

SOME GREEK WRITERS, THEIR MEMORY, THEIR POLITICS, THEIR ART IN THE 1980S

NASOS VAYENAS

Foreword 2006

Although undated, this text was probably put together in the late 1980s, in Edmonton, Canada, a short time after a last trip to Athens in 1987. It was hand-written, from notes, and I clearly meant to write further drafts. However, I abandoned the project, and the lined sheets of yellow notepaper lay almost twenty years in a file titled “Greek writers.”

In the winters of 1981-2, 1983-4, and 1986-7 I lived in Nafplion, but travelled frequently to Athens where I imbibed the exhilarating atmosphere of a society that had thrown off the dead hand of conservative politics and elected a socialist government. I was keen to learn how my own generation of writers, who had come to maturity during the awful period of the army dictatorship (1967-1974), were doing in this new dispensation, particularly women writers. As a Canadian who had grown up during the Sixties, I was obsessed with the theme of the relationship between art and politics in the life and work of people who had been challenged by both.

Except for the chance encounter with Rhea Galanaki in a bookstore, I made no note of how I came to meet these particular writers. Except for Katarina Anghelaki-Rooke, I did not see them again after the interviews. In the winter of 2006, when I “Googled” each of them, I learned that Nasos Vayenas had become a Professor of Literary Theory and Criticism at the University of Athens and published as recently as 2004; that Rhea Galanaki had achieved a very notable success with her novel, *The Life of Ismail Ferik Pasha* (1989), which has been translated into several languages, and that she was short-listed in 1999 for a European Literature Prize, and, because I still visit her, I know that Anghelaki-Rooke’s distinguished international career as a poet, translator and lecturer is secure. As for Jenny Mastoraki, however, the traces are fainter. It seems she has continued to write, judging from some fragments of prose poetry published in an American journal in 1997, and an authoritative critical study of contemporary Greek women poets published in the US in 1998, which includes accounts of the poetry of Galanaki and Mastoraki, theorizes their work as “feminine survival strategies” for recognizing how meaning is

“lost, disfigured and denied.” It is not clear whether this study is concerned with work produced after the 1980s.

2018: Another Google search yields information about a 1999 publication, *The Rehearsal of Misunderstanding: Three Collections by Contemporary Greek Women Poets* by Karen Van Dyck, editor and translator. A review hails “the appearance in English translation of collections of poems by four of Greece's leading poets,” including Jenny Mastoraki and Rhea Galanaki. I am no longer in contact with Anghelaki-Rooke.

Google yielded this, posted 2015: Nasos Vayenas is a poet living in Exarchia, Athens’ inner city where troubles erupted in December 2008. This is an area ‘down-at-heel, dirty, and loud, without public spaces or a single strip of green’ yet what sets it apart is its history and people as this is the site of the Athens Polytechnic University where the 1973 student protests took place in a series of events that brought the eventual downfall of the military junta (1967–74)

<https://medium.com/@kgeorganta/poetic-anachronism-no2-exarcheia-2-2-45b4e4a71f60>

An Interview with Greek poet, Nasos Vayenas, in Athens, in 1985

I wonder if there is a Greek literary biography that does not encapsulate, or at least suggest, the themes of the last fifty years of Greek history. The question occurs to me as I chat with Nasos Vayenas in a crêperie in the university district of Athens: he is forty-years-old, fine-boned, almost dainty, with grey hair and a high-pitched voice – and a professional life all too familiar in its inadequacies. He is an associate professor of Greek literature at a university in Crete, a job at which he is overworked and underpaid. Consequently he is chronically in debt, owns no property except for four thousand books, and has become a bit of a teachers’ union agitator.

All of this is normal – we trade stories about bad publishing contracts and the pleasures of solitude and book-reading – and so is our reaction that same evening to a performance, in a trendy *rembetiko* club, by a group of unsmiling students, crooning in their stiff-backed way, the classics of the Piraeus waterfront. We exchange a glance, we have been here before as students ourselves. (Vayenas had studied on scholarship in Rome and Cambridge as well as in Athens.)

Arms curled around knees, we had paid homage to the middle-class *artistes* among us, belting out with agonized identification the blues. It seems to me that I know this man, Vayenas.

But when I do the interview, on the glassed-in roof of my hotel (the Parthenon poised back of my left shoulder a couple of kilometres away in the smog) and he outlines for me the generational theory of post-war Greek literature, including in those remarks some scanty details of his own family life, there is all of a sudden no more normality. For he stands squarely within Greek history, and I am outside. There is nothing normal about the last fifty years of Greek history.

Vayenas was born in Macedonia, northern Greece. Although his father was not a Communist, he fought with Communist partisans during the German occupation of Greece, an act of patriotism for which he was imprisoned for years on the hellish prison island of Makronisos by the right-wing victors of the ensuing civil war. (One can see this island if one stands port-side on the pleasure-boat making its way to Mykonos.) It became impossible for the family to survive on their business – a shop whose potential customers were intimidated by local Rightist thugs – and so they moved to Athens with one thousand drachmas and the clothes on their back, and settled down in a shabby area of Exarchia where the father worked as a freelance translator and the mother as a telephone operator.

*They told me you had died and now I find you once again
playing backgammon with the living;
you're even winning and you wear a tie
you who had never worn a tie before
or even come down to the square*
(*The Perfect Order: Selected Poems, 1974–2010*, Anvil, 2010)

What happened next is Vayenas's own story, which is to say a generation's story, for the events of the 1960s in Greece were so tumultuous, wide-spread and unrelenting that the public and the private became interwoven narratives: one's youthful *angst* and crises were the crises of the state.

“We lived the aftermath of the civil war when persecution was still alive, but not as physical violence, more as psychological and ethical violence. During my university years here in Athens, 1963-1968, these years were more important in my opinion than the years [1967-74] of the Junta and Polytechnic uprising. A liberal government of the Centre Union party had come into power and prime minister George Papandreou tried to make changes, and the resistance of the reactionaries was tremendous. There was a demonstration every day for two years, can you imagine that? Let’s say, from the assassination of the leftist politician and pacifist Grigoris Lambrakis in 1963 to 1967 was a period of great turmoil: a crucial period of my history. It was a preamble of the dictatorship to come, during which we saw the real face of reaction in a way which my generation had not seen.”

But, unlike most other commentators of the period who see in the Polytechnic uprising of 1973 – which culminated in the early morning massacre of students occupying their own school under slogans denouncing the junta - *the* tragic moment in the contestation of the young, Vayenas locates the tragedy earlier. “I didn’t live the events of the Polytechnic, but from the descriptions I’ve read I think that the situation was easier to bear, because the end was predictable. The massacre took place at a time when everybody was already predicting the fall of the dictatorship. Yes. So it was a kind of denouement. But the period of the 60s was opposite. Everybody thought then that it would be the end of right-wing dominance. That’s why I think that those years were more tragic, because the *unpredictable* took place in 1967,” with the coup d’état of the colonels.

For those of us who were students in the 1960s in North America, the notion that public events – especially highly-charged political ones – demand that we respond at the level of our everyday existence, that we bear witness or struggle or resist or solidarize (oh, the vocabulary of consciousness!) is not strange. Nor, for those of us who became writers is it outrageous to claim that we speak for more than the idiosyncratic. But, in comparison with these rioting students in Athens, some of whom became writers and others died, our political experiences were merely episodic and our writing often simply clamorous. I am so much struck by the *persistence* of Greek civil disturbance and the almost seamless fit of the literature woven from it.

In Vayenas's view, the two post-war generations of writers are characterized not so much formally (although that is there) as thematically, which is to say politically. *What they lived* demarcates them. Formally, the first post-war generation – those who matured in the 1940s and 1950s – continued or developed the accomplishments of their immediate predecessors of the 1930s, the great innovators of modern Greek poetry: Giorgos Seferis, Odysseas Elytis, Yiannis Ritsos, with their experiments in modernism and surrealism and free verse. But thematically the break is absolute. What happened to these postwar writers was the German occupation and the civil war and, because neutrality was an untenable position given the urgency of affairs in a nation *in extremis*, they were invariably on the Left, politically. What the Left suffered so did they. And they suffered horribly. In the words of musician and composer Mikis Theodorakis, himself politically embattled for most of his career: “Greece needed art which sprang from the popular struggle and from living-modern Greek poetry.” [<http://npapandreou.gr/en/mikis-and-manos-a-tale-of-two-composers-2/>] Those were not the times to luxuriate in the world verse of modernism, they were times in which one was inescapably Greek, one picked up arms, and, if one was lucky, composed poems in solitary confinement.

With the second postwar generation – Vayenas's own, those who came into their own in the 1970s, formal concerns are once more insistent. Whatever were the public travails of the Junta period, they are now over and a semblance of political normality prevails. Poets can get back to the business of poetry. Thus: “Our generation brought out things that the earlier generation ignored. We brought language closer to the colloquial, we got rid of certain rhetoricisms, we mined the language for expression that had never been used before. This is an urban language, an argot, a poetry closer to the everyday speech of the Athenians, let's say, a poetry which describes familiar things in big cities. This is not to say we are better poets. In fact, there is a weakness in us for, in trying to avoid certain literary expressions and rhetoricisms, we have created a rhetoricism of simplicity. It's become a cliché.”

Two important life experiences mark them as different from their elders: they protested Rightist hegemony but not as Communist Party members (this was the époque of the European New Left and, before the Junta slammed the gates, Greek youth were still in Europe), and, with the downfall of the Junta, they were on the winning side. They did not have to go on paying, in the

loss of civil rights and in anguished poems of betrayal, for their commitment. Vayenas goes as far as to say that they are not “politically involved” anymore as a generation. However this is qualified by what one means by politics, this being 1985 in Greece and there are political parties and parliamentary oppositions and orderly transfers of power. But the generation is “against political dogmatism, they contest it from the point of view of individual liberty. They believe political parties betray the inner expression of the individual. This is close to anarchism. They are sympathetic to the Left but not to the parties which might govern. This contestation is a kind of easy pose because I have not suffered like my father. My father spent five years on Makronisos. I was luckier.” The contestation extends to their poems, what Vayenas calls a “poetry of the ecological,” in which private space is staked out by themes of love and desire, of despair at the pollution of the city and alienation from the mindless post-Junta optimism. There is also the “very good tendency” of feminist themes introduced from the small but vociferous women’s movement in the cities. Yes it all depends on what you mean by “politics.”

But it is not just history that has liberated the expression of the younger writers. In great turmoil and with personal distress, alongside their political militancy the first postwar generation has struggled intellectually with the literary question of their age: what is art for? In the 1930s the question had been answered with the doctrine of social(ist) realism according to which, in order that “the people” understand revolutionary theory, poems extolling the Party program were to be written in everyday language with conventional metres and rhymes. Paradoxically, this produced a very conservative verse, and, stylistically speaking, the truly revolutionary poetry of the 1930s was written by non-Communists. The postwar generation chafed under the discipline of social realism (significantly, one of their major poets, Manolis Anagnostakis, wrote a collection called *Anti-Dogmatic Texts*.) And in the late 1950s their unhappiness could no longer be contained.

The open split between the poets and the apparatchiks came with the publication of the novels of Stratis Tsirkas, works in which Tsirkas, a liberal Communist, resenting the controls imposed by Party functionaries and insisting on his right to write as a “free man,” criticized the activity of the Party cadres during the German occupation of Greece. All hell broke loose: “The Party considered him a kind of betrayer,” Vayenas told me, “but the book was a landmark. Writers

took position vis à vis Tsirkas. Thus the split, and it's still going on, although, for our generation, without discussion. We are *for* Tsirkas. For us it's old news."

That was an intramural split, argued seemingly once and for all. Apparently, there is no polemical debate in the new generation, differences being dissolved in the communal rejection of Communist dogma. The wound has closed. Nevertheless, although it is taken for granted that the new poetry may resist narrative, experiment with the line, speak with an ironic voice and challenge rationalism, it still contains an implicit "sociology," or as Vayenas put it, "the sociological has penetrated individual expression so that they are really indistinguishable." He supposes it has to do with the irresistible tradition of political writing but, in the case of his generation, "we have been able to write politically but as non-conformists by disputing certain situations in life which are produced under capitalism – but without talking about capitalism as such. For example, we write about the inhuman aspects of life in Athens but, if this is social realism, it is very indirect and muted."

For all the talk about generation contradiction, differences in experience, doctrinal splits, and ideological clashes, there is one disjunction that has been consistently unthinkable: that between public and private discourses. The one is implicated in the other; the very act of writing implies citizenship, for until recently there has been no such thing as privacy. The younger generation of writers may dispute their public responsibility but this is just another way of acknowledging that the Greek writer is accountable to the Greeks.

Myrna Kostash

Edmonton, Canada