

## Characteristics of Intercultural Dialogue through Translation of Modern Greek Poetry

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*Abstract:* Readers are very familiar with at least one of "Four Evangelicals" Modern Greek Poetry, Kavafis, Seferis, Ritsos and Elitis, but not with other 20 century poets, especially of years 1970 - 1980, as example the poet Michalis Ganas, also translated into Albania. The purpose of this paper will be the missed success of contemporary Greek poets and the reasons for this recognition. They could be credit to translation quality, commercial marketing, language, cultural heritage of ancient Greece, etc. As instance, without hesitation can confirm that what constituted a significant advantage for the Greek poets; their ability to use easily variants of the Greek language, constituted a major disadvantage for its translation into other languages because did not allowed the interpreter to decide the same sort of "grades" as the author, in order to reproduce the same melody as original. Also, another factor like the fame and the heritage of the Ancient Greece is one of the major disadvantages for many young poets who failed in their efforts to become known and also to affect the poetic world, have suffered no doubt from Greek ancient past and a particular perception of Greece from the reader, included Albanian one, who also from political reasons was supply only with the images of Ancient Greek mythological heroes. Actually, despite the fact that Michalis Ganas was translated for more than 2 years in Albania with poetic volume "Barefoot Rain" continues to be unknown to the Albanian reader. These characteristics of Greek poetry translation will be analyzed in this study.

*Keywords:* Translation; Greek poetry; intercultural dialogue; international viewpoint; Albanian viewpoint; conclusions.

### 1. Introduction

The Modern Greek poetry walks on tracks of a long experience which roots are in the poetry of Homer and Hesiod, of lyric poet and antiquity dramaturge, and in the epigrammatic and bucolic poetry of Helen period. Leaving back a stagnation phase during roman era, it flourished again in Byzantine era and also during ottoman occupation as a folk poetry.

After the Greece won the independence, the Greek poetry comes with a new energy through Solomos works, Kalvos and Valaoritis's ones, later on with Palamas till reaching its peak during years '30 of last century. But it still continues to have an impressing force even nowadays in a no friendly atmosphere at all for poetry.

Greek poetry has become winner of Nobel prize twice, once with Jorgos Seferis and then with Odiseas Elitis, and at the same time personalities of Greek poetry like Nikos Kazantzakis, Jannis Ritcos are awarded and become world well-known, among them one of the most powerful poetic voices of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Konstandin Kavafis.

Regardless the tradition or the evident present in the world literature papers the Modern Greek poetry is not notorious and as a result not assessed by readers and poetic critics. This fact can be easily noted in the edition of 1952 "Little Treasure of World Poetry" (Creekmore, H. 1952), by Charles Scribner's Sons, where the contemporaneous Greek poetry is represented only by five poets with one verse each: Kavafis, Sikelianos, Seferis, Engonopoulos and Elitis.

### 2. Facts and literature

Konstandin A. Tripanis, a translator and British academic, as commenting Greek poetry, asserts the collision within during a century: "...though it has the longest maybe the most noble tradition in the west world, the best and authentic poetry in Greek, is written during the last hundred years than during the foregoing fourteen centuries" (Trypanis. 1971:54).

We can argue about the above fact, analyzing three events as significant proofs for not being internationally recognized of Greek poetry but, which infer persuasively the special importance the poetry had and stills does in Greece.

- 21<sup>st</sup> of March, year 2002, in National Book Shop in Ottawa, Canada, the World Day of Poetry was celebrated by UNESCO, conceived as Canadian-European Union cooperation. Based on a Greek proposal, two verses of each one, of 15 participating countries were read in their native language, while the translation in English and French run on a big screen placed in the amphitheatre of National Book Shop.

Greece was represented by the part "Mermaids" from the poem "Odiseas" of Homer, and with verse "Itaka" of Kavafis.

While the literature representatives of each country were choosing the poets and verses, it was evident that Greece had no difficulty at all regarding choosing them. This simply, because of achievements of Greek poetry in antiquity and even of the Modern one. Only during the last century, the Greek poetry won two Nobel prizes in Literature and exactly with two poets, but especially for the fact that poetry in Greece was one of the most cultivated genres, and also with a continuity line in centuries.

- The Greek poet Odiseas Elitis, when receiving the Nobel Prize at Swedish Academy for Literature in 1979 commented, referring to himself, in a language spoken only by several millions of people and which is a language still spoken today, though it has been spoken for more than 2500 years constantly, and it has changed very little for eras. He underlined the fact that there is no century when the poetry created by Greeks has not been written in Greek, a fact that shows the great significance of tradition established by Greek language and the big responsibility for the Modern Greek poet.
- Konstandin Tripanis, highlighted in the Introduction of "Anthology of Greek Poetry" (Trypanis.1971), a very large summary volume considering that started with Homer and finished with Elitis: *"The poetry written in Greek constitutes the longest and sustained tradition in all West World. From Homer to nowadays no generation of Greeks has lived without expressing his joy and sadness in verses, and always in very authentic and beautiful verses. (...) This is a nice event that in the last millennium the best poetry has been written in Greek, as it was in fourteen previous centuries: in the last 50 years Greek poetry, with indulgence of politic aspirations or simply national ones, has reached anew the former universal and important values it carried in antiquity"* (Trypanis.1971:4).

Referring to Wallace Stevens affirming somewhere that "Poetry is the art of knowledge", I think that as a special art of knowledge, poetry has had deep roots and relations with Greek people since in its infancy, that is why today it is considered as an issue of national importance.

### 3. Analysis of facts on international and Albanian viewpoint

#### 3.1. Authors

Let's begin from the most ancient event in time: Trypanis wrote his anthology in 1971, when Konstantin Kavafis had already become internationally famous and his works were translated in many world languages; when Jorgos Seferis was awarded with Nobel Prize for Literature in 1963; and when Janis Ritzos and Odisea Elitis were on the top of their poetic maturity and had started to be on international translation "market", attracting widely the attention and interests of foreign reader.

Today, west readers are very much familiar with at least one of these "Four evangelists", of Greek Modern Poetry. Four evangelists have been translated and have become very much known even in Albania; Ritsos earlier because of the communist dictatorship regime of years '50 in Albania and the other three from various translations made during the democracy period.

Anyway, except Kavafis, Seferis, Ritsos and Elitis (listed chronologically according to their birthdates, but even by the order generally known in the literary world), a lot of Albanian readers must be known even with other poets of 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially of years during 1970-1980.

Of course, the grandeur of "Four Evangelists", mentioned above, might have eclipsed to a certain point the fame of the other part of Modern Greek poets, and so the reader can be justified suggesting and arguing that they left no pupil successors behind and as a consequence, in contrast with the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the second half did not produce any famous Greek poets' generation.

But in fact, this is not the reason, not even because this generation has not been translated. Many of them, like Nikiforos Vretakos (1912-1991), Takis Sinopoulos (1917-1981), Miltos Sachtouris (1919-), Manolis Anagnostakis (1925-), Kiki Dhimoula (1931-), Katerina Anghelaki – Rooke (1939-), etc, up to the most youngest ones like Jannis Kondos (1943-) and Michalis Ganas (1944-) have been published all in poetic volumes in the foreign market while some of them even in the Albanian market, and also in anthologies, topic or special essays in journals and literary magazines. In continue, I will often refer to the contemporary poet Michalis Ganas, whose poetic volume "The Barefoot Rain" has been brought to Albanian in 2008, through translation of Nikos Kacalidhas, a poet and writer. He was deeply influenced by Seferis, the poet and technique mentor, awarded by the National Greek Prize for Poetry in 1994.

Most of Greek poetry translated into Albanian, in antithesis of Greek prose which has achieved great success (enough to mention Kazantzakis), has failed to the impact on literary world. I underline that it is the same with international literary world where there is the same phenomena, Greek poets are obviously absent to the international literature and book shops.

But how can we consider this absence? Let's analyze some of the most factors of this "lack of recognition" of 20<sup>th</sup> century Greek poetry.

### 3.2. Themes

We can otherwise start by making some argumentative thesis about the relative success of four Greek Poets, who managed to win fame at various levels, but we can also start with the descending order of familiarity of Greek poetry into translated literature.

Measuring the dimensions of poetic fame of the four Evangelists, as they have been given by the reader, it can be said that Kavafis was the most lucky one to be champion and this because of writing poetry with antiquity theme and with a special prosaic-philosophic tone of Kavafi's voice, familiar for the poetic sensitivity of Albanian reader already accustomed with the rhythm of Albanian folk ballads.

Seferis (the first Greek awarded with Nobel Prize), very much influenced from Eliot and through Modern use of ancient Greek myths, is also rather familiar when reading him in different translations and just like Kavafis, there is a lot of exorcisms and ancientness in his themes to attract the reader.

Ritcos, who most of the time has lived far from Greece because of political persecutions and who has come to Albania too, took fame and became widely known for the reader during the seven years of Military Dictatorship in Greece (1967-1974) when translated became an opposing act versus imperialist Greek military regime and an appeal for democracy of "labour class".

The contrary happened with Elitis poetry, which was vitally related with form of typical word and tone of Greek language, even though the Nobel Prize for Literature conferred to him in 1979, in a way contributed more to give a bigger role to his position in foreign literature world, he remained almost unknown and ignored in Albania, this because of the simple fact that he belonged to an imperialist country in objection with Albanian regime of that time. However, during the last years, thanks to the impressive translation of Nikos Kacalidhas and of Aegean images of symbolic word "sea", which are so dear and known for the Albanian reader too, has become known and famous even in Albania.

However, let's stop a while to the contemporary poet Michalis Ganas.

He was born in 1944 in the village of Camanta, only some kilometres far from the border to Albania. Since when he was a child, he lived the climate of instability caused from Civil War in Greece. As a consequence of this war, he would live for nearly six years in the Socialist Republic of Albania. When he came back to his motherland after the end of civil war, he went to Athens where he stills lives, to continue the studies. He has written many poetic volumes like "Glasses Jannina", "Ballad", "Bouquet" etc; but he is widely recognized in the wide public for his strings converted to songs by famous Greek composers.

He is the poet that writes for the Modern Greek with inspiration, talent and free soul using the main topics like fatherland, love, time, soul and material immigration, and death. Everything in his work shows the contrary of what we already underlined above regarding the four Evangelists; no topic from antiquity and anxieties of the old Greek – only the anxieties of Modern Greek, no Aegean landscape, the contrary, deeply in love with his mountainous birthplace, Epirus. To illustrate the aforementioned, I would extract from his poetic volume translated into Albanian "The Barefoot Rain" the poem "National Road" (Ganas.2008:56):

This way  
Emigrated  
Half of fatherland

Or the other poem which opens this poetic volume, "Robin in the third millennium's eve" (Ganas.2008:3):

Mythic bird  
In red  
Tightly covered  
Frightened of being taken away

### 3.3. Language

But, doubtless what was an important advantage for Greek poets, was of course their skill to use easily the variants of Greek language, though in different phases of its development – ancient, biblical, medieval, the one taught at school or the folk one – was a big disadvantage for its translation to other languages. This was a real difficulty for the translator to put the “keys” to the same order like the author, to allow the translator reproduces the original musicality.

For instance, in many foreign languages, including Albanian, there are no corresponding idioms to those “pure” Greek or as they are called “katharevousa”, which is often used in Modern Greek literature to produce the desired literary effects, ordered from those official to the pompous and up to those ironic and exhilarated ones. It is virtually impossible for the translator to produce this mixture of languages to his own language.

On page 35 of poetic volume “The Barefoot Rain” of Ganas we read the poem “Equivalence” (Ganas.2008:35);

*Only snake knows what it means  
To change skin  
Therefore a lot of poison he has.*

In Greek this poem is:

*«Μόνο το φίδι ξέρει τι θα πει ν'αλλάξεις το πετσί σου,  
γι αυτό του περισσεύει το φαρμάκι.»*

The translator uses the verb in optative manner of the verb “to have”, “a lot of” is used to reach the same effect the poet gives to his poem using only a verb “περισσεύει”, that literally means “in excess”.

The same thing happens with the lines on page 53 of the volume that I am not analyzing so that I do not go any further. (Ganas.2008:53);

*Years that fell on us like projectors  
Shoot us one by one  
Like distracted bunnies*

In Greek they would be:

*Χρόνια που πέσαν πάνω μας σαν προβολείς.  
Μας ντουφεκίζουν έναν έναν  
Σαστισμένους λαγούς*

### 3.4. Heritage

Though not only the language, but even the very rich poetic and famous heritage of Greece becomes the biggest disadvantage for promotion of Modern Greek poetry. Many Modern Greek poets who have failed in their attempts to become known and at the same time influence to the international literary world, have doubtless suffered from the past of Greek antiquity and from a special conceiving of Greece by the foreigners and especially from the Albanian one who because of even politic reasons has been fed of only with the image of ancient Greek heroes of mythology like Hercules, Odiseas, Zeus etc.

From a research made by the Greek Culture Foundation of Tirana, on data basis of National Library of Tirana, in its files and its electronic sites, it concluded that there were over 80 titles translated during the period 1912-1990 (some of them republished more than twice), that in their most part, especially during the communist dictatorship years, their topics were from antiquity. Excluding a few cases of poetry translations like Sapho, Solomos, etc, the other translated literary works belonged to antiquity dramaturgy authors. After the fall of dictatorship, 500 items of translations circulate from 1990-2012 (GCFT.2012:2). Most of them have a literary content, about 240 of them and the others have a historic, linguistic content, art books, magazines etc. (GCFT.2012:3). If we ordered by the translated authors, it would be clearly noted that most of titles belong to the antiquity authors, republished several times and the most interesting is even from third languages, like French, Italian, English, Russian etc.

Lack of Modern Greek poets, actually of Ganas, of references to antiquity or folk images of Greece, collides with

what the reader is used to expect from Greek authors. Actually even though Mihalis Ganas has been translated since a year in Albania, he is still unknown for the Albanian reader.

In contrast with Ganas, poets like Seferis and Kavafis, filtered their reflections on Modern Greece and their individual responses of Modern man preachments, through the familiar prism of ancient Greece and Greek mythology. Even Ritsos, in his late creation period, used widely the topics and characters of ancient Greek myths. Elitis, consciously, avoided any reference to ancient myths, although he used the images from Aegean world like a recurrent leitmotif in his ancient poem. These Aegean images are completely acceptable and known by the reader.

### 3.5. Translation

One of possible factors can be even the weak and inaccurate translation by translators; it is always easy to blame the poor translations.

But this does not happen to translations of prose, however they are translated they are more successful and famous than poetic translations. We can say that this is not worthy saying for the volume "The Barefoot Rain" by the poet Michalis Ganas, who is presented to Albanian reader with a good translation of Kacalidhas, but is still unknown for Albanian reader.

### 3.6. Other Factors

But however someone can find other significant factors like distribution, marketing of Greek poetry during the translation process, and also the inherited ineffective policies of Greek state, regarding the promotion of Greek literature in the world.

## 4. Concluding notes

During the years passed since the appraisalment of Trypanis two whole generations of Modern poets have cultivated poetry in Greece, even not in tracks of profile of forerunners generations, which has been distinguished by the "universal and significant assessment", and continue through their ways of expression the unbeatable poetic Greek tradition.

To write a poem it was and it still is the national Greek preoccupation, even though nowadays its privileged position has lost points in preferences of reader public comparing to novel and roman. It is mostly depended on expectancy of international and Albanian reader for the Greek literature but even of marketing policies of commercial Greek publicists or those international ones.

Despite this, the poetry remains, rooted deeply and passionately to the Greek psychic and the poets have reached the success of being recognized by the international reader, represent only some of the tops emerged on the surface of a deep sea of collective Greek poetic consciousness.

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