

Greek Folk Poetry - Songs of the Robbers

If modern European fiction "came out of Gogol's overcoat", modern Greek prose came out of the ample folds of General Makriyannis's kapa. But the prose, in Greece as in Elizabethan England, is a distant second to the poetry and there is nothing in Makriyannis's always moving memoirs more moving than the passage in which he says, after a comrade has been killed: "So I made him a song".

It's only proper - in Greece more than anywhere - that it should have been a great poet, Seferis, who wrote the definitive assessment of Makriyannis's greatness. Just as it was he and another fine poet, Elytis, who taught us to see the paintings of Theofilos with eyes clearer than those of the louts who threw rotten fruit at him and knocked him off his painting-ladder.

That particular collocation of names is not accidental. The much-belaboured ideal of "organic" or "natural" culture, so torn and trampled and squabbled over in England and America by critics and sociologists and assorted wiseacres, is - or was until very recently - far more than an ideal in Greece; and a poet like Seferis; a soldier-writer like the nineteenth-century Makriyannis; a painter like the early twentieth-century Theofilos; for that matter, a contemporary musician like Markopoulos, are indissolubly linked to one another and to their heritage by a folk-culture which has always expressed itself above all in song - song, the words of which comprise a folk-poetry unequalled outside the Border Ballads and the ancient Chinese Book of Songs.

This is, of course, partly because of exactly that naturalness, that matter-of-factness, shown in Makriyannis's remark, "So I made him a song". If his friend were still alive, Makriyannis might equally well have made him a coffee; after his death he might or might not have made him a coffin. Making him a song was an act of the same order, with no special cachet attached to the making itself - though one can assume he wouldn't have made a song for just anyone.

But the point is that poetry - for I'm not discussing the music; fascinating, complex and beautiful though it is - was not the privilege of a lettered elite; anyone, on any pretext or none at all, could and did (and in Crete still does) make a song. And the thousands that survive - even the three hundred-odd in Polites' anthology *Ekloghai apo ta Traghoudhia tou Ellinikou Laou* (Selections from the Songs of the Greek People), constitute a sort of collective epic, reverberating with a common ground-note too deep for notions of influence or individuality.

I first came across Greek folk-poetry, and especially the *kleftika traghoudhia* ("Songs of the Robbers") when I was twelve and living on Hydra, and a friend gave me a copy of Polites' collection. Twenty years later I am as much in thrall as ever. I have translated them and re-translated them, and am still doing so; writing articles and radio features about them. And one memorable evening I read them to an audience of two thousand Greeks who had gathered in Sydney, Australia to protest against the Junta, and who sat there frozen with

emotion, many of them weeping, at this vital part of themselves being given back to them; improbably enough, by a long-haired, hippy-looking Australian, in an outlandish accent, but still in their own language, of which these poems are one of the glories.

Small boys like playing soldiers, worse luck. The kleftes were the half-brigand guerillas who harassed the occupying Turks from the mountains for centuries (and not infrequently the Greeks as well). And no doubt what first attracted me were the battles, the cannon and banners and silver-filigreed pistols, the severed Turkish heads and prancing chargers and clouds of smoke. I also liked Kipling and Campbell and the Chesterton of Lepanto. But in many of these kleftika there was something quite different:

My friends of Roumeli, and you, sons of Mona,
by the bread we've eaten together, by our brotherhood,
pass by my country and by my people.
And don't enter the village by sunlight or by moonlight,
don't fire your guns, don't sing your songs,
lest my mother hear you, and my poor sister.
And if they ask you, the first time say nothing.
And if they ask again, a second and a third time,
don't tell them I've been killed and make them sad-hearted.
Just tell them I've married here, here in these parts;
I've taken the grave for a mother-in-law, the black earth for a wife,
and these strewn stones for my brothers and cousins.

Nikos Xylouris sings a Cretan variant of that, on the LP Rizitika; and it makes the hair stand on end - A.E. Housman's test of true poetry (and he knew more about Greece than most).

The note is that of the very greatest poetry of war: the note of the Anglo-Saxon Battle of Maldon ("Heart shall grow the higher, will the stronger . . . as our strength lessens"), of Li Ho's meditation on an old arrowhead, of the soldier poems of the Han Dynasty, of Achilles' terrifying speech in the Iliad which begins "So, friend, you die also. Why so much clamour about it? Patroklos died too . . .", of Simonides and of Yeats.

Yeats himself (wrongly, I think) dismissed the verse of Wilfred Owen on the grounds that poetry cannot be made out of passive suffering; but what you find in "Pass by my country" (my own arbitrary title: Polites leaves the poem untitled) is anything but that - stoic, rather, with the true stoicism that loves life all the more passionately for the knowledge that early death must sometimes be necessary; asserts life by grim jesting in the face of death. Or, in a more solemn but equally moving modality of the same spirit:

The brave man's arms should not be sold.
They should be put in church and worshipped there,
hung high up in a cobwebbed tower
where the rust eats the steel as the earth eats the man.

Or, closer again to the first example - and extraordinary because here an exquisite pattern of imagery is being draped around a dead and defeated enemy, the Turks of Dramali's army destroyed by Kolokotronis at the battle of Dhervenaki:

Blow, cool mistral and breeze of the sea
To take the greetings to Dramali's mother . . .
At Dhervenaki they lie, lie on the ground,
Their mattress is the black earth, their pillow, stones,
And their bed-coverings the shining of the moon.

There's an obvious family likeness between this and the end of "Pass by my country", and in general these poems are very rich in formulaic phrases and patterns, which often turn up virtually unchanged in a multitude of different contexts: again and again, at the beginning of a kleftiko, "three little birds were sitting . . ." - one looks this way, one that, "the third and the best one" describes or laments or celebrates the actual content of the poem. Just so, in Homer, hero after hero dies "and his armour clatters upon him"; every new morning is introduced by rododaktylos Eos - rosy-fingered Dawn; and Hektor is the Tamer of Horses even when there's nary a horse for miles.

As Albert Lord systematically shows in his classic *The Singer of Tales*, this is how oral epic poetry is made. And these poems are certainly oral. When Makriyannis "made" his dead friend a song he hadn't learned to read and write. And, as I've said, collectively they are epic, an epic, as truly the epic of the later Greeks as the Homeric poems were the epics of the earlier ones. A discontinuous epic, if you like, but Ezra Pound has surely taught us to accept that possibility; and there is a greater unity to these poems of innumerable, mostly illiterate people sharing one culture than to the Cantos of one man torn between a dozen cultures.

This unity goes a long way back. In the current jargon, it's as much diachronic as synchronic. One of the many folk songs constellated around the full-scale Byzantine epic of Dhiyenis Akritas has the hero telling how he passed through "the mountains of Araby, the Syrian gorges" with "my four-foot sword, my three-fathom spear". Fair enough in a Byzantine context, but it's interesting to find in "The Kleft's Grave" - the monologue of a dying old man who has led a kleft band for fifty years or so and knows he is about to die, and is thus planning his own burial - the instructions to:

. . . make me a good tomb,
Make it wide for the weapons and long for the spear
And in one side make a little window
For the birds to come in and out, the nightingales of spring
And for the beautiful who pass by to wish me good morning.

For the *spear*? When did even Greeks last use them?

But Greek culture, the "high" as much as the "folk", has always been rather like Freud's imaginary Rome, with all its aspects and epochs present simultaneously. In Greece, old gods are dressed up as new saints and seem quite comfortable in their unaccustomed haloes, an Ionic capital does service as an Orthodox chapel altar, and in Cavafy's poems the epicene young men of his own Alexandria merge into the drinking companions of debauched Seleucids and Ptolemies - "All of these things were very old, / The sketch and the ship and the afternoon".

These tricks time plays in Greece make up a texture of life that's usually far too rich, confusing and prone to the unexpected - as anyone will know who's lived here for a while - to suggest any obvious idea of "timelessness" as we usually understand it. The life of the kleftes was no doubt less varied, but on the other hand almost impossibly perilous and unpredictable. Yet in the midst of it all some unknown poet found the time and the mood to write (rather, to sing) this extraordinary little piece, called by Polites simply "Of Varlamis":

Three plane trees, the three in a row,
And one plane tree, what a thick shadow it has!
In its branches swords are hanging,
On its roots guns are leaning.
And below it is Varlamis,
Lying down.

No one has the faintest idea any more who Varlamis was; as with the "companions" of Seferis's Mythistorema who "were good boys, all day they sweated at the oar" and now "No one remembers them. Justice." Still, Varlamis, whoever he may have been - presumably, from the trophies, a kleft of some eminence in his day - exists in that perfect, limpid, almost Buddhist tiny vignette, at peace for a moment "at the still point of the turning world".

The subject matter of most kleftika, however, naturally enough precludes the depiction of many such instants of serenity. They are the songs of brigand-warriors, "made" in the intervals of slaughtering and being slaughtered. There is much in them of roasting sheep and downing wine in their remote lairs, of loving observation of birds and trees and weather, but these gain much of their vividness because of the permanent presence of death, of kharos - the ancient ferryman Charon who has become a rider on a black horse, dragging heroes in chains behind him.

Just see what a time Kharos has chosen to take me,
Now that the branch blooms and the earth gives forth grass.

Athanasios Dhiakos, captured by the Turks at the battle of Alamana, is made to sing as he dies by torture. Or in the famous ballad Of Kitsos:

Kitsos' mother sat on the river-bank
and quarrelled with the river and stoned it.
"River, grow shallow! River turn back,
so I can cross over to the kleft lairs
where the klefts are gathered, and all the captains.
They've captured Kitsos and take him to be hanged.
A thousand go ahead of him and two thousand behind
and last, behind them all, goes his poor mother.
"My Kitsos, where are your arms, where are your ornaments,
the five rows of buttons, the smoke-blackened buttons?"
"Mother, mad mother, foolish mother,
don't you cry for my youth, don't you cry for my gallantry,
do you only cry for my miserable ornaments?"

Centrally, this is a world in which someone can begin a song in the tones of Chaucer's or Sidney's springtime:

If I could be a shepherd in May, a vinekeeper in August,
And in the heart of winter if I could be a wineseller . . .

but:

. . . better to be a kleft
. . . Make my cross on the peak of Liakoura,
Eat Turkish corpses, but not be called slave.

The tradition of Greek poetry is, of course, uniquely long and it is uniquely continuous. We are coming to realise this, as Byzantine poetry - for instance the great kontakia and troparia (hymns) of the Church - is becoming better appreciated. It is staggering that so small a country has produced, in our century alone: Cavafy, Sikelianos, Seferis, Elytis, Gatsos and Ritsos. But to maintain that Greeks are somehow innately likely to be great poets seems to me dangerous racist nonsense.

No: just as the flowering of Marlowe, Shakespeare and Donne depended on a tremendous resurgent vitality of English at all levels, so the modern Greek achievement in poetry is inextricably linked with a common tradition, as much present to the illiterate shepherd as to the Francophil Phanariot. A tradition in which the elements of old and still older religions, an intensely observant love of unaccommodating nature, and an historical situation which provided a universal cause, led to that manifold self-expression of thousands of ordinary people in an extraordinary time, the finest expression of which, perhaps, is to be found in the "Songs of the Robbers". Our own civilisations are all too far removed from any such tradition, and the loss is ours; and insofar as the Greeks try to ape us (however unavoidably) the loss is not only theirs but everyone's.

- Martin Johnston. 1980

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