

## On Greek Literature

by Dr. Nicholas Papandreou

The first Greek book I remember reading when I moved to Greece was by Penelope Delta - wonderful name that - about a kid only slightly older than me serving as a go-between on the country's Northern borders during the Balkan Wars. Then my godfather gave me a book by Menelaos Loudemis called **Ενα Παιδί Μετράει τ'Αστρα**, "A Boy Counts the Stars," about a poor child trying to learn to read. This is how it starts.

*Ο αέρας φύσαγε σαν γύφτος. Ελεγε πως βάλθηκε ν'ανάψει κάπου  
μια θεόρατη φωτιά για να ζεστάνει τον κόσμο. Γιατί κρύωνε ο  
καημένος ο κόσμος τούτο το φθινόπωρο. Κρύωνε σαν αμαρτωλός.  
Κρύωναν και τα σπίτια αυτής της πόλης. Είχαν στριμωχτεί εκεί  
απάνου στην ποδιά του βουνού, απ' τα παλιά χρόνια, και τώρα  
μετάνιωσαν. Μα ήταν πια πολύ αργά. Τώρα είχαν γίνει πόλη.  
Σηκώνεται και φεύγει, έτσι εύκολα, μια πόλη;*

*The wind was blowing like a gypsy. You'd think it was trying to  
start some huge fire to warm the world. Because the world was  
cold this fall. Cold as sin. The houses were cold. They'd been  
squeezed into the mountain's apron a long time ago, and now they  
were sorry. But it was too late. Now they'd become a city. And it  
isn't easy for a city to get up and leave, is it?*

But then came the Greek dictatorship. Unlike the cold city in Loudemi's book, we could leave. We did, and went to Canada. There my apprenticeship in modern Greek books almost came to an abrupt end. The only smidgen of Greek literature which did get through to me came in the guise of the politicized music of the period. This music drew on poets like Odysseas Elytis. Poems like *The Axion Esti* thrust Greece into our revolutionary-minded sunken living room.

*Τη γλώσσα μου έδωσαν ελληνική -  
το σπίτι φτωχικό στις αμμουδιές του Ομήρου.  
Μονάχη έγνοια η γλώσσα μου στις αμμουδιές του Ομήρου.  
Εκεί σπάρτοι και πέρκες  
ανεμόδαρτα ρήματα  
...σφουγγάρια, μέδουσες...  
ρόδια, κυδώνια...  
σπάρτο και πιπερόριζα...  
Εκεί δάφνες και βάγια  
θυμιατό και λιβάνισμα  
τις πάλες ευλογώντας και τα καριοφίλια  
...κνίσες, τσουγκρίσματα...*

*Greek the language they gave me;  
poor the house on Homer's shores,  
My only care my language on Homer's shores  
There bream and perch  
wind beaten verbs,  
... sponges, jellyfish...  
... pomegranates, quinces  
... broom and ginger root  
...-laurel and palm leaves  
censer and incense blessing the swords and muskets...  
... the smell of roasting lamb...*

I didn't *return* to Greece when the dictatorship fell in 74 but instead took up the study of economics at a North American university. Then, one day a Greek-American professor teaching there gave me his book on the poet Yannis Ritsos. Here was a completely different Greece, dry, austere, tragically humorous, full of manly dignity, a Greece inhabited by the aged, the crippled, the one-armed and the one-eyed.

#### Ανοικοδόμηση (Ρίτσος)

*Τότες ανάψαμε τις μεγάλες φωτιές - βάλουμε το γέροντα στο βράχο -  
βγάλαμε τις αρβίλες μας - κ' έτσι κατάχαμα στο χώμα,  
δύο-δύο μετρήσαμε τα πόδια μας αντικρυστά πέλμα με πέλμα.  
Ο μικρός Κωνσταντής, ο πιό μεγαλοπόδαρος, χόρευε πρώτος.*

From the poem *Reconstruction*

*Then we lit the great fires; we set the old man on the rock;  
we took off our boots; and sitting like this on the ground,  
two by two we measured our feet, soles against soles.  
Young Konstandis, who had the largest feet, danced first.*

Ritsos notices *everything*: baskets full of radishes, a bucket of fish sitting on a doorstep, a child alone in the elevator with a *stolen* pencil, a plumber in his blue overalls lighting up a cigarette, the bicycle that leans against the wall, a wheelchair tied with rope to a lamp post. These were images of Greece that I immediately recognized. Ritsos unlocked a Greece that had lain dormant in my mind for years.

Living abroad, reading the poets, I tried to reconstruct the country from a distance. Not an easy task. The study of economics grew less and less compelling and the world of the imagination started to take over. I began to see my *own* Greece, highly political, full of crowds and I started to compose verbal snapshots. Some of them found their proper place in my first novel, others were quietly buried in the wastebasket.

Imagination won the day. At the age of thirty-five I quit my job in Washington to study the art of writing in Vermont and after that I returned to Greece -- to write. But I didn't set up shop on one of those heavenly Aegean islands or stark mountain tops like a turn-of-the-century Boheme. Instead I took up residence in a small home in a quiet Athenian suburb. Lots of books, a large desk, and *nooo* telephone. By the time I got one installed, two years had passed.

Here, surrounded by three skinny pine trees and a short and stumpy olive tree, with the loud call of the *paliatzis* selling second-hand goods from a small truck early each morning, I tried to catch up on the literature of my missing Greek childhood. But I was too old. I couldn't read them. Besides, my Greek was so much slower than my English that I grew impatient.

One fine day I picked out a worn paperback sitting at the bottom of a cardboard box and read the opening page:

*Μαζεύω τα σύνεργά μου: όραση, ακοή, γέψη, όσφρηση, αφή, μυαλό, βράδιασε πιά, τελεύει το μεροκάματο, γυρίζω σαν τον τυφλοπόντικα σπίτι μου, στό χώμα. Όχι γιατί κουράστηκα να δουλεύω, δεν κουράστηκα, μα ο ήλιος βασίλεψε.*

*I collect my tools: sight, smell, touch, taste, hearing, intellect. Night has fallen, the day's work is done. I return like a mole to my home, the ground. Not because I am tired and cannot work. I am not tired. But the sun has set.*

I was hooked. This was Nikos Kazantzakis. Here was an author who saw the word "story" written across everything Greek, across the foreheads of old men, in the songs of children and the smell of donkey dung, etched into the marble of ancient ruins. A sense of discovery, wonderment and humor, this was the way to enter Greece.

Here is Kazantzakis, traversing the countryside, pencil in hand, drawing his own portraits of Greece. In front an ancient ruin he spots a little old lady holding two figs and a bunch of grapes in her palm. She presents them to Kazantzakis as a gift.

*-- Και τί 'ναι εδώ; τη ρωτώ, [δείχνοντας τον ναό του Απόλλωνα].  
-- Ε δε βλέπεις; πέτρες.  
-- Και γιατί έρχονται από την άκρα του κόσμου και τις βλέπουν;  
Η γριά δίστασε μία στιγμή. χαμήλωσε τη φωνή της:  
-- Είσαι ξένος; με ρωτάει.  
-- Όχι, Έλληνας.  
Πήρε θάρρος η γριούλα, σήκωσε τους ώμους:  
-- Κουτόφραγκοι! έκαμε κι έσκασε στα γέλια.*

*"What's this all around us," I ask the old woman, pointing to the temple of Apollo.*

*"Don't you see? Stones."*

*"And why do people come from the ends of the earth to see them?  
"The old woman hesitated a moment. Then, lowering her voice,  
she asked me. "Are you a foreigner?  
"No, Greek. "  
Encouraged, she shrugged her shoulders.  
"Foreign idiots! " she exclaimed, bursting into laughter.  
(Report to Greco, p. 164)*

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*Κατεβαίνοντας στον κάμπο είδα ένα γέρο γονατισμένο στις πέτρες  
να σκύβει σ'ένα αυλάκι να βλέπει το νερό να τρέχει κι ήταν το  
πρόσωπο του βυθισμένο σε ανείπωτη έκσταση—θαρρείς, μύτες,  
στόματα, μάγουλα, είχαν αφανιστεί και δεν είχαν μείνει παρά δυό  
μονάχα μάτια πού κοίταζαν το νερό να κυλάει ανάμεσα στις πέτρες.  
Τον ζύγωσα:  
Τι βλέπεις, γέροντα; τον ρώτησα.  
Κι αυτός, χωρίς να σηκώσει το κεφάλι, να ξεκολλήσει τα μάτια από  
το νερό:  
Τη ζωή μου, παιδί μου, μου αποκρίθηκε, τη ζωή μου που πάει...  
(σελ. 165 Αναφορά στον Γκρέκο)*

*As I was returning to the plain, I saw an old man kneeling on the  
stones. He was leaning over a channel and watching the water  
run, his face bathed in inexpressible ecstasy. It seemed as though  
his nose, mouth, cheeks had vanished,- nothing remained but the  
two eyes which followed the water as it flowed between the rocks. I  
went up to him.*

*"What do you see there, old man? " I asked him. And he, without  
lifting his head or removing his eyes from the water, replied, "My  
life, my life which is running out... " (p. 165)*

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*Όλα στην Ελλάδα, βουνά, ποταμοί, θάλασσες, πεδιάδες,  
"ανθρωπίζονται" και μιλούν στον άνθρωπο μιά σχεδόν  
ανθρώπινη γλώσσα. Δεν τον καταπλακώνουν, δεν τον τυραννούν –  
γίνονται φίλοι του και συνεργάτες. (σελ. 165)*

*All things in Greece - mountains, rivers, seas, valleys become  
"humanized": they speak to man in a language which is almost  
human. They do not torment or crushingly overwhelm him; they  
become his friends and fellow workers.*

Ritsos, Kazantzakis, Elytis, my first teachers. I also began to listen more carefully to the language of the streets, the kitchen, the bedroom, and the coffeehouse. I learned that a clever person is an "eagle's talon," a tall man is a

"Cypress-lad," a piano is "tooth-matress," the earth is an "ant-sphere," a boy's erect penis is a "fakir's flute," and short people "kick up dirt when they fart." "Never scowl at the lowest steps," a saying goes, "since you need them to get to the top/palace."

Because of Kazantzakis I started to explore the Cretan language. There's a single word for a girl who is red from work, perspiring slightly - *Δροσοκαυκάλατι Drosokafkalati*. Her work-induced heat adds a certain charm to her appearance. I learnt that the Cretans are also famous for their rhyming couplets.

*Άλλους μαραίνουν οι καιροί οι πολέμοι κ' οι χρόνοι  
μα μένα με μαραίνουν οι στεναγμοί κ' οι πόνοι.*

*Others shrivel up from the times, the wars and years  
but me, I shrivel up with the pains and fears.*

*Αέρας τρω' τα ρούχα μου κι ο ήλιος τ'άρματα μου  
κι ένας μικρούλης έρωτας τρώει τα σώθηκά μου.*

*The wind eats up my clothes and the sun my knives  
and a small little love eats up my insides*

On another day, still collecting the elements of my fictional Greece, doing things like thrusting a fresh sponge into my face to recall the pungent smell of the sea, my brother Andreas gave me a thick book with a rather strange title: **Με το Φως του Λύκου Επανέρχονται** or "With the Wolf-light They Return," by Zyranna Zateli. Through it I entered still another Greece. The Greece of farms and the proximity of life to death. It's full of scenes like this: A woman is trying to encourage her younger brother to lick *honey from an ax* to take strength before he goes out to slaughter his first lamb:

*Ηρθε στον νού της ένας άρρωστος με πόνους μαρτύρια, που έφτανε να του πείς: "Αυτό είναι φάρμακο, γιάν να μην πονάς," κι άνοιγε έτσι το στόμα του, σαν θεονήστικο πουλί. Κι επειδή δεν υπήρχε φάρμακο για τους πόνους του, ή δεν υπήρχαν χρήματα γιά φάρμακο, τού έδιναν να καταπίνει ξεφλουδισμένες φακές ή κουκιά, κι αυτός όλο προσδοκία άνοιγε και ζανάνοιγε το στόμα του... Οι δικοί του δεν ζέρανε πιά με τι ν' απελπιστούν περισσότερο: με τους πόνους του: "Όμως τι σχέση έχει εκείνος ο δύσμοιρος μ' αυτό το παιδί," είπε στον εαυτό της η Κλητία, "και οι φακές που του έδιναν με το μέλι πού δίνω εγώ στον αδελφό μου;"*

*"Κοίτα..." του είπε ωστόσο, "δεν κάνει ν' ανοίγεις τόσο πολύ το στόμα σου, δεν θα σε ταΐσω με κουτάλι! Με την γλώσσα σου θα το γλείψεις, μόνος σου. Ακρη-άκρη πάνω σ' αυτό."*

*She recalled a sick person who was in great pain, it was enough to tell him: "This is medicine, to rid you of pain, " and he opened his mouth wide like a famished bird,- and because there existed no medicine for his pain, or there simply wasn't enough money to buy it, they gave him peeled lentil beans or chick-peas, and the expectant patient yawned and widened his mouth... She wondered what made the family more desperate: his pain and suffering or his hope that his pain would suddenly dissipate? "But what does all this have to do with this boy, " Cletia suddenly asked herself, "and the lentil beans they gave the sick man with the honey [along the ax head] I now offer to my brother?"*

*"Look, " she told her brother nonetheless, "there's no cause for opening your mouth so wide, I'm not feeding you by spoon! You're going to lick the [honeyed ax] with your tongue, by yourself. Along the edge, here!"*

Because of Zateli, I began to collect information on village superstition. From fishermen on the island of Hydra I heard about mermaid sightings. During a trip to the Peloponnese I learned that villages had their own "magic-women" who guaranteed a baby's sex through careful application of herbs and appropriate rubbings of rabbit fur.

I began to imagine *another* country, one filled with superstition. I learned about a priest in Piraeus who performed exorcisms in your home and placed hooks under your mattress to *snag* evil spirits. The habits of my closest friends suddenly came under scrutiny. Their behavior seemed tinged with irrationality. One of them covered his eyes when his soccer team took a shot at the goal. This was because he didn't want to cast the evil eye on the player and cause him to miss. Another friend always entered my home with his right foot first. I caught someone speaking a garbled abracadabra-type language over the telephone. When I lifted my eyebrows she told me she was curing her friends of the flu.

In spite of my Anglo-Saxon doubt for the supernatural, I now find myself switching off the TV set during crucial moments in championship games, just in case. Now I have a telephone but to date I haven't made any magical calls to cure my aching back.

In the meantime, as I grow increasingly Greek, I continue to explore the terrain of my fictional Greece, the Greece of my imagined memory, the Greece of my missed childhood. How? I read, I listen, I take notes and I wonder.