

# Contemporary Greek Poetry as World Literature

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Ritwik Ghosh

## Abstract

In this paper I argue that Greek poetry is a living tradition characterized by a diversity of voices and styles and that Greek poetry is a vital part of contemporary World Literature. The diversity of voices in contemporary Greek poetry gives it both aesthetic value and political relevance. Greek poetry, as it survives translation into a number of languages, including English, gives us a model for the successful translation of texts in both World literature and Comparative literature. A thematic analysis of some poems is presented in this paper. The aim is not to chronicle the contemporary Greek poetic production but to show how Greek poetic tradition continues to expand beyond national boundaries.

## Keywords

Greek poetry, World literature, Comparative literature, Translation.



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World literature is today a thriving enterprise with texts read across national boundaries, in an international context, with readers reading literary texts in translations. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was the first person to formulate the concept of world literature, remarking that “National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach” (Damrosch 1). In his *Conversations on World Literature* (1827) Goethe reflects on poetry from Rome, France, Persia, and Serbia, and classical Chinese novels (Damrosch 18).

David Damrosch in *What is World Literature?* states that world literature is not “an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading” (Damrosch 5). Damrosch states that a work enters into world literature by being read as literature and by circulating into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin (Damrosch 6). I argue that contemporary Greek poetry by surviving translation, and being read as literature in translation has become a vital part of world literature.

The Greek poetry of Classical Antiquity which spans about a thousand years, from the eighth century BCE to the Second Century CE, and encompasses poets such as Homer, Hesiod, Sappho, Pindar, and the Athenian tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides have had a notable influence on World literature, through their influence on authors across the world and their works have been influential in the development of distinctive genres of literature such as epic poetry, lyric poetry and tragedy. (Constantine 3). Zhang argues that the comparative work is not for competition but appreciation and cultivation (327). He explains that we learn to appreciate the rigorous theoretical discussions of the art of literature, the various elements in different literary genres and their forms, the richness, the diversity as well as the affinities across different traditions in world literature (327).

In this paper I argue that contemporary Greek poetry is a vital part of World literature, since it is characterized by a diversity of voices and styles. It has aesthetic and political quality, reach and relevance. I also argue that Greek poetry, as it survives translation, gives us a model for the successful translation of texts in both world literature and comparative literature. World literature is multi-temporal, as it reaches across all time, present and past. It is multi-cultural, as it embraces all cultures. Hence,

contemporary Greek poetry constitutes a significant part of world literature.

The twentieth century saw a renaissance in Greek poetry with the appearance of poets like Kostis Palamas, C.P. Cavafy, Angelos Sikelianos, Yannis Ritsos, as well as the Nobel laureates George Seferis and Odysseus Elytis (Constantine 431).

Kostis Palamas's poem 'Gypsies' translated by Paul Muldoon, empathizes with the displaced and dispossessed Gypsy people, and points to their achievements in music. The poem shows both humanity and a capacious power of sympathy.

C.P.Cavafy (1863-1933) wrote both historical and sensual poems in an often appealingly straightforward style (Mendelsohn xvii). Poems such as 'Ithaka' evoke wonder and mystery. Many of Cavafy's poems evoke ambivalent meanings and emotions, giving the poems a particularly powerful resonance. Poems such as 'The City' evoke a qualified pessimism, skepticism and fatalism. The poem 'God Abandons Antony' has a dramatic power and a sense of nostalgia. Poems such as 'Philhellene' reveal Cavafy's pride in Greek culture and identity. Poems such as 'Kaisarion' vividly bring historical periods and events to life. The poem 'For Ammonis, Who Died at 29, in 610' has an intense dignity about it. Cavafy's poem 'Ships' is an extraordinary figurative representation of the process of artistic creation. It is through the imaginative representation and reinvention of the Greek past, that Cavafy has gained a wide readership outside the Greek speaking world in translation. The poem 'Waiting for the Barbarians' is politically relevant as it shows how politicians use the fear of barbarians, and by implication outsiders, to stir up political sentiments.

The poems of Angelos Sikelianos (1884-1951) such as 'On Acrocorinth' and 'The First Rain' celebrate the sensual grandeur of nature and the diversity and power of the human senses. Sikelianos celebrates the immediacy of the human senses and of human activity.

The poems of George Seferis (1900-1971) are evocative of a cosmic desolation and of the immensity of time and space. The first poem in *Mythistorema* contrasts the immensity of nature with the intimacy of human art and artifacts. The third poem in *Mythistorema* discusses the difficult themes of murder and mutilation with tragic force and power. The fourth poem valorizes human effort and endeavour. The fifth poem contrasts the immanence of life with the longing for transcendence. The sixth poem contrasts the interiority and exteriority of human life. The seventh poem explores the difficulties and sorrows of life. The seventh poem reminds us that forgetting has its cost. The eighth poem evokes homelessness, and the sense of not belonging anywhere. The poems of Seferis are evocative of the harshness and difficulty of life and the tactile presence of belonging in the world.

Yannis Ritsos (1909-1990) wrote song-like poems, which often have humanistic significance. The poem 'The Meaning of Simplicity' celebrates the meeting of hands. The poem 'Miniature' depicts a story with only a few images. The poem 'Women' is a meditation on death and war. Ritsos writes with extreme subtlety and delicacy of color and shading. In the poem 'Final Agreement' we are urged to recognize our true voice. The poem 'Circus' contrasts the artificial façade that is the circus with the beauty and

splendor of animals such as the lion. In the poem 'Understanding' simple, mundane, everyday things and occurrences give the poet warmth and peacefulness. The poem 'The Same Star' is enigmatic and ambiguous. The poem 'The Poet's Room' attributes to poetry immense importance and power. The poem 'The Last Hour' is a recognition of human innocence. The poem 'After Death' is an enigmatic exploration of the theme of posterity. The poem 'In the Ruins of an Ancient Temple' paints a scene of ordinary life in the backdrop of an ancient temple. The poem 'Freedom' describes the scene of a mountain. The poem 'Eurylochus' portrays the divergent fates of those who fail and those who succeed. In the poem 'Return II' Ritsos describes both the beauty and the ugliness of the world. The poem 'The Tombs of Our Ancestors' argues against grand monuments and gaudy decorations for the dead. The poem 'The Decline of the Argo' argues that with time all things fade. The poem 'Penelope's Despair' rewrites poetic tradition by showing Penelope unhappy at the return of Odysseus. The poem 'Court exhibit' describes the act of looking at eyes as a revelatory act. The poem 'The Distant' describes the unapproachable as a mysterious power.

Nikos Gatsos (1911/4-1992) wrote the surrealist poem 'Amorgos'. 'Amorgos' presents a dizzying range of images and its vast descriptive range is overwhelming. 'Amorgos' presents a phantasmagoria of mysterious images. The poem ends with sustained descriptions of beauty and loveliness. The poem 'Evening at Colonos' attributes to ancient books magical properties and power. The poem 'We Who Are Left' retains hope in the future and hopes to make the earth into a place fit for children who are still unborn.

The poetry of Odysseus Elytis (1911-1996) has an atmospheric quality to it. The poem 'Aegean Melancholy' desires to give the sustained impression of peacefulness and calm. Elytis has the power to sustain a particular emotional state or tonality. The poem 'Drinking the Sun of Corinth' paints a picture of extraordinary beauty and connects the external world with the interiority of the human heart. The poem 'The Mad Pomegranate tree' creates an ecstatic state which is sustained throughout the poem in addition to its energetic climax. The poem 'Body of Summer' is an ecstatic celebration of the human body in the Summer time. The poem 'The Axion Esti' is a celebration of the Greek world and the Greek language. It also celebrates God. The poem shows the intense pride the poet feels for his country. The poem 'Small Green Sea' has surrealist elements. The poems in *Maria Nefeli* construct the character of Maria Nefeli as a poet herself. Maria Nefeli's voice is juxtaposed with that of an antiphonist or other speaker. The poem 'Transfiguration Day' speaks of freedom from chains and freedom with open wings. The poem 'The Alfa Romeo' is a comic poem comparing the Parthenon with a sports Alfa Romeo car.

Nikiforos Vrettakos (1912-1991) in the poem 'The Chorale and the Dream' talks about the beauty of polyphonic voices, which the children of peace will one day sing. The poem 'The Olive Picker' is a moving poem about the death of the poet's mother.

Costas Montis's (1914-2004) poem 'To Constantine Cavafy' is a light-hearted poem that states the poet is amazed that Cavafy never wrote about the Nile, for the Nile

made the city of Alexandria possible. Montis gently chides Cavafy for ignoring the Nile as irrelevant.

Takis Sinopoulos (1917-1981) in his poem 'Elpenor' evokes the enormity of history in which individual lives are buried and forgotten. 'Joanna's Invitation' is an extraordinarily beautiful poem about the invitation. The poem 'The Beheading' is about a woman who orders the beheading of her husband. The poem 'The Window' evocatively talks about the phases of the moon, seen through a window. The poem 'Magda' evokes the deep emotions associated with war.

Miltos Sachtouris (1919-2005) in the poem 'The Savior' states that there is no salvation. The poem 'He Is Not Oedipus' is a lamentation of war in surrealist imagery. The poem 'The Soldier Poet' is a meditation on the life of a soldier. The poem 'The Collector' is about not being scared in this fierce world. Michalis Katsaros (1920-1998) in his poem 'Contrary' speaks against those in political authority.

Eleni Vakalo (1921-2001) in her poem 'Genealogy' displays an archaeological consciousness and is interested in the relationships between animals and between ancestors and their descendants. Nanos Valaoritis (1921-) in the poem 'Poetic Art' describes the various ways a poet may write poetry and literature.

Tassos Leivaditis (1922-1988) in the poem 'Coming Home from the Pharmacy' is an enigmatic poem about loss. George Pavlopoulos (1924-) in the poem 'The Cellar' seeks justice for a crowd of chained people. Manolis Anagnostakis (1925-2005) in the poem 'Epilogue' imagines the end of poets and poetry. In the poem 'I Speak...' the poet talks of the devastation of war. The poem 'The Decision' is about the importance of decisive decisions. The poem 'My Child Never' is about the importance of telling the truth to children. In the poem 'Thessaloniki, Days of A.D. 1969' the poet speaks of the pervasive beauty of Greece and states that wherever he travels, Greece wounds him.

Nikos Karouzos (1926-1990) in the poem 'The Nobility of Our Comedy' talks of serenity. In the poem 'Poem on Tape' the poet uses color to great effect. The poem 'The Rocks of Hydra' is about losing innocence by gaining a greater awareness of desolation.

Nikos Fokas (1927-) in the poem 'Group Photo' desires to be classless, cosmopolitan and to transcend history. The poem 'Random Sounds' states that life on the streets is harrowingly painful. Titos Patrikios (1928-) in the poem 'Allegory' talks about the felling of an oak tree. The poem 'Weekend' describes waking up on a weekend. The poem 'A town in Southern Greece' states that the nights of Greece never change. The poem 'Words Again' states that words are important to our existence. The poem 'The Lion's Gate' states that lions and their images are terrifying. The poem 'Carnival Night' is about keeping hope alive when imprisoned in a dark cell. The poem 'A Family Lunch' is about the transience of time and days. The poem 'My Language' states the poet's desire to preserve his language. Dinos Christianopoulos (1931-) in the poem 'The Park' describes the divergent activities that take place in a park in the morning and at night.

Kiki Dimoula (1931-) in the poem 'The Letter' describes how envelopes bring silence. In the poem 'Sign of Recognition' the poet recognizes a statue of a woman with tied hands as a woman. In the poem 'Photograph 1948' the poet reminisces about her

past. In the poem 'Single-Room Symptom' the poet talks about travelling alone. Dimoula's poetic voice is idiosyncratic and unique.

Tassos Denegris (1934-2009) in the poem 'Patriotism' takes consolation that dogs remain patriots. Nana Isaia (1934-2003) in the poem 'Monstrous Game' talks about a game that never could have been played. Stylianos S. Charkianakis (1935-) in the poem 'The Twentieth Century' writes about civility amongst strangers. The poem 'Oracles of the Virgin' is about the sounds buried inside us.

Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke (1939-) in the poem 'Penelope Says' writes about the thoughts and feelings of Penelope. The poem 'The Triumph of Constant Loss' is about the transience of time. The poem 'When the Body' celebrates the human body. The poem 'The Piglet' is about life's shortcomings. The poem 'In this House Settling Time's Account' describes a house and the memories stored there.

Kryiakos Haralambidis (1940-) in the poem 'Tortoise Hunting' describes hunting a tortoise. Yannis Kondos (1943-) in the poem 'Bronze Age' describes archaeological excavations. The poem 'The Old Café' describes the thoughts of a café owner. The poem 'The Pharmacy' is about the thoughts of a pharmacy owner. The poem '23' is about Franz Kafka. The poem 'Computer Memory' is about the failure of computers to be human. Michalis Ghanas (1944-) in the poem 'Greece is not only a wound' describes the effects of war.

Lefteris Poulis (1944-) in the poem 'American Bar in Athens' talks about the poet Kostis Palamas, and the relationship between older and younger poets. Dinos Siotis (1944-) in the poem 'Tinos' describes the island of Tinos. The poem 'Practical solutions' is a sympathetic view of the barbarians. The poem 'Retrieved in Translation' is about the ubiquity of translations, as found in daily life.

Anteia Frantzi (1945-) in the poem 'Wreath' states that the poem is a tiny silence. Athina Papadaki (1945-) in the poem 'Ironing' describes the act of ironing clothes. The poem 'Kitchen Cupboards' describes the various items inside a kitchen cupboard. The poem 'Marriage Bed' describes a wedding night.

Nasos Vayenas (1945- ) in the poem 'Apology' states that his verses have a prosaic style. The poem 'Spinoza' describes the philosopher Baruch Spinoza. The poem 'Episode' is a comic poem about death. In the poem 'The Ballad of the Uncertain Lover' the poet states that poems grow with sorrow. The poem 'On the Sublime' states that heights take the breath away.

Rhea Galanaki (1947- ) in the poem 'Greek Landscape' describes the Greek horizon. Maria Laina (1947-) in the poem 'Fresco' describes a body. Yiannis Patilis (1947-) in the poem 'Attempt Against Silence' speaks about the nature of silence. Vassilis Steriadis (1947-2003) in 'The Bad News' writes a comic poem. Yorgos Chronas's (1948-) poem 'Ode to Marilyn Monroe' is an intensely rhythmic poem that imagines the life of Marilyn Monroe. Dimitris Kalokyris (1948-) in the poem 'To Mine Own Son Romanos' tells his son to make a point of memorizing journeys. Pavlina Pampoudi (1948-) in the poem 'Autobiographical' states that the house with small windows is secure.

Jenny Mastoraki (1949- ) in the poem 'Then the Trojan horse said' comically compares a wooden pony to a Trojan horse. In the poem 'Note' the poet comically talks about her own name. In the poem 'The Underground' the poet talks of the hair of men who have drowned.

Greek poetry is distinguished by its high aesthetic quality, its diversity of styles, its ideational depth, and the wide range of its voices. The high survivability of Greek poetry in translation makes it a model for world literature and comparative literature, for it allows us to see and investigate how literature may be successfully translated and yet maintain high aesthetic quality. Greek poetry possesses a deeply literary character, as evidenced by the craftsmanship of the poetry. Greek poetry benefits by entering into World literature through translation, as it gains new nuances and interpretations in translation. It is an interconnected world and reading a part of it illuminates the rest.

The expressive possibilities of Greek poetry are various and profound. The Greek language is enriched by the poetic use of vernacular expression (Greene 582). The use of local dialects and diasporic idioms has given Greek poets an extraordinary expressive power (Greene 582). C.P. Cavafy, for example, skillfully mixed the formal idiom, Katharevousa, with the quotidian spoken idiom, the demotic.

The future of literature is one of literary inundation, with the number of books of literature ever-increasing beyond what any one person can read in a lifetime, and of increasing globalization as texts from hitherto neglected languages and regions gain entry into World literature through translation. However, Damrosch specifies that "world literature is not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time" (302). By this he means that works designated as world literature should not be credited too much for transnational, but rather that they be considered as a way to connect to cultures and times other than our own. Greek poetry can serve as a model for the future of world literature and comparative literature, due to its success in surviving translation, and its sustained literary, aesthetic and ideational qualities. The sustained expressive and aesthetic quality of contemporary Greek poetry, which survives translation largely well, makes it a vital part of world literature.

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### The Author

#### Ritwik Ghosh

St. Xavier's University, India

Email: [ritwik.ghosh1@gmail.com](mailto:ritwik.ghosh1@gmail.com)

### The Article

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