The Poetics of Pain

Lament and Elegy in Modern Greek Literature

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Abstract

Modern Greek poetry has been influenced by a tradition of lament that is still practiced in rural Greece, and by the tragic events of modern Greek history. In contrast to the elegiac tradition, laments and their women practitioners ascribe a positive value to pain. Male poets of the generation of 1930 made use of the imagery of folk lament in their poetry, and women poets of the second half of the 20th century addressed the dead directly as their village counterparts still do. The Asia Minor catastrophe of 1922 dominated 20th-century modern Greek literature and drew on another traditional poetic form, the “lament for lost cities.” More recently, songwriters have mourned the political and economic tragedies of contemporary Greece in lyrics that seem much closer, in their expression of pain, to the tradition of lament than to elegy.

Keywords

Modern Greece – laments – pain

In modern Greek, the word ‘elegy’ is not often used for the poetry of mourning. In parts of rural Greece, people still mourn their dead with traditional laments, generally performed by women. Like the ancient Greek elegies, dirges, and laments for the dead, of which we have many examples in tragedy and lyric poetry, they are formal expressions of the pain of loss, not only performed at a grave site or in the face of death, but in the face of other losses – migration being the most common, but also the loss of cities in the eastern Mediterranean that once had large Greek populations, particularly Constantinople and
Smyrna. Laments are also sung for the dead Christ at Easter as part of the Holy Friday liturgy called the Epitaphios Logos. All Greek laments are rhythmic and musical expressions of loss, and despite the distance between the folk tradition and literary poetry, I argue that laments have influenced the modern Greek literature of mourning. Like the modernist poets of England and the United States, modern Greek poets, male and female, have generally rejected the conventional elegiac poetics of consolation and praise, but in doing so they share with traditional laments a bleak and comfortless vision of death and loss. Yet such laments are valued, even enjoyed. If there is pleasure in lament, it is because laments have created what might be termed a poetics of pain. Pain is not simply felt, it is held onto as something to treasure. As one Greek lament of a mother for her son puts it:

My child, what do you want me to do with my love?  
I can't sell it, nor can I give it away.  
I'll take it to the goldsmith to gild  
and I'll make a charm and a cross, a cross and a ring,  
and I'll wear the ring, I'll hold the charm  
and I'll pray to the cross to tell me my son lives.

Saunier, 124

Not only is there a value in pain, one that should be preserved, but according to the lyrics of laments, there is pleasure in the activity of lamenting. In an article about ancient Greek elegy, Gregory Nagy talks of the sensuous pleasure of elegy, “derived from the pleasure that women take in passing on their own sorrows.” “Such,” he says, “are the pleasures of elegy.” (Nagy Ancient). But do women take pleasure in passing on their sorrows, and is that pleasure sensuous, as Nagy suggests? A Greek folk example suggests so: “I prefer to lament than to eat or drink,” as one lamenter says.

The conventions of elegy differ from those of lament, although much of what Peter Sacks says in his study of English elegy could apply equally well to lament. In both cases there are poetic conventions that include repetition, refrain, and a formal structure, and in both genres a certain amount of artifi-

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1 For a detailed discussion of laments for the loss of cities, ancient and modern, particularly in the Mediterranean, see Bachvarova et al. The Fall of Cities.
3 This and all translations from modern Greek are my own.
4 Karen Weisman Ancient Greek Elegy.
ciality is inherent. Under the influence of painful emotion, the poet is, as Sacks points out, confronted by the “artificial nature of his own words.” (1985: xii). In the case of elegiac poetry in English, self-consciousness induces “an enforced accommodation between the mourning self on the one hand, and the very words of grief and fictions of consolation on the other” (ibid). If we think of the poetry and songs of mourning in Freudian terms as a substitute for something else, for the unrecoverable dead, or that “only once the loss is recognized can the griever continue the work of mourning by withdrawing his attachment from the dead” (Sacks, 1985:24), then we are in some sense deliberately distancing ourselves from the source of our grief. Here is where a gulf opens between elegy and lament, and it has to do with a willingness to embrace pain as a natural and desirable stimulus to poetic expression. Laments do not withdraw attachment from the dead. They communicate with the dead, usually addressing them directly. The work of mourning, in traditional lament, is to preserve attachment and to ascribe a poetic and emotional value to the pain of grief.

1 The “Generation of the 1930s” and the Lamenting Voice

It may be argued that the distance between folk lament and the poems of Greece’s sophisticated, urban poets is great. Conversely, I argue that modern Greek poets, consciously or unconsciously, avail themselves of a tradition whose sensibility is as “modernist” in its refusal of conventional, especially Christian consolation, as that of any poets writing in the English language. Take, for example this lament from Mani in the Peloponnese, in which a mother says:

Listen old priest,
Go away and preach somewhere else
and if there’s a crossing to Hades
and a way to the underworld
go and find your cantor
the false Logothetakas
and let his song accompany him
and let my own son be your censor-bearer.

Maniot lament. KASSIS, 1979–81

Or this:

Curses on you Death, great traitor that you are,
You take children from their mothers, sisters from brothers,
You separate couples, married to one another
Who swore an oath to Christ on the Holy Bible
Not to be separated as long as the world is the world.

1939, Kefalonia, Saunier 346

These laments, despite being composed in a country where the Orthodox Church still plays a powerful role, rarely refer to paradise or a comforting vision of the afterlife. Instead, the lamenting female voice is heard not only in songs about death but is employed more broadly to include every kind of loss. The songs of the Aegean islands, with their gentle dance rhythms and attractive melodies, include laments for emigration and for sailors lost at sea that are anything but comforting. Some of the most beautiful folk poetry of Greece comes from this tradition such as this song from the Dodecanese called “My Treasure”:

Ah! Curses on you, foreign lands!
My jewel, my treasure,
you and your fine things.
Softly, softly, softly and humbly.

Ah! You took my child,
my jewel, my treasure,
and made him your own.
Softly I tread the earth.6

The makers of these laments are almost exclusively women, who address what they regard as the direct cause of their pain – foreign lands that tempt their sons to emigrate, and the “treacherous” sea that drowns their menfolk.7

Another entire class of Greek folksong concerns the loss of cities. The oldest are for the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453. Twentieth-century equivalents address the fall of Smyrna to the Turks in 1922 and the subsequent expulsion of approximately a million Orthodox Christians from Asia Minor. The tradition is not, of course, a new one. Troy was the city that came to symbolize, for the ancient Greeks, the classic fallen city, mourned in the Iliad, but even the iron age poem ascribed to Homer looks back, according to scholars of the ancient Near East, to laments from Sumer and Ur that date to the second

6 Traditional, my translation.
7 A bi-lingual selection of the lyrics of these Aegean songs can be found in Holst-Warhaft Nisiotika. For a discussion of the relationship of these songs to lament see particularly chapter 8, 162–171.
The Biblical Book of Lamentations (interestingly expressed in a female voice) was another example Greeks were familiar with, and one similarly dependent on the ancient Mesopotamian tradition.

The loss of Smyrna was a seminal event in modern Greek history. Not only did it end the grand but delusional dream known as the Megali Idea (the Great Idea) that Greece might recapture the lost center of Orthodox Christianity, Constantinople, but it filled the towns and villages of Greece, especially Athens, with refugees, many of whom would become leading figures in Greek society. In literature this massive uprooting of people was reflected in the novels and poems of a group of writers known as the “Generation of 1930.” Among them was the poet George Seferis, whose family came from Vourla, in Asia Minor. Seferis never recovered from the sense of living in exile; his family settled in a country that failed ever to represent a real home to him. Like the prose and poetry of a number of his contemporaries, his writing was filled with references to a lost, longed-for world, to “the memory of a great happiness” that is stored in the lip of a well (Mythical Story 2) or in the waters (4). What is lost, in Seferis’ poetry, is a place where the mournful, permanently exiled protagonists of Mythistorema (Mythical Story), had ancestral roots, where ...

The olives with the wrinkles of our parents
the rocks with the knowledge of our forefathers
and our brother’s blood alive on the earth
were a powerful joy, a rich order
for the souls who knew their prayers.

Refugee poets like Seferis and novelists like Ilias Venezis, Kosmas Politis, Yiorgos Theotokas and Fotis Kontoglou were children when they left Asia Minor. Their loss of place was linked to the loss of their childhood, creating, as Peter Mackridge wrote, a double burden (Mackridge 75–83). Both losses are lamented in a literature of nostalgia that bathes the landscape and cities of Asia Minor in a golden light. Too young to have experienced the horrors of the great fire that destroyed Smyrna, or the panicked withdrawal from the Asia Minor shores, the writers of the Generation of the 1930s mourned a homeland they idealized.

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8 See Bachvarova, “The Destroyed City” and Jacobs, “The City Lament” in Bachvarova et al. (editors) The Fall of Cities. Bachvarova argues that the makers of the Iliad consciously looked back to these Mesopotamian models.

9 For a discussion of the musical laments for the lost city of Smyrna, especially the amanedhes,
Fotis Kontoglou entitled a chapter of his book about Aivali, the city of his childhood, simply “Moiroloi” (lament). He describes weeping as he writes: “As I write down in my mind your golden days that were lost, my heart contracts. Was it a dream do you think? Was it a magical delusion?” Somehow, he tells his readers, he has managed to live through the winter in exile in a state of numbness but now that spring has returned, he sees in his mind the springtime landscape of his home “and a scalding wound in my heart torments me without mercy. I think about Spring in my rocky mountain and my eyes stream.” (1962:74).

2 Mourning the Endless Catastrophe of Modern Greek History

The “Generation of 1930” came to maturity as writers at a time when a series of other catastrophes descended on a country overrun by immigrants with no means of support. The economic depression of the late 1920s and 30s, the military dictatorship of General Metaxas in the late 1930s, the German occupation of the country from 1940 to 44 and the civil war that lasted until 1950 were followed by a brief period of economic and cultural recovery. Then came another military dictatorship that lasted from 1967 to 1974. Those who fought in the resistance against the Germans and on the side of the Left in the Civil War, including many who had come as refugees from Smyrna, were as scarred by torture, imprisonment, and exile as they were by the Asia Minor catastrophe. The poetry of the fifties and sixties in Greece, distant in mood from the nostalgic literature of the 1930s, nevertheless produced elegiac poems celebrating the heroic deaths of mostly young men, but also women.

The term “elegy” does not often appear in twentieth or twenty-first century Greek poetry, nor does it appear in the title of the poem by Odysseas Elytis translated into English by Keeley and Sherrard as “Heroic and Elegiac Song for the Lost Second Lieutenant of the Albanian Campaign.” (1981) The Greek title is “Άσμα ηρωικό και πένθιμο για τον χαμένο ανθυπολόχαγο της Αλβανίας”. A literal translation would be “A Heroic and Mourning Song for a Second Lieutenant of Albania.” Its focus is on the briefly successful struggle of the Greeks against an

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sung and recorded by refugee musicians, see Holst-Warhaft “A Sudden Longing: Lamenting the Lost City of Smyrna.” In Bachvarova et al., op. cit. 2016.

10 The modern Turkish city of Ayvalık on the coast of Anatolia approximately opposite the island of Lesvos.
invasion by the Italian army via the mountains of Albania. The dashing young man killed in the Albanian campaign is hymned in extravagant but traditional Greek folk style:

He was a handsome young man. The day he was born
the mountains of Thrace bowed to reveal
the wheat rejoicing on the mainland's shoulders.
The mountains of Thrace bowed and spat
once on his head, once on his chest, and once on his tears ....

There are passages in Elytis' poem that look not so much to Greek folk models but to perhaps the best-known lament in modern European literature, Federico García Lorca's great llanto for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías:

Oh! Don't look, oh look at the place where
where life left him. Don't say
don't say the smoke rose high, the smoke of the dream
just so one moment, just so one
just so one moment deserted the other
and just so the eternal sun, the world!

Elytis' poem is a lament not only for a lost youth but for a campaign that was ultimately lost, ending when the Germans came to the rescue of the Italians, defeating the Greek army and occupying Greece until 1944. From a wealthy family, Elytis had led a privileged life, but his first-hand experience of war in the Albanian mountains had a devastating effect on him. Having reached the same rank in the army as the dead youth – second lieutenant – his identification with the death youth was both physical and spiritual. He had published two books of poems heavily influenced by French surrealist poets. Then he published his single lament in 1945 and was silent for 14 years. Despite the precise description of the wound that killed the young man and the horror of the blood oozing from his forehead, Elytis cannot refrain from celebrating the beauty of a young man, killed in the flower of youth during a campaign that gave modern Greece a moment of military glory. Not surprising, perhaps, that Elytis' translators should call the poem an elegy.

And yet when he came to write his masterpiece, Axion Esti, with its lyrical apostrophes to the islands of the Aegean and its women, its “Gloria” for the beauty of Greece, Elytis inserted passages of prose describing the horrors of warfare on the muddy slopes of the Albanian mountains, and the betrayal by Greek of Greek during the German occupation and civil war, as if prose was the only language he felt was suitable for such material:

Night after night we walked without a break, one behind the other, all of us blind, struggling to pull our feet out of the mud where we were stuck in up to our knees. Because more often than not it was drizzling out on the roads, as it was inside us. And the few times we made a stop to rest, we didn’t exchange a word; serious and silent, we’d share our raisins one by one by the light of a small pine torch.

Axion Esti, ‘The March toward the Front’

Yiannis Ritsos belonged, like Seferis and Elytis, to the Generation of 1930, although his background and political beliefs could not have been more different. Ritsos was an idealistic leftist who suffered appalling torture and exile and died still a loyal Communist. And yet, as a poet, he was exquisitely sensitive to small details, to the least heroic moments of life, to women. Many of his fellow leftists were murdered and he lamented them in verses as moving as any of the folk laments. In the poem Neighborhoods of the World, by focusing on the buttons of a dead man’s jacket he produces one of the most heart-stopping poems in modern Greek literature:

Think of two hands clasping one another
and you without any hands,
two bodies embracing one another
and you asleep under the earth,
and the buttons of your jacket lasting longer than you
under the earth,
and the bullet wedged in your heart not decaying
when your heart, that so loved the world,
will have decayed.

1957

12 The poem was first published by Ikarus in Athens in 1959. Twenty years later, Elytis won the Nobel Prize for Literature, largely on the basis of the poem, which was set to music by Mikis Theodorakis.
This is not only heart-wrenching, but coldly graphic, even macabre in its details, just as the laments for the dead in the folk tradition are macabre in their descriptions of the dark and gloomy afterlife presided over by the figure of Death (Charos), a dark rider on horseback who carries off men, women, and children without mercy to his underworld home, sometimes feasting on the bodies of children with his wife, Charontissa.\(^{13}\)

Ritsos’s greatest poem of mourning, one he kept working on for many years, was a lament for a young man shot by police in a strike of tobacco workers in Thessaloniki in 1937. Seeing a newspaper photograph of the man’s mother cradling the body of her son in her arms, Ritsos was inspired to write a poem he first called, simply, “Lament.” Later he changed the title of the poem to “Epitaphios”, and added verses that portrayed the mother rejuvenated, joining a heroic procession of protest. There was an increasingly uncomfortable juxtaposition between the heroic and the lyrical elements in Ritsos – the exquisite miniaturist and the militant hero. I suspect political correctness had something to do with the change of the title of this poem that begins as a mother’s lament and ends as a rather bathetic call to revolution. The title “Epitaphios” links the dead man to the Holy Friday service, where Christ is mourned, but believers know he will rise again. It also suggests the ancient “Epitaphios Logos,” the funeral oration inaugurated by Pericles to celebrate the heroic death of soldiers who had fought in the Battle of Marathon. Heroes were not, as Pericles reminded his listeners, to be mourned by weeping women but by proud citizens in full control of their emotions.\(^{14}\) And yet no Greek poet, male or female, has mimicked a mother’s lamenting voice more movingly than Ritsos in the early stanzas of Epitaphios that the composer Mikis Theodorakis memorably set to music:

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\begin{align*}
\text{My son, flesh of my flesh, heart of my heart,}\\
\text{Little bird of the poor courtyard, flower of my desert.}\\
\text{Where did my bird fly? Where did he go? How could he leave me?}\\
\text{Cage with no bird, fountain with no water.}\\
\end{align*}
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\(^{13}\) The depiction of the underworld in modern Greek folklore is discussed by inter alia, Margaret Alexiou (1974) Holst-Warhaft (1992).

\(^{14}\) Nichole Loraux (1986 1–9)) called the Epitaphios Logos “the invention of Athens” Demosthenes had said “They alone in the world deliver funeral orations for citizens who have died for their country.” (Against Leptines, 141).
How could your eyes close and not see me weep?  
And you don’t move, you don’t listen to my words.

Where did my bird fly? Where did he go? How could he leave me?  
Cage with no bird, fountain with no water.

How should we categorize a poem like *Epitaphios*? It is written in the voice of a grieving mother, and yet it is not written by her. It borrows imagery from both folk and Byzantine-Christian traditional poetry – the son as a bird, the dry fountain, the flesh of my flesh – but the bereaved mother’s voice is adapted by a male poet as a poem of mourning for a young worker whose death in a strike symbolizes the martyrdom of the Greek Left, of which he is a fervent adherent. Adding to the ambivalence of the poem, when it was set to music by Theodorakis, was the fact that it was performed by a male singer singing in the style of the blues-like *rembetika* music popular with working-class Greeks. Renaming the poem gave it Christian associations, but it remained, for Greek listeners, a mother’s lament for her murdered son. It caused a furore in Greek intellectual circles because of its many contradictions, but above all for its mingling of different registers of artistic expression – learned and popular, “highbrow” poetry and “lowbrow” music.15

The poetry of the Generation of 1930, which included the two Nobel Prize-winning poets, Seferis and Elytis, was almost exclusively a male phenomenon. The flowering of modern Greek literature from the 1930s to the 1960’s occurred against a background of mass starvation, occupation, war, and persecution. Living in a backwater of Europe and writing in a language that depended on translation if it were to have any international recognition, Greek poets looked to western European models for inspiration as they tried to establish a new national literature. Seferis looked to England, particularly the poetry of T.S. Eliot, whose work he admired and translated. Elytis looked to France, and the French Surrealists. Ritsos, like Kostas Kostas Varnalis, Tassos Leivaditis, Manolis Anagnostakis, and other poets who were active in Greek political struggles, spent much of their lives living and re-living the tragedy of the Greek Left, and lamenting the loss of a generation of political martyrs who died unheroic deaths in prison camps or lined up against a wall and shot by firing squads.

Elegy was a poetic language they rejected in much the same way their counterparts in England and the United States had done. Elegy, or at least the con-
ventional elegy that expressed resignation or consolation was made obscene by the manner of modern death in war. The rupture that modern theorists of elegy such as Jahan Ramazani (Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney, 1994), or Diana Fuss (Dying Modern: A Meditation on Elegy, 2013) have remarked on between the traditional elegiac poetry of mourning, and the anti-elegiac, modernist refusal of the traditional poetics of redeeming loss was common among the poets who lived through World War I, whether as combatants or observers. American non-combatant poets such as Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, and British poets such as Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and David Jones, who experienced the horrors of trench warfare firsthand, both refused the elegiac poetry of consolation. And by rejecting consolation and staring coldly at the finality of death and the decay of the body, these seemingly revolutionary modern poets were closer to the traditional laments once common in most of Europe and still performed in parts of rural Greece than they were to the elegiac poetry of mourning that preceded them.

In Death’s Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve, Sandra Gilbert analyzes not only modern death, but the death of the pastoral and its inevitable companion, the elegy. She quotes Wallace Stevens’ lines from “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” ...

This is the mythology of modern Death
And these, in the mufflings, monsters of elegy,
Of their own marvel made, of pity made.
Collected Prose and Poems 374

3 Greek Women Poets of the 1960s – Stifled Mourning, and State of Siege

Modern Greek women poets of the generation that followed the internationally celebrated writers of the 1930s were as influenced by Dickinson and Stevens as they were by Greek poets. And yet the cold eye and refusal of consolation were typical tropes of their traditional laments. Emerging as nationally respected poets in the late 1960s and 70s, their baptism by fire was not the German Occu-
pation and the Civil War, but the military dictatorship of 1967 to 74. Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke and Kiki Dimoula, both of whom died in 2020, were the oldest of these poets. They wrote memorable poems of mourning, none of which could be described as elegiac. Anghelaki-Rooke addressed her mother in a long poem she calls “My Mother and Satan” that veers between satire and self-pity, desire for knowledge and loss:

On Good Friday
the Virgin becomes the personage of the day again
and my own mother emerges from the marble.
she no longer wears the pink
she was buried in
nor is she going steadily down
along with her box.

...

Mother
funeral with many faces
hats and social events
stories don’t reveal you
they just name you
place you, reveal you
but I want the in, in, in,
the inside of your skin
the little mechanism of your breath,
and that other one,
the hobgoblin
of your thought.
How much holiness did you have?
How much rust?
How much of the peace
you are born with?

How far this poem is from the mourning poetry of those giants of the 1930s! Anghelaki-Rooke’s poem is shocking in its failure to mourn, its greed for knowledge, its conflation of Christian and pagan imagery. The poet resurrects the body of her mother without achieving any further knowledge of this woman in her hats, obedient to her social obligations. The focus of Anghelaki-Rooke’s mourning is, as in all her poetry, herself. Her failure to gain any knowledge of
her dead mother, her melancholy when a lover leaves her, her awareness of the approach of death – these are the stuff of lament but not, I think, of elegy. Perhaps self-pity is one of the salient characteristics of lament. As Anghelaki-Rooke admits, what matters to the grief-stricken is their own feelings – what folk-laments called the “uncurable wound”, the unassuageable pain of absence.

Like Anghelaki-Rooke's, Kiki Dimoula's laments for her husband are bereft of the usual trappings of mourning. Instead, they are filled with resentment at the meaningless of photographs as aides-memoire:

I have no news of you.
Your photograph fixed.
You look as if you're coming,
You smile as if not.
Dried flowers beside you
Keep repeating ceaselessly
Their unadulterated name *semprevives*
*Semprevives* – everlasting, everlasting
In case you forget what you are not.

I have no news of you
Your – your photograph fixed
Like it's raining without really raining.

It returns the body to me like a shadow.
And like we'll meet one day
Up there.17

Just as photographs fail to resurrect her dead husband, an orchestra of porcelain figures fails to resurrect her dead mother who admonished her not to break them as a child. In the end she is left with unsatisfactory substitutes for the dead, and yet she cannot refrain from writing. She asks herself whether the poet is “the blind helper of the magician word … who hypnotizes insupportable pain into peripatetic pain.” Is it he, she asks herself, who “persuades/those all-black mothers to live/to live on their children’s tomb/into the depths of old age?”

The village women only have what the poet has, “the magician word.” Dimoula recognizes that this is what enables them to go on living. They don’t

17 From *Χαίρε ποτέ* (*Never Farewell*).
relinquish pain, or substitute anything for what has been lost. Instead, they survive by reiterating pain, living on their children’s tombs, lamenting.

4 The 1967–74 Dictatorship and the Stifled Silence

A younger group of women poets who came to maturity during the dictatorship – Jenny Mastoraki, Maria Laina and Rea Galanaki are discussed in Karen Van Dyck’s perceptive book Cassanda and the Censors: Greek Poetry since 1967. Unlike their older contemporaries, these poets agreed at first not to publish under a regime of censorship and suppression, but they eventually contributed, with a group of male colleagues, to a collection entitled Eighteen Texts. A poet to whom less attention has been paid and who wrote her best-known poem in prison, was Rena Hadzidaki. Hadzidaki was arrested with other known lesbians, and held in a cell of Bouboulinas Prison at the same time as composer Mikis Theodorakis. Fellow-prisoners collected the scraps of paper she had written and discarded in her cell, and smuggled them to the composer, who would set the long poem “State of Siege” to music after his release, using her pseudonym ‘Marina’ to protect her. Unlike the poets who appeared in Eighteen Texts, Hadzidaki cries out her desperate lament in uninhibited language. “How shall I sing,” she says, addressing her lover, “when the voice you loved has been stabbed?”

The wounded light after curfew, the inexplicable noises, the breathing. The senseless sacrifice, the siege, the absence, the guard's cigarette. And I will speak only this language.

... Far, far away, life is heard. High, high above the lights shine – perhaps the lights they stole from us, the lights they’ve stolen from our city, and the memory of the last sunset and the mountains around, ours. Far, far away you still exist. You must exist.

Time has been warped. The years to come, distorted. You know where to find me –

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18 Anyone interested in poetry, or its absence, during the 1967–74 Greek dictatorship should consult this excellent study of poetry during those years.

19 Eighteen Texts, published in 1972, after censorship was officially lifted by the regime.
I, the fear, I, the death,
I, the relentless memory,
I, the remembrance of your hand’s tenderness,
I, the sorrow of our ruined life.

Hadzidaki may despair, but we sense the tomb of her prison cell is a temporary resting place, that there is a throbbing energy stored in her anger which will not be wasted in death. The poet herself reaches out for life, for the only possible source of strength – the generation that will follow her:

As for me, they won’t be able to kill me,
but I imagine the only ones who will understand
will be the children
rich in our inheritance,
for the first time.

Hardened in memory, hardened by us
perhaps they’ll read in time the clumsy messages of our penultimate shipwreck,
correcting the mistakes, erasing the lines.
By then there’ll be nothing left of me,
neither the remorse that I was destined to become
nor my touch on your hand
nor my truest possession, my language.
and my body, dead perhaps, but whole again, will rest
surrounded by the memory of you and of the sun-filled life.

1974

Hadzidaki’s extraordinary *cri de coeur* seems closer in spirit to lament than to the verses of her contemporaries. Like many traditional laments, it is a mourning song for herself, addressed to a lover she doubts she will see again.

In 2016 Karen Van Dyck put together a bi-lingual anthology of contemporary Greek poetry that she called *Austerity Measures*, translated by a number of poets and translators (van Dyck *Austerity*). As its title suggested, it was poetry published in the years of economic austerity that began approximately in 2008. I read through it searching for poems lamenting the misery of urban life, the sudden reversal of many Greeks’ fortunes. Instead, with few exceptions, there was an ironic refusal to lament, to admit the nightmare into the poetry. And when I tried to remember which poems had delivered the sort of body-blow that Ritsos or Elytis had delivered in the elegy-laments
written in the 1960’s, or Anghelaki-Rooke and Dimoula in the 70’s, it was hard to think of a single example. I realized I had to look elsewhere for such poems.

5 Song Lyrics and Lamenting Voice

Modern Greece has been unique in Europe in the quality of its popular music. In the 1960s an extraordinary synthesis of poetry and music took place led by Mikis Theodorakis and Manos Hadzidakis. They took the great poetry of Greece and combined it with the popular music of their day. The result was that Greeks were singing the poetry of Seferis, Ritsos, Elytis, and Gatsos in tavernas, at demonstrations, in football stadiums. Theodorakis had read poetry with an eye to setting it to music all his life. In the post-dictatorship period he turned to the poems of poets he felt represented the spirit of the times, including Kostas Tripolitis.

There were also lyricists who may have written poems, but regarded themselves as the makers of song-texts. Other songwriters began writing their own memorable texts. And since so many of the generation who came to maturity in the 1960s had much to lament, their lyrics included many powerful elegy-laments.

For the generation who came of age during the stultifying years of the military dictatorship of 1967–74, no poetry was more important than the song-texts of Dionysis Savvopoulos. Now that Bob Dylan has been awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, it is a reminder to consider the song-lyric as an important poetic genre. In the case of Greece, songs, whether based on existent poems and lyrics or written as songs, have been as influential as any poetic texts in defining the spirit of an age and lamenting loss. Savvopoulos’s songs from the 1970s include a number of elegy-laments, some for individuals, some for his generation, some for the wretched state of urban Greece in those years, when the only escape from poverty was temporary migration to Germany as Gastarbeiter:

Look, wherever I look,  
the whole of Greece a hovel,  
hovel, hovel of winter  
and you talk like a deadbeat.

People on the sidewalks  
want pretzels and lottery tickets
like herds of sheep at the ministry – permits for Germany.

Savvopoulos denies what he writes is a song:

No, no, [he insists] this isn’t a song,
it’s the leaky roof of a hovel,
the roach picked up by a bum
and the informer on our tails.

1976:27

Despite his denial of it being a “song”, for a generation of Greeks that came of age in the dictatorship, the lyrics of his songs were the most popular laments for the condition of Greece at the time, expressing, as they did in a series of blues-like laments, the political and economic misery of the period, but also recognizing the reality of Greece as an urban society bereft of the values that had once sustained its village life.

Because of the unusually high quality of Greek popular music, Greeks are accustomed to hearing poetry sung. Theodorakis and Hadjidakis had set the poets of modern Greece to music, but songwriters also wrote lyrics that were memorable poetry. One of the most interesting of modern lyricist-poets is Lina Nikolakopoulou. Often collaborating with the composer Stamatis Kraounakis, she created a slightly wacky, sometimes tragic voice that I hesitate to call lamenting, but that seems, to a generation of Greeks, to express the peculiar atmosphere of contemporary urban Greece, so full of sadness and irony. Her song “A Drop of Torture” is typical:

It’s torture to be hungry
but specially tormenting is
love that’s missing –
with one you head out to eat
before the body returns
the sorrows of the world
devour it ...

2007

In September 2013, in the midst of an economic crisis, the anti-fascist Greek rapper Pavlos Fyssis was murdered by members of the neo-fascist organization Golden Dawn. What poets had been searching for in their poems composed in a time where “austerity measures” had destroyed the economy and driven
people to suicide, was best expressed by Fyssis in a rap-lament written shortly before he died:

The world has become a big prison
and I look for a way to break the bonds.
I have a place waiting for me there,
I have to reach a really high peak
So I stretch my two hands up high
to steal a little light from the shining stars.
I can't bear it down here and the misery
and the sadness of the people.
is nearly drowning me.
Σιγά μην κλάψω, 2013

Perhaps the songwriters of Greece have been the ones to best capture the pain of modern Greece. Theirs is a cry of pain that has risen from the streets of Athens as the rembetika songs did the 1930s. The poetics of pain that inspired the songs of refugees from Asia Minor and their Piraeus neighbors re-surfaces during hard times in song. Economically, politically, and culturally, modern Greece has had much to lament and little to elegize. And yet there is great beauty in their suffering – a love of language, of music, and an ability to transform pain into art, and as they say themselves, to make the bitter, sweet.

Works Cited


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