The Homophonic Imagination: On Translating Modern Greek Poetry

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When I translated Jenny Mastoraki's prose poem "The Unfortunate Brides" (1983) I drew on the beat and even the syllabic count of the Greek to create a rhythm that was legible, but new in English:

> . . . the way a roóster lights up Hádes, or a gílded jaw the speéchless night,
> a beást jángling on the rún, and the ríder búbbles up góld.

For Anglophone readers, the four phrases make up a recognizable stanza, though somewhat unusual with two long beats in the first two phrases and three shorter, faster ones in the last two. Newness arose not simply from the surreal imagery, but from the sound on which it rode.

To focus on the sound of the source text is to run counter to the dominant translation strategy, which focuses on meaning. This is true more generally, but also in the case of Modern Greek poetry. Translations such as those by Edmund Keeley and Phillip Sherrard introduced the poetry of C. P. Cavafy, George Seferis, Odysseas Elytes and Yannis Ritsos in an idiom that reads easily in English and makes the living tradition of myth and history readily available to an Anglophone audience.

The Greek tradition, with its notion that sound is meaning, complicates the picture. It is not that sound doesn't have meaning in British and American poetry. We have only to think of Wordsworth and how he incorporated the ballad stanza to bring folk spirit and authenticity to his poetry to understand that sound is a container of cultural significance. But in the Greek case, meter isn't imagined as additional information that situates the poem in a tradition and a culture; it is seen as the very stuff of political and historical consciousness. The fifteen-syllable line of the folksong that recurs in Modern Greek poetry is called "the political verse" (*o politikos stihos*). From the nineteenth-century national anthem of Dionysis Solomos to the prose poems of a contemporary poet such

as Jenny Mastoraki, meter and rhyme are integrally related to the project of nation-making that began with the War of Independence in the 1820s and ended with the recent economic and political crisis.

Making meaning through sound is common fare in Modern Greek literature. This happens intralingually, where six different ways of writing the "ē" sound make homophonic rhymes such as Cavafy's walls (τοίχοι, pronounced tēchē) and fate (τύχη, also pronounced tēchē) an immediate way of hammering home a feeling of being trapped. But it also happens interlingually, where words from a host of different languages show up in the Greek tradition speaking of common Balkan and Diasporic experiences. The name Karaghiozis means "black eyes" in Turkish, but it is the name of the hero of the Greek shadow-puppet theater whose claim to fame is outwitting the Turkish Pasha. As the Greeks say, mixing Greek with the language of a more recent oppressor, Mussolini: Una ράτσα (ratsa), una φάτσα (fatsa) (one race, one face), i.e., Turks, Greeks, Italians, are all the same people, and all look alike! What becomes evident is that in the Modern Greek tradition, homophony is working overtime.

The importance of sonic sense in Modern Greek poetry poses a challenge for translators. When Eleni Sikelianos and I decided to try to bring over the booming echo of a cannon in our translation of Dionysis Solomos's battle poem "Free the Besieged" (1845), we resorted to assonance and rhyme. The idea was to foreground lyricism, but also to present the strange mix of idioms, forms, and unfinished drafts that characterize Solomos's work. Rudyard Kipling had tried his hand at a few stanzas of the "Hymn to Freedom," but in his version the weirdness is gone. We get a familiar English ballad. Instead of making the poem at home we tried to bridge Greek and English with translingual sound patterns to create a more modernist poem. Here is a fragment of one translation:

> Resounding
> in enemy air
> another sound sounds
> like an echo there.
> They hear it as it soars
> with a horrible blast
> that lasts for hours
> and the world thunders.
> (Van Dyck 2009, 406)

We refracted the oo-sounds of the original (*grikoun*, *tou ekthrou*, and *antilalou*) into the ow-sounds of the English "resounding," "sound," and "hour," and then recreated the ABAB rhyme scheme in a free verse heavy with slant rhymes: "soars" and "horrible;" "blast" and "lasts;" and "sounds" and "thunders." By attending to sound and the oral tradition of the folksong, we created quatrains that also carried an impact in English.

But let's see how paying attention to homophony works in my translation of Mastoraki's poetry. Here is the whole translation of the poem with which I began:

> The Unfortunate Brides
>
> As in sad ballads, chased with sobs and glorias, in dresses, long and red, and ankle-length, in hunting boots, the dowry promised once, now soft and moss-grown, with flames and fuming and wild laughter, so they won't see him threaten, they leave—
>
> the way a rooster lights up Hades, or a gilded jaw the speechless night, a beast jangling on the run, and the rider bubbles up gold.
> (Van Dyck 1998, 93)

Although the Greek text is a prose poem, the fifteen-syllable line, often broken into the standard seven- and eight-syllable halves, periodically surfaces. If the challenge with Solomos was to find a vowel sound and form of repetition that could work in both Greek and English simultaneously, here it was how to create a line that was legible in two different traditions. This poem appears in a section in which each poem takes its title from a different tradition of folk songs—those about the underworld, about unfortunate brides, etc. It paves the way for another section in which poems do what they say: songs sing, prayers beseech, spells entrance. It was these performance poems that I found most challenging until I learned to give in to the rhythm and sound of the Greek. I took the fifteen-syllable line of the Greek, and even the caesura between the two halves, and crossed it with the anapests and trochaic quatrains of nursery rhymes. Think of "Ride a cock-horse":

> Ride a cock-horse to Banbury Cross,
> To see a fine lady upon a white horse;
> Rings on her fingers and bells on her toes,
> And she shall have music wherever she goes

This enabled me to keep the sound of an animal galloping—"a béast jángling on the rún" and "and the ríder búbbles up góld."

This attention to the fifteen-syllable line and beat is even more obvious in the translation I did of the spell poem since it isn't just in the final stanza, but structures the whole poem. Here I broke the line into groups of three five-syllable sections with two beats each:

> Fíve for black véspers,/ thrée for the príest,/ húrry to the chúrch,/ and arríve
> on tíme/ tén for the brónze thread,/ ánd for the réd mare . . .

Twice for emphasis I added in two syllables, "how the water/ maddens with a backward wind . . . " And again at the end, "watch him, he will drown them in a rotten skiff." Here is the full translation:

> **A magic spell to protect you from**
> **snake bites, evil enemies,**
> **and all the healed wounds**
>
> Five for black vespers, three for the priest, hurry to the church and arrive on time, ten for the bronze thread, and for the red mare, how the water maddens with a backward wind, six for the witches next to the well, ferry them across with his one arm lost, thirteen for the shipper and again for the saint, up and down the dungeon the eleven ladies pace, and one for the son of the dragon sire, watch him, he will drown them in a rotten skiff.
> (Van Dyck 1998, 111)

Mother Goose provided an intertext in English that could give my translation a rhythm with a history situating it within a literary tradition.

Homophonic translation is not a popular strategy. Louis and Celia Zukofsky's Catullus is the only translation I can think of that has had some influence on American poetry, but I am arguing that in the case of a highly sound-conscious tradition like Greek it can have interesting repercussions. Interlingual homophony works by bringing over sounds from one language and grouping them into different words in another. In the Zukofsky translation, for example, *dixit* becomes *dickered*. By analogy, homophonic translation can also be used to bring over a sound (a long vowel or a sigma). One can even do this with a beat as I have been showing.

This effect figures prominently in Greek-American multilingual literature and translation. The poet Olga Broumas, who emigrated to America when she was seventeen, lives and writes between Greek and English. In a class she gave for my students at Columbia University she explained how the Greek language with its history of quantitative verse enables her to use vowels differently in English, to make them more open and longer than they usually are:

> The only reason my poems are the way they are is because when I say an "a" I say "ah" [as in "father"]. I don't say "uh," that ubiquitous American schwa, where different vowels "a", "o," "u" all get pronounced the same [as in "what" and "mud"] ... I *hear* vowels, and I *see* vowels, and when I write I'm aware of what vowels are doing.

This is a part of a larger experimental practice she calls "a politics of transliteration" in which the sounds of Greek make new meanings possible in English. This happens in her first Yale Younger poets collection *Beginning with O* (1977) and, in her later collaborative efforts, such as the book she wrote with Jane Miller entitled *Black Holes, Black Stockings* (1985), but also in her translations of the Greek Nobel Laureate poet Odysseas Elytes. Her translations, like her own poems, stay close to the sound of Greek. In describing her experience translating Elytes she explained:

> As different as Greek and English are, you can do this. . . . Even though they don't have the same number of syllables, they still have the same basic stresses. So even if a line is longer, . . . the song is still there. . . . For instance the Greek in this line from Elytes' Το μονόγραμμα (The Monogram) is "αλλά θέλω της ξέσκεπης όρθιας θάλασσας τον καλπασμό" (alla thelo tis kseskepes orthias thalassas ton kalpasmo). That's a lot of syllables. [I translated it:] "I want the uncovered standing sea's full gallop." It's much shorter, but it still has [the four stresses]—"ξέσκεπης όρθιας θάλασσας τον καλπασμό" (kséskepes órthias thálassas ton kalpasmó) "úncovered stánding sea's fúll gállop."

Broumas's translation practice rests on finding a place of intersecting sound between two languages, something that is the same, but not quite.

Working and thinking about this issue over the years, I have begun to see that Greek and Greek Diaspora poets from Solomos to Cavafy to Mastoraki and Broumas make sound carry an inordinate amount of meaning. In fact if one

stopped thinking in terms of national traditions, another canon took shape, not only of a multilingual literature written in Greek and English, French and Albanian, but also a canon that viewed translation as an integral practice to the making of a tradition. Connections that bridge ethnic difference not at the level of deliberation, but materially at the level of the signifier–the open alpha or the long omega–suggest an experimental translation practice that crosses accepted linguistic and geographical borders.

In theory there is no reason to insist on reproducing style and national preoccupations such as orality and multilingualism in translation. Semantic correspondence should suffice. A translator makes sure the translation says the same thing as far as dictionary definitions are concerned, and then he or she is free to fashion a new work with its own intertextual relation to the receiving culture. We have only to think of the powerful impact that the King James version of the Bible had on English literature and the fuss that was caused by the new, "more accurate" translation in the late nineteenth century, to understand how translations and their style (their rhythm, their register) belong to the literature where they arrive, not the literature they leave behind. But a literature like Modern Greek that takes the folk song as its starting point and is radically multilingual at every juncture suggests an addendum, if not an exception. There are times when something, even at the level of content, is foregone if the translator does not pay attention to sound and the particular in-between space of the homophonic imagination. What Greek does for English is to remind us of an immediacy and interconnectedness that our vision-centric world sometimes forgets. Or to put it less in terms of loss: attention to sound is something Greek poetry in translation can offer contemporary American poetry.

Translations cited:

The Rehearsal of Misunderstanding: Three Collections of Poetry by Contemporary Greek Women Poets (Wesleyan 1998)

The Greek Poets: Homer to the Present, co-edited and translated with Peter Constantine, Rachel Hadas and Edmund Keeley (Norton 2009)