-fertilization between categories and modalities, helps us understand the Greek crisis cross-culturally. It also highlights the in-betweenness of poetics at the intersection of idiolect and idiom, fiction and theater, screen and song, or freedom and history:

> I want to understand
> (I try to understand)
> that which hurries to give the mind its freedom
> that which, at the heights of refinement,
> asks the mind for its freedom back
> the whole of history
> the script and the knife.
> (Dimitra Kotoula, 67)

A second, topographic view is strongly encouraged by the ingenious structure of the book that is based not on trends or generations but on venues of poetic activity. Moving from metropolitan Athens outwards to

the rest of the country, to the diaspora, the anthology maps several poetry scenes. It locates poetry centrifugally in overlapping sites such as magazines, small presses, bookshops, cafes, graffiti walls, airwaves, and the web:

> I like the fracturing of linearity
> Art that involves more senses
> Asking questions non-stop
> To row with gusto
> to beautifully dressed scenes
> Leading clichés around by the hand
> Street fights, codes, hunts
> (Kyoko Kishida, 145).

This distribution foregrounds the performative circulation: these verses are also meant for the stage of the slam, the square, the gallery, the theater, and the school. They also represent collaborative poetry coming out of intermedial synergy in creative cells where writers team up with artists of all persuasions and engagements to make poems happen.

What is performed in all these stages is the crisis of identity, especially the collective one. Poets navigate and negotiate their ethnic, national, class, linguistic, political, racial, gender, religious, and other affiliations: "Your life saunters along slowly/a little off center like a flag/Admit it! Admit it—/Which city's flag are you?/How many deaths/do you stand for?" (Yiorgos Alisanoglou, 277). They also explore local displacement in a global world, such as the plight of the homeless, the stranger, the foreigner, the migrant, and the refugee. The generalized crisis of representation is embodied and enacted in the realm of unstable and fluid identities that are posited and positioned:

> Thetis
> the one in position
> perhaps
> always the one who posits
> as we know even she
> who refused to be placed
> to a man to surrender
> becoming

fire wind water
tree bird fowl tiger
(Phoebe Giannisi, 117)

Quite a few translators in the anthology work accordingly in that, instead of seeking an identity between the original and its rendering, they take creative liberties with the Greek, producing a transcription more than a translation. Readers of Greek will be intrigued, and perhaps inspired to try their own hand.

The crisis of representation in language and identity evident in the new Greek poetry will resonate with American poets writing in the era of post-truth and post-gender. The intersection of verse and representation is a major stage for the tragic dilemmas of our time. It is in the third realm of representation, the political, that Greek writing is suggesting a highly unsettling attitude.

With basic artistic, humanistic, and democratic values under assault, American writers and their readers are responding in a powerful spirit of protest and opposition. They march literally and figuratively, determined to fight back by all means necessary and rise again.

The Greek literary scene is remarkably different: no feisty declarations against bureaucrats and bankers in Brussels and Berlin or popular calls to arms, not even vocal support for the bargaining Left, which has been in power since 2015. The fires of rebellion have been lit and extinguished too often in Greek history:

Voices, cries gather now from all around
streaming before the palace, cheering
setting fires in terror, praying
hoping
the fires go out abruptly
they scatter
times turn quickly in Greece
(Z. D. Ainalis, 227)

Now the prevailing mood is what I have called "left melancholy." It is a term that has been lifted from Walter Benjamin and filtered through Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholy to denote the distinct sense

that since the 1990s, together with the communist regimes, the two-century old revolutionary ideal itself fell:

> Goodbye forever to this brief
> age of freedom.
> Farewell unforgettable days and glorious nights
> and leaves swept away by the wind.
> We were young, we hoped for nothing
> and we waited for tomorrow with the blind obstinacy
> of the castaway who throws stones in the water.
> (Stamatis Polenakis, 233)

The messianic belief that the revolution would fulfill a human covenant and redeem history has been renounced. The younger generations feel "Imprisoned, lifers of *later*/We wait for it, it never comes" (Yiannis Doukas, 59).

The same mood prevails in another excellent anthology that covers complementary ground, *Futures: Poetry of the Greek Crisis*, edited by Theodoros Chiotis (2016). The bankruptcy of the revolution, along with the exhaustion of postcolonial emancipation (and even more, in the Greek case, the extraordinary compromises of the Left government with foreign creditors), have inspired in young poets a combination of resignation and resilience that we might call melancholic (as opposed to optimistic) dignity:

> And I was not afraid.
> It's due time things change
> it's time the water be left untouched,
> the birds be for the birds,
> it's time that Man—spiritual, pellucid—
> return to stardust
> and be gone; no mercy
> and no pride
> and no more talk of justice.
> Just cosmic stillness.
> And we, the little stars that light
> up in this eternal darkness.
> (Krystalli Glyniadakis, 139)

Living under the devastating economic deprivation that so rapidly followed the glorious 2004 Athens Olympics, people have learned to look at the ancient ruins through the ruins of the neoliberal order. Penelope now accepts that the reason why Odysseus is late is not the Sirens, Circe, or Poseidon: "It is that in the ancient world/by now it gets dark early/the earth isn't flat/and men sometimes get lost" (Chloe Koutsoumbeli, 315). Greeks do not envision liberation or advocate rebellion. They anticipate that the next revolt, much like Badiou's "event," will explode suddenly and dissipate fast, yet leave its mark, like a Velasquez court painting in which

> The obedient child
> goes wild
> without restraint
> at the very instant
> the delicious
> Infanta Margarita
> in one vicious
> whirl/smashes
> the fine
> porcelain
> salt cellar
> (Elsa Korneti, 295)

They are working closely together towards bottom-up communities of solidarity, towards a commons of sharing, founding, building, perhaps even leaving:

> All full of cracks now;
> we'll be surprised
> we stayed alive,
> under the pressure of so many threats.
> Those who greet us from afar
> are our old friends,
> they came to keep us company,
> on our travels
> (Apostolos Thivaios, 258)

This anthology questions categories, genres, registers, and histories in a "rhizomatic" (Deleuze and Guattari) manner to dramatize the crisis of representation in language (through translation), identity (through performance), and politics (through post-revolutionary melancholy). It illustrates the becoming of new multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, multi-generational, multi-medial Greek poetry as a map of intersections that lack center and unity, and instead work as lines of flight in a network of rhetorical, topographical, and leftist intensities: "Dreams come from far away places/The stones, the birds and I take on new forms of life/Dreams have their own road/And we live far away these days, like dreams." (Hiva Panahi, 415). It coheres around the refusal to mourn revolution and forget revolt. It feeds on the melancholic yet unyielding insistence on multiplicity and process, on roots that move and overspill, on measures that pulsate:

> I have no fatherland
> I live within words
> That are shrouded in black
> And held hostage . . .
> My words do not speak on the news
> They're out hustling every night
> My words are proletarian,
> slaves like me
> They work in sweatshops night and day
> I want no more dirges
> I want no more verbs belonging to the non-combatants
> I need a new language, not pimping
> I'm waiting for a revolution to invent me
> Hungering for the language of class war
> A language that has tasted insurgency
> I shall create it!
> Ah, what arrogance!
> OK, I'll be off
> But take a look: in my face the dawn of a new poetry is breaking
> No word will be left behind, held hostage,
> I'm seeking a new passage.
> (Jazra Khaleed, 157–9)