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Modern Greek Poetry on the Edge (of the century, of history, of language)

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Greek Poetry Elsewhere¹

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Both in Greece and abroad, Greek poetry is often treated like a fetish.² Whether it is a Greek politician touting the merits of Kiki Dimoula's most recent collection, critics repeatedly referring to the Noble Laureate poets, George Seferis and Odysseus Elytis, or the friends of Jackie Onassis wanting C. P. Cavafy's poem "Ithaca" read at her funeral, Greek poetry has cachet. Like Freud's furs or Benjamin's velvet pouches or Almodovar's high-heeled shoes, Greek poetry as fetish compensates for everything that Greece does not have. Like coats, pouches and shoes, Greek poetry as fetish calls attention to what it covers over, encases or holds up. It speaks of lack in a language that soothes us with its masterful substitutions. Like flags and *foustanellas*, and other more patriotic fetishes, Greek poetry inscribes notions of national, linguistic and generic purity. It is the measure of what is most Greek.³

As fetish Greek poetry is a great achievement. Its invocation of homeland, mother tongue, and lyric tradition has given us myriad ways of imagining ourselves and the Greek nation. But like all fetishes it is selective in its replacement of the part for the whole—the clothes for the body, the flag for the country. Greek poetry as fetish refers exclusively to poetry written in Greek in Greece. In this article I want to suggest that we explore not only what Greek poetry as fetish stands for, but also what it leaves out. As well as rummaging through the already selected Greek poets and poems that make up the contemporary canon for our discussions, I want us to pay attention to the way Greek poetry exceeds itself, turning up in the most unexpected places—way outside national, linguistic and generic boundaries. How might our perspective on Greek poetry change if, in this special issue on contemporary Greek poetry, I were to discuss the work of two writers living in the United States and writing in English, one of whom is not a poet?

Greek poetry haunts Greek American as well as Greek cultural production—from the poetry of Olga Broumas, to the performance art of Diamanda Galas, to the films of Elia Kazan, to the novels of Irini Spanidou. Galas's piercing assaults recall the lament tradition of the *moirologoi*, the Greek women's poetry of her Maniot heritage. A Nikos Gatsos poem about immigration set to music

by Manos Hadzidakis frames Kazan's film "America, America." While in *God's Snake* Spanidou's heroine invokes the Greek poet Yiorgos Drossinis and admits, "I wanted to be a poet and write beautiful words about beautiful things but it didn't come out that way" (1986, 77).

Critics who discuss these Greek American authors are mostly Americanists, however, and pay scant attention to the interrelations of Greek and Greek American culture. Their concern is either with the important contribution Greek American writers have made to American literature or with the specific strengths of Greek American literature as an ethnic literature. In his article "Greek American Literature: Who Needs It?" Yiorgos Kalogeras aptly criticizes the exclusionary tactics of both mainstream American literature and the ethnic literature it gives rise to. He mentions many writers whose works are forgotten or dismissed because they do not fit into either group. Poetry especially falls by the wayside.⁴ Only poets who can be accommodated as mainstream American poets are saved—Vyron Vazakas by way of his affiliation with William Carlos Williams, Olga Broumas in connection with Adrienne Rich (1992, 138). Americanists for the most part do not consider looking to Greece for alternative ways of organizing the terms of the discussion.⁵ From the perspective of Modern Greek Studies, one way out of the either/or bind—either mainstream American or ethnic American—is to examine Greek American literature, not only in relation to American literature, but also in relation to Greek literature. By doubling our focus neither side of the hyphenated ethnicity can be the determining factor—neither Greek nor American—and we are obliged to come up with critical categories which cross cultural, generic, and linguistic boundaries.⁶

To explore the interrelatedness of Greek, Greek American, and American literatures, and to expand what might count for Greek or Greek American or American literature, I propose to focus on the critical categories of immigration and translation. Whereas categories such as nationality, ethnicity or language usually divide literatures, those of immigration and translation thematically and formally unite them. They make impossible the fetishization of a pure, national literature which informs so much of Greek and Greek American criticism. Such categories allow all sorts of hybrid texts to come to the fore. Not only is Greek American literature, as one might expect, thematically and formally structured by the experience of immigration and the practice of translation. Much of 19th and 20th century Greek literature is also "about" immigration and translation, from the writing of Alexandros Papadiamantis to George Seferis's poetry of exile—"Wherever I go Greece wounds me"—to Vassilis Vassilikos's *I mithologia tis Amerikis* (The mythology of America) and Thanassis Valtinos's *To Sunaxari tou Andreas Kordopati* (The Legend of Andreas Kordopatis) and Soti Triandafillou's *Savvato vradi sin akri tis polis* (Saturday Night at the Edge of the City). It can even be argued that American mainstream literature has a special interest in Greek immigration. One example would be the importance of Theodor Dreiser's encounter with Greeks in Chicago for his literature of immigration and social mobility.⁷ Another would be the prominent role of Greek characters in the

detective fiction of the 1930s and 40s (James Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Dashiell Hammett's *The Thin Man* and *The Maltese Falcon*, Ellery Queen's *The Greek Coffin Mystery*).⁸

It is therefore worth focusing on the cross-cultural and cross-linguistic issues of immigration and translation. But before doing so, I think it is also necessary to invert their usual order. In the work of many contemporary cultural critics issues related to immigration, Diaspora, multiculturalism and the movement of peoples between places are given priority over issues related to translation, multilingualism and the movement of texts between languages. For obvious geopolitical reasons the physical movement of people is the first order concern and the linguistic process of translation a related, but secondary, one. Translation, in fact, more often than not, shows up in the service of immigration as a handy metaphor for the more "real world" demands of globalization.

The anthropologist James Clifford, for example, in his book *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, apologizes for his broad use of the term "travel" to cover the territory of "diaspora, borderland, immigration, migrancy, tourism, pilgrimage, exile" and for the impossible task of thinking globally about such issues. But he doesn't go into as much detail about the other term in his title: translation. The issue of translation seems secondary for him; it helps him define travel. The term travel, for example, *is* a translation, he writes, "built from imperfect equivalences" (11). My point is that we also pay attention to the way translation is a blanket term. If the word travel is a translation "built from imperfect equivalences," shouldn't the word translation also be such a translation? Doesn't it also cover an expansive territory of different practices and theories? In fact couldn't translation be a useful lever for prying open the monolingual assumptions frequently associated with globalization?⁹

Experimental texts by contemporary women writers such as Olga Broumas, Kay Cicellis, Diamanda Galas, Eleni Sikelianos, Thalia Selz, Irimi Spanidou and Soti Triantafyllou produced between Greece and the United States foreground issues of multilingualism and translation. These texts written in a hybrid language of Greek and English, invite us to think about the material specificity of different languages. Rather than treating linguistic translation simply as a metaphor for cultural translation, these experimental texts challenge received ideas about immigration and other forms of physical displacement by making us look at these experiences through the linguistic thicket of translation. For these writers, travel between Greece and America, whether real or imagined, is a linguistic enterprise. It describes the particular way the Greek language inhabits their use of English—whether it is the transliterated Greek vowel sounds in Broumas's poetry or the surreal-sounding literal translation of Greek sayings in Spanidou's novel *God's Snake*.¹⁰ What their writing suggests is that in an age when global travel is easier, the difficulty of linguistic translation keeps us attentive to "imperfect equivalences."

Though these relatively recent texts raise the question of travel as translation explicitly, this question is certainly not a concern limited to contemporary

texts. The history of the relation between issues of translation and immigration, and between Greek and Greek American culture can be traced back to the texts produced by the first wave of Greek immigrants who came to the United States in the 1880s. Embedded in literature by and about Greek immigration to America are theories about how texts move from one language to another and vice versa. Different immigration narratives, whether poems, films or handbooks,—of globalization (in the 1990s), of repatriation (in the 1970s), of assimilation (in the 1930s), and of Diaspora (in the 1880s)—provide different models, not only of how cultures reorganize themselves at different historical moments with regard to their changing populations, but also of translation.

Written both in Greece and in America, in Greek and in English, and over the course of two centuries, this group of texts “about” translation and immigration, when read through the lens of contemporary women’s writing, suggests all sorts of unorthodox positions: that 19th and 20th c. Greek and American literatures are as much literatures of failed immigrations as they are literatures of successful homecomings and nation-building; that the epithet “Greek American” is as much a kind of translation as it is an ethnic identity; that multilingualism is an important antidote to multiculturalism and that multiculturalism without a thought-out platform on language can be as dangerous a politics as mainstream cultural literacy;¹¹ and that poetry with its attention to language can play an important radicalizing role in discussions of literature and ethnicity and isn’t necessarily the monological voice of the nation.¹²

This is the larger field, both historically and theoretically, in which I want to place my discussion. In this article, however, I will limit myself to an examination of the work of two of these contemporary women writers, Olga Broumas and Irini Spanidou. By focusing on the issues of translation and immigration in their writing I can illustrate the importance of reading Greek, Greek American and American literature together as well as some of the ways in which Greek poetry haunts their texts both as fetish and as a resource for a highly innovative, multilingual poetics.

Olga Broumas’s poetry and translations

As a poet who grew up and wrote her first collection in Greek, Olga Broumas and her oeuvre of poetry and translation in English is an interesting place to start. Though Broumas began writing poetry in Greek, at the age of eighteen she left to study Architecture, Modern Dance and then Creative Writing in the United States.¹³ She eventually settled in Cape Cod where, as she wrote “she approximates the outrock jutting that is Greece” (1998, 162). Her collection *Beginning with O*, published in the States in 1977, received the Yale Younger Poets prize and firmly established her as an American poet. *Beginning with O* describes a passage from Greece to America and from Greek to English. It is an immigration narrative that leaves out all the usual details of the actual trip. There are no suitcases, steerage, or towering skyscrapers, no desperate misunder-

standings at the custom's desk as in the writing of other Greek American writers such as Elia Kazan, Harry Mark Petrakis, Nicholas Gage or George Economou. For Broumas the discovery of a new land involves the discovery of a new language.¹⁴

In the poem "Artemis" in this collection, Broumas describes Greek, her mother tongue, as the

... curviform alphabet
that defies

decoding, appears
to consist of vowels, beginning with O, the O-
mega, horseshoe, the cave of sound. (23)

In reconnecting the transliterated O of English to the O-mega of Greek, she finds a cave of sound. Yet what interests her is not any attempt to reenter this cave, but rather the way its vowel sounds are carried over into her new tongue. In the words of the poem's next two lines:

What tiny fragments
survive, mangled into our language. (23-4)

It is this act of transliteration which fuels her feminist politics of the final stanzas:

I am a woman committed to
a politics
of transliteration, the methodology

of a mind
stunned at the suddenly
possible shifts of meaning – for which
like amnesiacs

in a ward on fire, we must
find words
or burn. (24)

For Broumas Greek American is not a fixed identity, but rather the possibility and politics of haunting and inhabiting more than one language at the same time. It is a kind of translation. The multilingual implications of her project are missed if we group her solely as an American poet.¹⁵ This poem is not about an "ethnic" trying to assimilate – "We must find words or burn" – as Kalogeras argues at the end of his article about Greek American Literature. Instead I think the poem makes a much more hybrid proposition in which the old language is car-

ried over into the new and neither Greek mainstream literature nor American mainstream literature is the measure of what is possible.

The multilingual politics of transliteration found in "Artemis" characterizes Broumas's poetry to this day. After the "fragments... mangled into our language" of *Beginning with O* we find a Greek joke retold in English in her 1983 collection *Pastoral Jazz* in which the words "futbol" and "Eleutheria" are left in untranslated.

There is a joke it goes in Greece
 that summer there was a *futbol*
 match and the husband had
 lost his lady. BITCH! He shouted
 after her WHORE WOMAN HEY YOU
 BITCH! Greece is civilized
 the cop said call your wife
 by name. I can't
 the man said. Call her name
 the cop said. Not allowed
 the man said. Call her name I said the cop
 said if you don't the man stood in the Greek *futbol*
 stadium he said
 ELEUTHERIAAAAAAAAAAAAA (10)

The joke relies on the reader knowing that the woman's name "Eleutheria" means "freedom." This poem is evidently set during the Dictatorship when Broumas was a teenager and words such as "Eleutheria" were officially censored in Greece, especially in public spaces such as "futbol" stadiums.¹⁶ As in the poem "Artemis," transliteration for Broumas is about bringing the sounds of the mother tongue into the new tongue—not soccer, not football, but "futbol"—and, by doing so, confusing preconceived notions of what is and isn't Greek or American.

In her 1985 collection *Black Holes, Black Stockings*, which she wrote with Jane Miller, the Greek language unsettles the English language, not so much as transliterated sound—as in the o-mega or futbol examples—but rather as a kind of second order transliteration in which an idiom is literally translated from the Greek into English. Michael Onwuemene discusses this kind of transliteration as "literal translation" in his recent PMLA article on Nigerian writers. He explains how African writers since the 1960s deploy transliteration as a way of "introducing tropes and idioms from an African ethnic language into English through a commutation of equivalent words" (1999, 1057). So in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God*, he explains, the Igbo idiom which means "Read between the lines" becomes literally "Count your teeth with your tongue." This is more prevalent a practice in prose, and we will see how Spanidou manipulates it exemplarily, but Broumas and Miller too use this translation technique very effectively. In one poem in *Black Holes, Black Stockings* a whole line of Greek is left in—

ΣΤΗΝ ΑΚΡΗ ΤΟΥ ΣΥΛΛΟΓΙΣΜΟΥ ΠΑΡΑΜΕΡΑ ΜΙΑ ΛΕΞΗ . In order to justify such an uncommon practice the reader is broken in slowly—first we are given a “transliterated” idiom. The proceeding sentence reads: “There was no name for it pair and odd, pair and odd or did I dream you there, song of my region?” The words “pair and odd” are a literal translation of the expressions “even” and “odd” in Greek—*zugos* and *monos*. The awkwardness of the translation “pair and odd” for “even and odd” paves the way for the impossible translation of the line in capital Greek letters, and the enactment of the conceit that “There was no name for it,” this “song of my region.” The connection between using a literal translation and leaving in a line of Greek is strengthened by the cross-lingual assonance of the Greek “Paramera” and the English “pair and odd.”

By the end of this collection Greek is no longer necessary as a pretext for the estranging effects of translation. English itself has become a foreign language: “The heat, the song fills us, therefore we say we are hungry, and we uproot the lettuce at dusk. ‘Lettuce,’ ‘dusk’—they mean something and are funny, a sort of song” (1985, 54). Like “words mangled into *our* language” in *Beginning with O* which are both Greek and English, the song in *Black Holes, Black Stockings*, is both the Greek song of “song of my region” and the English “sort of song” of “lettuce” and “dusk.” Greek may have been the excuse for making English foreign, but now English is foreign of its own accord.

Broumas’s most recent collaboration with T. Begley, *Sappho’s Gymnasium*, is even more syntactically wrought and disorienting. In this 1994 collection the experience of moving from one country to another is not introduced. There is no “In Greece...” or “in Sifnos” or “song of my region” as there is in all her proceeding books. Greece is always already a part of her language and sexuality; it is “Sappho’s Gymnasium” where she works out, exercising her mind and her body. Here more than ever before we see how closely related the Greek mother tongue and the lesbian lover’s tongue are. We witness the simultaneous transliteration of another language *and* another sexuality:

Language you surge
 language you try me
 I set a place for you
 who would have guessed there were so many
 similars you with your light
 plotted across my window
 we are walking toward it arm around
 shoulder what else (139)

Disjunct phrases are lined up and connected through the simple gesture of an arm swung across the other’s shoulder. The call for a lesbian language and sexuality which took the form of a hard-earned manifesto in her early poem “Artemis” — “the twin/chromosome ribbons, emerge, tentative/from the archaeology of an excised past./I am a woman...” (23) is taken for granted in this col-

lection. The poetry does not so much call *for*, but *is*, a performance of entwined limbs and lines.

While Broumas's own poetry is a metatextual meditation on translation, her oeuvre also shows her deep commitment to the practice of translation. Another major part of Broumas's politics of transliteration, her act of "bringing over" her mother tongue into English, are her translations of Odysseus Elytis's poetry and essays.¹⁷ To talk about contemporary Greek poetry until recently meant to talk, above all, about Elytis. But if one starts with a discussion of Olga Broumas's work, one is tempted to twist things and say that in order to trace Elytis's legacy we must leave Greece and turn to America. One of his most accomplished epigones writes in English.¹⁸ Of Olga Broumas's twelve collections, four are translations from the work of Odysseus Elytis and all at some level owe something to his poetry. For Broumas, Elytis's poetry is an amulet, a special object of distraction and power, yes, a fetish. But it is a fetish whose unforeseen effects must be reckoned with. It is a fetish with spill-over. It is a fetish whose exclusivity has lost its focus, veered off, gone astray. Greek poetry is Elytis in Greece, but it is also Broumas in America.

The critic Walter Benjamin wrote that good translations alter a language forever, Holderlin's translation of Greek tragedy for example, made the German language Greek, expanded the German language (1988, 80-81). This is what Broumas is doing in her translations and her own poetry. She is making the American idiom Greek, opening up the English language to the sounds and syntax of this other complicated history. "What tiny fragments/survive, mangled into our language." And in doing so she not only expands American poetry, but Greek poetry too.

The favor, one might add, is repaid if we think of Elytis's translations of Sappho. There is something of his experience of having been translated by the lesbian poet Broumas that seems to have authorized him as much as his geographically adopted home Lesbos to translate Sappho.¹⁹ Sappho's fragments resonate with Elytis's translations of these fragments which then turn up in Broumas's and T. Begley's *Sappho's Gymnasium*. Greek poetry is Sappho; it is Elytis and Elytis's Sappho; it is Broumas and Broumas's Elytis and Broumas's Sappho by way of Elytis. To include Olga Broumas's work in a discussion of contemporary Greek poetry is to underscore the importance of translation more generally for and to contemporary Greek poetry.

By entertaining such an expanded definition of Greek poetry we can see all sorts of connections that the separating of literatures according to nations and languages blinds us to. Not only do we broaden our reading of Broumas's poetry by understanding that her reference to ancient myth is informed as much by Greek poetry as by American poetry, or our reading of Elytis's legacy by including Broumas as an Elytian poet in English, but we see that the challenge to clear-cut national boundaries is also a challenge to fixed gender roles. When Broumas reads a love poem by Elytis in her translation it becomes a lesbian love poem. When Elytis, the poet of such heterosexual love poetry as *Maria Nefeli*,

translates a poem by Sappho is it really lesbian any more? In this back-and-forth, distinctions between Greek and Greek American poetry, masculine and feminine, are blurred. Broumas's oeuvre read with Elytis's within the terms of questions of immigration and translation opens up an expanded definition of Greek poetry.

Irini Spanidou's novel *God's Snake*

As in Broumas's work the Greek language drives Irini Spanidou's use of English. But whereas Greek poetry and its particular linguistic structures are more explicitly an influence on Broumas who actively acknowledges her debt to Elytis, with Spanidou, a novelist, Greek poetry provides a less obvious agenda. It is more a symbol of the emotional power of Greek, her mother tongue, than a specific referent. And here too, as with Broumas, it is the clue to an alternative lesbian language as well. But all this only becomes clear if we carefully keep track of the uses of transliteration over the course of a whole novel. Only then does "Greek poetry," both in its oral and written form, provide a key to how Greek American is not a fixed ethnic identity but a kind of translation.

Spanidou, too, was born in Greece and came to the States as an adolescent. Her first novel, *God's Snake*, was published in 1986 and was hailed by Doris Lessing and Grace Paley among others. At one level this is not an obvious narrative of immigration. Whereas Broumas's first collection *Beginning with O* at least began in Greece and ended in America, this book begins and ends in Greece and never mentions America, except as some place other people go, her Uncle Yiannis, her cousin Loula (10). And yet, emigration is the condition of the book's publication. The reader senses the fact that this story could only be told at a distance from Greece and that the immigration, though outside the bounds of the text, applies a pressure on the text, a linguistic pressure familiar from Broumas's collections.²⁰

The blurb on the back cover of the paperback edition describes a *bildungsroman* in which a little girl turns her father's disciplining measures into her own "rights" of passage. It is a bit overblown as blurbs usually are, but it is worth citing since it sets up the book's main project.

Child of a proud, brutal, and authoritarian army officer and his beautiful but remote and disillusioned wife, Anna struggles to grow up in the war-ravaged landscape of Greece in the 1950s. Her father brings to her a series of animals—snakes, a crow, a deer, a dog—attempting to imprint upon Anna his harsh view of life and to mold her into his own inflexible masculine image. But searching, wondering, aching for love, Anna extracts her own lessons from these intense encounters.

Spanidou evokes her tale of childhood in Greece through animal fables, but it is the way she does this via her mother tongue, the Greek language, that will

concern me. The Greek language is a latent source that determines much of the novel's innovation. Whole chapters seem to hang on Greek words or phrases. The first chapter "Snakes" and the book's title "God's Snake" we are told refer to the literal translation of the Greek term for slug, "God's snake." (47) The second chapter "A crow" riffs on the sound of a crow's cawing—"Kaka kaka... Kakakaaa, kakaaaaa" (79) and the eventual shit it leaves in the center of her room—the literal meaning of "kaka" in Greek. In the chapter entitled "The Deer" it is the wooden surreal-sounding transliterated idioms that tip us off to the fact that some other language is moving this text along—"Anger that lasts and water that stands turn bad" (106), "Pride digs its own grave" (107). Greek is an invisible system that connects the animal symbolism of the chapters. Like Broumas's cave of sound, it is a resource only retrievable in mangled fragments. And, as with Broumas, the mangled state of the material is not unfortunate, but transformative.

The Greek language provides an alternative logic that unsettles the English language and by doing so any presumption of a clearly defined national literature in a single national language. As I mentioned before, this is not only true of Greek American writing but much hyphenated literature, in particular the ethnic novel, whether Chinua Achebe's Nigerian English *Arrow of God* or Henry Roth's Yiddish American *Call It Sleep*. Repeatedly one finds transliterated words, passages that call attention to the fact that the whole story takes place in another language, and "transliterated" phrases and sayings which create an unusual, surreal effect. All of these devices are at play in Spanidou's novel. There are transliterated words such as *inam baildi* (78). There are translated passages which refer to the specificity of the original language and remind us that the whole book describes an experience that takes place in another language. For example, Anna at one point confesses: "To God I always spoke in plain Greek and only said *our-Father-who-art-in-heaven* and *holy-is-God-holy-almighty-holy-immortal-a-men* to be on the safe side and make sure I had His attention" (76). We also come upon transliterated idioms like "pair and odd" which we saw in Broumas. For example, the slang word *pouli* which literally means bird but refers to a penis is left in as bird:

"Me boy, you girl," he said. "Me different."

"You have a birdie."

"Papa have a birdie, too. Yes?"

"A biüg bird." (87)

And all the most important scenes in the book are punctuated by literally translated proverbs such as "The mother of the brave shall mourn" (251).²¹

What is interesting, however, for our discussion of contemporary Greek poetry is that the driving force of this novel is not simply the Greek language in the form of proverbs and other transliterations, but the Greek language in the fetishized "beautiful" form of Greek poetry. In *God's Snake* Greek poetry is

what enables the girl to redefine her father's stark lessons. It is the repository of the Greek language, but of a particularly soft, velvety, dreamy form of this language. It is that which the General and Manolis, the girl's two mentors in life, have access to and that which distinguishes them from her father. While Manolis, the house-servant, teaches her about the folk tradition, the meaning of words like "God's snake" etc., the General gives her a book of poems by the Parnassan poet Yiorgos Drossinis. Poetry is a part of both these men's femininity and determines their appeal as models of an in-between existence — not completely boy or girl.

Greek poetry appears explicitly in the novel twice, first in a scene with the General and then in a scene with Manolis. Both times language and gender are intimately intertwined. The scene with Manolis in the chapter called "The Crow" is particularly revealing with regard to an expanded notion of Greek poetry. Anna's father has just brought her a frozen crow to show how cold it is outside and to teach her a lesson about hardship and survival. But Anna extracts a different lesson through a hybrid language of Greek and English and a hybrid sexuality. She figures out that her father's clear-cut military outlook is insufficient. She projects an alternative vision in which nothing ever turns out the way one expects. In the middle of the night the crow defrosts and comes back to life. Anna runs to her parents' room crying "There is a crow-ghost flying in my room." Her father sends her back saying "There are no crow-ghosts." Anna's challenge is to find a language that can express this paradox, a language that can acknowledge that there is and isn't a crow-ghost flying in her room. Like Broumas, Spanidou makes up a language which is and isn't Greek in order to do this.

Curiously enough, though Spanidou is a novelist, here too poetry is the inspiration for this language. Back in her room she ponders how gloomy everything is:

Gray light is dreary, I thought. I wanted to be a poet and write beautiful words about beautiful things but it didn't come out that way. "Night's black like velvet caressed my soul..., " a poet I loved said. Dawn's gray was like felt, I thought. How could I write a poem saying that? Yet it was true — I knew; I had a felt hat I didn't like. Cousin Mary had a felt coat with brass buttons she wore year after year, Aunt Vasilia always giving advice, saying every fall, "Buy felt. It's durable. Look at Mary." (77)

At this point Anna closes her eyes and writes a letter to Mary in her head. As she recounts that she saw a ghost, she hears the crow fluttering again. It is as though she is bringing the crow back to life by writing. She then remembers a dream she had of her Grandmother.

She was knitting something. I'm making you a ribillon," she said. There was no word "ribillon." I couldn't be making up a word now. My grandma said it and I dreamt it. I went to my desk and wrote on a piece of pa-

per ribillon in case I forgot, saying outloud as I scrawled, "Ribillon." (78)

Like Broumas, Spanidou appeals to a fantasy mother tongue, or actually, as in many cases in Greece where children are raised by their grandparents, to a grandmother tongue.²² And, as with Broumas, dreams provide the material for such a language. "Ribillon" is her translation of the language of the crow which is and isn't alive and which has come to signify the unexpected, rather than the predictable, as her father would have it. As soon as Anna writes down the word, we hear the crow flying away: "Kakaka kaaaa kakaaa" (78).

The achievement that this linguistic resuscitation represents is clear from the fact that her father can't recognize it. When her father comes into her room in the morning he kicks the slip of paper in the air:

He pushed me aside, went into my room and opened the window. The crow flew out. The little paper that said ribillon spun in the wind and settled on his feet. He tossed it aside with his shoe. (80)

In the same way the General recognized Anna's love of poetry so Manolis recognizes Anna's grandmother tongue. When he comes into the room he notices the piece of paper that her father has kicked aside. "He held up the little paper that said ribillon. 'Do you want this?'"

It is this slip of paper acknowledged by one of her mentors which is the little girl's ticket to freedom, the proof that she has turned her father's disciplinary measure into her own right of passage. Greek poetry, in the guise of the book and then as a wish to write poetry, enables her to write and love in her own way, more like Manolis, the General, and Mary, a queer way that is inspired by poetry, but cut out of a different fabric, more felt than velvet. At the end of this scene, after Manolis has scrubbed the shit from the floor, Anna finds three feathers. She presses them against her chest. The feathers are a fetish which both speak of poetry's power and suggests that poetry's truth is elsewhere, like the crow that was resuscitated and flew away.

The need to expand Greek poetry to include the foreign, felt-like territory of Spanidou's imagination is strikingly apparent if we turn to the actual story of the translation of *God's Snake* into Greek. When this novel, crafted as a kind of translation in the name of Greek poetry, was then translated back into Greek by the poet Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke, much of the foreignness was lost (Anghelaki-Rooke 1986). Anghelaki-Rooke returned Spanidou to her native tongue, giving her the benefit of her own poetic skills, in effect everything that Spanidou's heroine aspires to but cannot have: "I wanted to be a poet and write beautiful words about beautiful things but it didn't come out that way." Yet what was clear from the perspective of this first generation writer was that Anghelaki-Rooke had not captured the disorienting effect of the proverbs. The surreal-sounding idioms which marked the passage from one language to the other in the Greek translation became the original, very familiar *paramies* (sayings). The

choppy dialogue of Spanidou's version flowed too "naturally" in Anghelaki-Rooke's lyrical prose.

For Spanidou it is the final clause of her heroine's meditation, "I wanted to be a poet and write beautiful words about beautiful things **but it didn't come out that way**" which is crucial. Her writing aspires to an in-between ground—poetry that isn't poetry, Greek that isn't Greek. The poetic prose of the Greek translation in its more nationally and linguistically purer form is a betrayal of her experience as a displaced linguistically-unsettled person. Beautiful poetry, like velvet, is lovely but is only part of the story. Poetry as fetish has a place, but there must also be room for other less clearly recognizable modes of writing. Spanidou's novel as well as Broumas's poetry both show the power of an idealized exclusive view of Greek national poetry and dismantle the possibility of such a poetry. They challenge the ideological charge of Greek poetry as a fetish as well as find in Greek poetry a resource for their own parodic, citational, multilingual practices.

When I outlined my critical categories at the beginning of this essay I underscored a seeming bias among cultural critics—on the whole we pay more attention to immigration, Diaspora and the movement of people than to translation and the act of moving between languages. I suggested that cultural translation was often the more thought-out of the two concepts and that this bias was paradigmatic of a general cultural trend to neglect the material specificity of different languages. Contemporary women's writing written between Greek and English offers an alternative perspective, one that demands an expanded definition of national literature. By looking at how two American artists who are Greek chart the space between Greek and English, I can argue that in an age when movement around the world is easier, it is the difficulty of linguistic translation that can help keep us attentive to the challenges of globalization. An off-hand comment by another Greek American woman writer summed up this predicament quite well. She said, "Living between cultures is great, it's living between languages that is hell." What Broumas and Spanidou teach us is that in the right hands this linguistic hell can become a very productive place for thinking about how we cross national and generic boundaries. And that criticism rather than avoiding the messy territories of multilingualism might also benefit by attending to the tasks of the translator.

Notes

1. I am grateful for the questions and comments of audiences at Princeton University (the 1999 Modern Greek Studies Association Symposium), Harvard University (the Center for Literary and Cultural Studies) and Fordham University (the Literary Studies Program) who heard earlier versions of this article. I also want to thank Dorothea von Mucke for her helpful organizational advice.
2. The fields of Psychoanalysis and Marxism have had the most sustained discussion of the fetish. For Sigmund Freud's use of the term fetish, see "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes" (19:243) and "Fetishism"

(21:149). For Karl Marx's use of the term fetish, see "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof" in *Capital, Volume One*, also Walter Benjamin's *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. On Benjamin's discussion of the bourgeois fetish of covering and encasing things, also see my *Kassandra and the Censors*, pp. 159-160.

3. Even with Greek publishers scrambling over novelists in the past decade, poetry is still Greece's main claim to fame. The past few years have seen a plethora of translations not only of well-known Modern Greek poets such as Ritsos, Elytis, Cavafy, but also of contemporary Greek poetry. See Dalven's anthology of women poets, Connolly's translation of Dimoula's poetry, my anthology of three collections by Galanaki, Mastoraki and Laina, the Greek special issues of *Modern Poetry in Translation*, edited by Ricks, and *Agenda*, edited by Connolly. By calling attention to such activity, however, I do not mean to suggest that Greek literature is in anyway a major cultural player at the present moment. As Jusdanis makes us painfully aware in his article "Greek Literature Abroad: A Stranger at the Feast?", when he compares Greek literature to Indian and other postcolonial literatures, "in order for authors to gain recognition on the world stage today they had better write in English" (2000, 26).
4. In bibliographies (Cutsumbis 1970; Kalogeras 1985, 1987; and Miller 1976) poets, if they appear at all, represent a much smaller group than the novelists and memoir writers.
5. In the article I refer to here, Kalogeras, as Americanist, does not discuss Greek literature; his approach, however, more recently is to situate Greek American literature between American and Greek literatures. See in particular the conclusion to his article on Greek-American Literature for the collection *New Immigrant Literatures in the United States*, where he writes: "The task that lies ahead, then, is not only to define the canon of this literature but also to find ways to talk about it without compromising its difference or integrating it within the canon of either American or Greek literature" (1996, 259.) and his forthcoming edition of Konstantinos T. Kazantzis's *Istories tis patrídos mou* [Stories of my Homeland].
6. The separation between Greek and Greek American literature in criticism is striking. Literary historians invariably discuss one or the other, but never both (see Politis and Beaton for histories of Greek literature, and Kalogeras and Giannaris on Greek American literature). Only recently have critics begun to view ethnic literatures as Diasporic literatures with important ties to more than one national literature. See Nikas and forthcoming studies by Kamboureli with regard to Greek Australian literature, Kamboureli (2000, 106-109) and Klironomou's forthcoming article in the Ministry for Greeks Abroad publication *Papers from the Women Diaspora Writers Symposium* (Dec. 1997) with regard to Greek Canadian literature, as well as Monica Kallen's Ph.D. dissertation for a comparative approach to Greek literature in America, Sweden and France (Harvard University, 2000).
7. I am thinking of the figures of the Greek immigrant and the importance of the Greek restaurant in Theodore Dreiser's autobiography *Dawn* and of the way Hurstwood in Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie* is based on a prominent Greek business man. For a discussion of this see Petridis.
8. For useful catalogues of Greek characters in American literature, see Karanikas and Giannaris (235-39).
9. Certainly recent work in Translation Studies supports this position. See Susan Bassnett's and Harish Trivedi's introduction to their collection of essays *Post-colonial*

- Translation* (1999). But even here the practice of linguistic translation is subordinated to questions of cultural translation: "The basic premise upon which all the chapters are based is that the act of translation always involves much more than language" (6).
10. Although for the purposes of this introduction I am grouping together these women writers, there are also important differences between them with regard to how the Greek language haunts their English or, in the case of Cicellis's more recent work and Triandafillou's, how the English language haunts their Greek. For example the use of Greek by first generation Greek American authors such as Broumas and Spanidou should be distinguished from that of second and third generation authors such as Galas and the poet Eleni Sikelianos. For Galas and Sikelianos the Greek language is an abstract and imaginary world. These artists are free to be more extreme in their avant-garde language politics than Broumas and Spanidou who actually have the Greek language present as their mother-tongue. It is revealing that Broumas in her collaborative collections — *Black Holes*, *Black Stockings* and *Sappho's Gymnasium* — is more removed from her mother tongue than in her solo-authored collections and translations, as if she is able to move into the freer position of second or third generation author when she teams up with a native-born English speaker such as Jane Miller or T. Begley. For the purposes of this paper I have chosen to discuss the work of two first generation Greeks in America because first generation writers have a particularly charged relation to their mother tongue and especially to poetry in that mother tongue.
 11. The Longfellow Institute at Harvard University has pioneered work on multilingualism. See Shell's article "Babel in America: or, The Politics of Language Diversity in the United States" and Sollors's edited collection of essays *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature* as well as the Longfellow Institute web page (<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~lowinus/>).
 12. Mehmet Yashin gives poetry such a radicalizing role in his anthology *Step-Mother-tongue: From Nationalism to Multiculturalism: Literatures of Cyprus, Greece and Turkey* in which he intersperses critical writing and poetry (2000).
 13. For biographical and bibliographical information as well as the actual texts of a large proportion of Broumas's poetry go to the American Poetry Database at <http://lion.chadwyck.com>.
 14. For a discussion of how Broumas's discovery of a new language is also the discovery of a lesbian sexuality, see my article, "Diaspora, Translation, and Women's Writing," in which I rehearse some of these issues of immigration and translation, but with a focus on their relation to her lesbian poetics.
 15. Both Broumas and Spanidou, though American writers in terms of their publishing histories, conceive of themselves, at least in their work to date, as "Greek" writers. At a reading for the Poetry Society of America (February 24th, 2000), Broumas said she was a Greek poet who happened to write in English. While Spanidou in an interview with the Saturday magazine of *Ta Nea* (March 17th, 2000) explained how her first novel *God's Snake* was set in Greece, mostly thought out in Greek, and then translated, by herself, as she wrote, into English, her next *Fear* was also set in Greece and at least half thought out in Greek and then written in English.
 16. For a discussion of censorship during the Dictatorship, see Chapter 1 of my book *Kassandra and the Censors* (1998).
 17. See Broumas's afterword in *Eros, Eros, Eros* (1998) for a meditation on why she began translating Elytis's poetry and essays.

18. The poet Ioulita Iliopoulou who lived with Elytis in his last years and collaborated with him also carries on his legacy in her poetry.
19. Broumas first sent a tape of some of her translations to Elytis in 1980 (1998, 162). His translations of Sappho appeared in 1984.
20. There is actually a long list of Greek American novels which seem to ignore the experience of immigration and instead concentrate on remembering the homeland: Nicholas Gage's *Eleni*, Stratis Haviaras's *When the Tree Sings*, Elias Kulukundis's *Feast of Memory*. In a recent conversation, Kalogeras noted that his earlier opinion that "the immigration story has always had little appeal to the Greeks" (1996, 254) has given way to a more complicated notion of Greek-American novel as novel of displacement. The author who writes about Greece but lives in America is also in some sense writing a story about immigration.
21. For a useful comparison to my approach, see Hana Wirth-Nesher's "Afterword" to Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* in which she outlines all the ways in which Roth's work is both typical and exemplary of Jewish ethnic literature in its multilingualism. The use of transliterated idioms seems to be rampant in all ethnic literature from African to Jewish to Greek American. Helen Papanicholas's "transliterated" title of her collections of short stories seems particularly apt: *The Apple Falls from the Apple Tree*. The original Greek idiom refers to the fact that children always turn out like their parents i.e. children will not lose their ethnic identity. By transliterating this phrase she implies that part of the project of ethnic survival is linguistic.
22. Again this inventing of made-up words ("ribillon") is a recurring tactic of immigrant literature. *Call It Sleep* begins with an invented quotation (Wirth-Nesher, 450).

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