

How I Came to Translate Karyotakis by Keith Taylor

Keith Taylor, University of Michigan faculty member in English and co-winner, along with Prof. Bill Reader of Central Michigan University, of the 2004 Keeley and Sherrard Translation Award discusses the paths he followed on the way to translating the poetry of Kostas Karyotakis



It is difficult to follow the paths of imagination and curiosity. But that someone like me—a rather happy protestant from the Canadian prairies—has come to spend a decade or more trying to translate the poems of someone like Kostas Karyotakis—a morose and skeptical Greek who killed himself twenty five years before I was born—is a puzzle that is at least amusing. There are parts to the puzzle that I don't understand and probably never will, but I know that the pieces started falling into place early in my life.

My father is a protestant minister from a small and primarily rural denomination and he minored in New Testament Greek in college. Later he spent a couple of decades teaching the basics to the next generation of prairie preachers, so they would all know enough to preach the important sermon on the difference between eros, philos, and agape. The Greek alphabet, a Greek New Testament, and a few dictionaries were always around our house. Of course, I was a rebellious child, and—to my lasting regret—never spent the time to learn even the alphabet from my father, who would have loved to teach it to me.

My family moved from western Canada to Indiana when I was a teenager, and for many years I didn't learn to fit in to my new place. It was then I discovered books. And very shortly after discovering books, I found Nikos Kazantzakis. Certainly someone must have recommended Zorba to me, but I quickly read everything else that was in translation. I like to think that Kazantzakis's capacious spirit saved me from the wizened self-centeredness in Ayn Rand that the other bookish adolescents of my generation were reading. While still in high school, I began to look at the modern Greek poets, and by the age of nineteen—after I had fled to France for obvious bohemian reasons—I began reading Cavafy in his French translation. At different times in my intellectual development, I kept turning to Greek authors.

In 1976 I met William W. Reader. Bill had returned to the United States after a dozen or more years in Germany, where he had studied the New Testament in one of those famous German universities. At one time Bill shared an apartment with a law student from Rhodes who could just sit down and read the early church fathers Bill was studying as easily as if he were reading a novel. Bill decided to learn modern Greek to help him with his scholarship, and he has been working very hard at it ever since, returning to Greece almost every summer and spending his sabbaticals there.

I learned a lot about Greece from Bill. My wife and I visited him in 1983 and we spent most of a couple of weeks driving around the Peloponnese. I had with me an already dog-eared copy of the Keeley and

Sherrard anthology, *Voices of Modern Greece*. A Greek friend of Bill's read aloud some of the Cavafy and Ritsos poems in the original, the first time I had heard them.

Bill always takes language classes when he goes to Greece, usually the very demanding ones specifically designed to train translators for the European Union. Every now and then, he would also take a literature or culture class to help his reading. I know, for instance, that he read Kazantzakis's *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel* with Kimon Friar. At one summer session, someone introduced Bill to the work of Kostas Karyotakis. When he came back, Bill told me about Karyotakis, and I was surprised that I'd never heard of him. As I began to check out the name, I realized that here was a modern Greek poet with a significant reputation in Greece who had been seldom translated into English. The 15 poems wonderfully translated by Rachel Hadas were all I could find at first. Although I was not (and am still not) convinced by the bleakness in Karyotakis, I was startled by the precise yet lush language marshaled into such tight, even rigid forms. In every poem I looked at there was some startling imaginative turn.

Bill and I decided to start working on the poems. He did literal word for word translations and then we would surround ourselves with dictionaries and other kinds of reference material, trying to make an English poem out of what often seemed recalcitrant material. I remember our first weekend of work at my kitchen table in Ann Arbor. On the first day we spent eight hours trying to get eight lines we could live with. On the next day we spent six hours on four lines. It was painfully slow, yet was also exhilarating in some ways. The difficulties of the poems would often open up in interesting ways as we tried to understand them solely as poems rather than as translation exercises. My wife and daughter got used to the table covered with Greek dictionaries, Babinyotis and Stavropoulos, and some more obscure.

Shortly after we began the project, I introduced myself to Kostalena Michelaki, a graduate student in archeology at the University of Michigan. She was a customer in the book shop where I worked at the time, and I wanted to know if Greeks knew about this odd poet I was discovering. She responded immediately, made a joke about how bleak he was, and specifically referred to a couple of poems. It was obvious that she knew the work. As we talked I discovered that she was teaching a course, *Modern Greek 101*, and that Michigan had just begun a program in *Modern Greek Studies*. Shamelessly I asked if I could sit in and be a student in her class.

I worked hard on my Greek that first year. It was a wonderful feeling being with a small group of smart college Freshmen, all young enough to be my children, and I certainly didn't want to look bad in front of them. During my second year of Greek studies, I was already getting a bit distracted by outside work as a writer, so I could devote less time, and started falling behind the smart young people. The third year got even worse, yet I kept at, and was particularly pleased that now-under the direction of Vassilis Lambropoulos-we were actually reading poems in class. Soon the demands on my time got so bad I actually had to drop out of the conversation class during my fourth year, and I haven't made it back yet. I have jealously guarded my friendship with the *Modern Greek* program at Michigan, though, and was very happy to work with Artemis Leontis and Lauren Talalay co-editing the book that accompanied the big Cavafy show a couple of years ago.

But Bill and I were still working on Karyotakis. We published just a couple of our translations in small journals in 2001, and in 2002 were awarded a joint residency at the International Writers' and Translators' Centre of Rhodes. For five weeks in June and July we sat in a conference room at the Rhodes Centre, facing each other, and arguing over Karyotakis poems. Now I had a little Greek to help support my arguments, even if I still found it difficult to have a real conversation. The meltemi would blow through the open windows beside us, and when we took a break we went out to the veranda and watched the waves break in the sea below us. We seldom took a day off, and the staff, concerned about what must have seemed an unhealthy work ethic, would come down and tell us to make sure we enjoyed the island, that Rhodes was beautiful, that the restaurants were good. But we just worked away, finishing a polished draft of every poem Karyotakis published in books, and quite a few that he didn't. Even though not all the poems were important, it felt great to have accomplished something that no one else has done in English. Our friendship actually survived!

But there are some exquisite poems by Kostas Karyotakis. He was a poet of the first order who simply died too young to realize his obvious potential. Nonetheless a third of his work should be known widely- those poems are as interesting or more so than many of the modern Greek poems known by people who don't read the language-and probably another third certainly rewards the reading of it. My next order of business in this project is to try to get those English translations of Karyotakis poems out to a larger audience.

But still: why have I spent so much time with Karyotakis? Over the years I have come to be quite fond of him, have come to expect certain turns of phrase and certain attitudes toward life. When he varies those or makes fun of himself, he startles me. I sympathize with his sense of himself as someone unable to measure up to his models. I have come to realize that he wrote some moving, important poems despite terrific obstacles created by his environment and his personality. That's enough to keep me hooked.