Martin Johnston

The Paintings of Theofilos

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There was an exhibition here [in Athens] in January of the paintings of Eleni Kourtzi, folk-artist or modern primitive - take your pick - and Mrs Kourtzi herself, a lady in her sixties from Mytilene, was duly fêted. It seems to have been Mrs Kourtzi's first visit to the city, which not surprisingly appalled her. In an interview the name of Theofilos came up. "Please," Mrs Kourtzi implored, "don't call me a female Theofilos!" And she explained that when she was little her mother used to threaten her when she misbehaved: "Be a good girl or I'll marry you off to that paliotsolias" - roughly, "that wretched kilt-wearer".

Poor Theofilos: that was how nearly everyone regarded him all his life. Now there are lavish illustrated coffee-table books of his paintings, galleries devoted entirely to him, learned critical assessments. In 1961, there was even an exhibition of his work in the Louvre. Well, he's forty-five years dead and none of it can do him any harm (and precious little good), though if he's looking down I'm sure he feels - quite humbly - all the fuss to be no more than his due.

It is odd how painters, not usually the most articulate of people, so often emerge hauntingly from the words of others: a stray phrase, a single summating action - Giotto's freehand perfect circle or Dürer's fatal quest after a stranded walrus or some of Picasso's casual aphorisms - anecdotal fragments, references in passing that keep reverberating.

This is exactly how I became intrigued by the Greek primitive Theofilos Hadzimikhail - Theofilos, as he is usually called - years before I had ever seen so much as a reproduction of a single one of his paintings. There is an essay on him in George Seferis's Dhokimes (partially translated as On the Greek Style), which I read years ago. There Seferis describes how once Theofilos was executing the sort of commission on which he mostly lived: painting a mural in a Mytilene baker's shop - no more, really, than an elaborate advertisement. As was his habit, he had depicted the loaves of bread upright in the baking trays, like heraldic emblems on an out-thrust shield - so that no one could be in any doubt that they were loaves of bread and very fine ones, too. The irate baker pointed out that in real life loaves thus placed would have fallen to the floor.

"No," replied Theofilos - surely with that calm, implacable self-certainty which carried him throughout what most people would call a miserable life - "only real loaves fall down. Painted ones stay where you put them." I thought this delightful in its simultaneous naiveté and depth, a perfect statement of the self-sufficiency of art. From then on Theofilos was real to me, sight unseen.

When I finally saw my first Theofilos it was, very properly, completely by accident. I had been spending a couple of days in Volos, that big, drab, ugly bustling seaport at the foot of Mount Pelion, which seems such a grotesquely inappropriate place to have been the home port of the Argo, when for lack of anything better to do, I had caught a bus up the mountain to the village of Makrynitsa, with its carved marble fountains and plane trees and painted gables and the view tumbling down to the Pagasetic Gulf. I had quite forgotten (if Seferis mentions it) that apart from his native island of Mytilene, Mount Pelion had been Theofilos's main stamping-ground.

I had almost finished my ouzo in the dark, frowsly little kafeneio off the village square when I noticed, through the smoke and gloom, a mural entirely covering one wall. It was dark, as I say, and the forty-watt light did little to alleviate it. The painting, here and there, was sadly faded and stained and shredded. Besides, someone had elected to place a fuse box and assorted sockets in one of its corners at one time; but from what I had read already there was only one thing that mural could be.

This the proprietor confirmed. Yes, it had been done, many years before in his father's time by that crazy vagabond Theofilos, who went about in the gear of a hero of the War of Independence, only caring about painting. He was occasionally stoned by the village children; and he commonly worked, so the kafedzis had heard, in exchange for as much wine and food as he could get through while he painted. He'd been told, he said, that the painter used to leave the most important characters or images till last, so as always to have the threat of leaving the picture unfinished and meaningless should the supplies end. Crazy like a fox, evidently.

But the mural itself: In the foreground a band of kleftes [brigands] are feasting, laden with their usual magnificently dandyish paraphernalia, richly chased muskets and long pistols, fearsome silver-hilted yataghans, embroidered jackets in red-and-gold, fustanellas, huge fiercely waxed and curved moustaches. They are spit-roasting sheep, dancing and singing. One, I think, is playing a flute, and a barrel of wine is propped against a convenient rock nearby. One can only feel envious of the time they're having, and the kefi. Up the wall behind them stretches (in very uncertain perspective) that harshly beautiful landscape typical of the Greek mountains: jagged precipitous rocks, a few trees, a little stream.

And - but it takes a while to notice this, and it is the key to the painting - far, far up in the top right-hand corner, coming over a ridge, are betrayal and ruin. None of the merrymaking warriors is looking towards where a long column of tiny figures is stealthily descending upon them. You can just make out the red fezzes which tell you they are Turkish soldiers.

Even in its neglected state, in the darkness of the cafe, the mural was wonderful in its life, its rich abundance of detail, the loving particularity of the painter's eye, and its unashamed quality of telling a story. One can only imagine what it was like when the colours were fresh. It was my first Theofilos, and it was even better than I could have hoped for.

After that I combed the area of Pelion for more, and meanwhile found out as much as I could about the artist's life. There is an excellent little monograph by the poet Elytis - 0 Zoghrafos Theofilos - which gives more detail than Seferis could. From this I take the basic outline.

Theofilos was born in Vareia on the island of Mytilene in 1870. He started drawing all over every available surface in early childhood and was regarded as "odd" by other children. He must have seemed considerably odder when at seventeen - full of incoherent dreams of the War of Independence - he adopted the full national costume, fustanella and all, which he never abandoned. He put it on, like anyone else, for Carnival; and, unlike anyone else, kept it on.

"Am I a Frank," he would demand, "to dress Frankish style?" (This outfit of his reputedly got extraordinarily tattered and grubby over the years. He did have a Sunday-best fustanella but hardly ever wore it.)

Later he moved to Smyrna, where he somehow found a job at the Greek Consulate which not only permitted but required his mode of dress. And twenty years after that he suddenly turned up on the slopes of Pelion with his box of homemade paints and his notebook full of patriotic poems and selections from the Iliad.

There, as in Mytilene, to which he returned in his later years and where he died in 1934, he covered the walls of restaurants and cafés, shops and private houses, as well as boards and paper and pieces of furniture, with the evidence of his obsession - which seems to have been little less than to devour the entire real world and create in its place an ideal painted one.

The man in Borges's short story The Aleph who set out to write a poem which would describe everything was, of course, regarded as deranged by the other characters. And Michael Drayton, who in his endless Polyolbion actually did try something of the sort for England, is generally thought of as at least eccentric. Theofilos was called paliotsolias and lunatic and made the butt of cruel practical jokes by the children who were nevertheless almost the only people he could get on with. Well, perhaps he was mad - at least in the sense that he was driven and possessed.

The Betrayal of Katsandonis (for that, it turned out, was the subject of the Makrynitsa mural) is, I discovered, only one of many Theofilos pictures around Pelion. Even so, the tragedy is that there is so little left in proportion to how much he painted. Theofilos had a compulsion to cover things in paint; and it almost seems that wherever he worked the locals sooner or later developed an equal and opposite compulsion to cover his paint in whitewash.

Or, like the Katsandonis mural, the pictures were wholly or partly vandalised or just left to flake and stain and generally decay. Many of the villages, both on Pelion and in Mytilene, have become depopulated since his day. The abandoned shops and houses eventually just collapsed, taking their Theofilos murals with them.

And at least the house in Anakasia, just above Volos, still stands. A big archontiko, a mansion, and almost the entire first floor is covered with Theofilos murals. With the sunlight pouring in through tall windows, it is dazzling. Where they haven't faded too much you can still see how vibrant his colours were. He mixed them up himself, grinding down coloured rocks for his base. How much closer he came than almost any other painter (including the most technically sophisticated) to solving the notoriously insoluble, eternally irresistible problem of capturing the Greek light. Hence perhaps Elytis's sense of affinity: It is something he has been attempting in words from his earliest poems.

The huge reception room is profusely populated with kilted heroes - Katsandonis again; Markos Botsaris; Kolokotronis in his weird fireman's helmet; Athanasios Dhiakos in the Turks' hands; the splendid Nikitaras the Turk-Eater, scimitar flashing, amply living up to his cognomen; battle scenes with hundreds of meticulously detailed figures, pouring through mountain passes or grappling their way over fortress walls; as well as religious scenes and (I must admit) remarkably stodgy and ill-executed pagan gods and goddesses.

Despite the synoptic mythology he carried around in his notebook, there is no doubt where Theofilos's imagination is most truly kindled. Still, that's a peccadillo in the midst of such splendid and dramatic opulence. All around the main panels, there are purely decorative motifs - gardens, fountains, curling and twining plants, animals wild and domestic, all done with an almost rococo luxuriance of line. One is at a loss to account for them. Where, with nothing but icons and cheap postcards to use as models, did he get all that life, colour, movement?

One of the oddest things about Theofilos is that though he springs straight from the very heart of Greek folk-culture, there are, except for Makryannis's illustrator Panayiotis Zoghraphos, virtually no visual precedents to him. In the negative sense, he may well have acquired his lack of interest in either perspective or the niceties of anatomy from the formulae of icon-painting. The room is an almost excessively rich joy to the eye, as well as being a sort of one-man cabbalistic text. For, as with the mural in the Makrynitsa café, there is always some new detail that throws the expected response out of kilter.

And then there are the long elaborate titles in his unformed hand and erratic spelling that sometimes sprawl themselves over large expanses of the painting - titles as distinctive as Magritte's, though never there for Matritte's purpose of additional surrealist mystification.

A year after "my first Theofilos" I was finally able to retrace the painter's steps, or rather wake, back to his home island of Mytilene. The abominable statue of Sappho on the waterfront seemed an inauspicious omen for what was, I suppose, that rather ludicrous subspecies of journey, the artistic pilgrimage. And it turned out to be unexpectedly difficult to find out exactly how one got to my destination, the tiny village - though it is called a suburb - of Vareia.

But then in Greece it is usually hard to find out how to get anywhere, largely due to unsolicited enthusiasm in giving directions to wherever it is felt you really, and unbeknownst to yourself, want to go. But I got there.

In his last years Theofilos finally acquired a patron, and friends and admirers after his death. The Greco-French connoisseur and collector, Efthymiades Teriade, had put him on commission: he could paint anything he liked, any time he liked; no more grumpy bakers and jeering little boys. And when he died, Teriade joined forces with the poets Elytis and Emberikos, the painter Tsarouhis and the architect Yanoulelis and created at Vareia the Theofilos Museum.

It is a simple, airy whitewashed building crammed with the extraordinarily moving paintings of the final period. Guarded by a very young soldier with an alarmingly large gun (he should, surely he should have worn a fustanella and carried a kariofili) there was The Lute Player of Limnos, to me Theofilos's masterpiece: an old musician with his dog, the musician's eye downcast (melancholy or merely affectionately involved in what he's playing?) and the dog as much essential Dog as Rousseau's lion is Lion. The composition is framed by the lute-player's immense multicoloured cummerbund, his man-high walking-stick and the prickly pear and other foliage in the corners. The comparatively muted colours are perfect, and so is the quality of lyric tenderness and compassion.

There is again a hint of Rousseau (whom Theofilos can never have known of) in The Wrestlers. In their solemn, hieratic gripping of each other they are as static and as universal as the Douanier's football players.

There are the usual heroes; there are portraits: an enchanting Lady with Dog (Theofilos adored his cat Maroulio, but painted a lot of dogs) and an even more enchanting The Family of Mr. Patrison the Democrat of the Province of America Chicago, in which it is quite impossible to distinguish naiveté from irony, and placid local scenes of olive-picking, fishing, shepherding.

Outside the museum the actual olive trees come almost up to the walls. The groves are full of soldiers (all, alas, in standard khaki) for Turkey is very near. It is a theme close to Theofilos. The branches against the just-off-blue sky as it hazes over are straight out of one of his serene landscapes busy with derring-do, though there is no one visible but the occasional soldier and an old lady with a blue plastic bag.

Perhaps no one can turn a whole world into paint; but Theofilos and Greece sometimes seem one and the same.