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Abstract

The island of Cyprus has been shaped by a hopelessly complex multicultural history, division, and by a geographical position that has long ambiguated the geopolitical borders of 'Europe', 'Asia', and 'the Middle East'. Any discussion of translation, literature, history, and culture in this zone of indeterminate encounter between heterogeneous cultures and populations is intriguing. The literature of Cyprus has been shaped across a spectrum of languages and trans-cultural relations which may range from confrontation, indifference or mutual exclusion, to creative engagement depending on the social and cultural processes and historical moments.

STEPHANOS STEPHANIDES

An Island in Translation

INTRODUCTION

The island of Cyprus has been shaped by a hopelessly complex multicultural history, division, and by a geographical position that has long ambiguated the geopolitical borders of ‘Europe’, ‘Asia’, and ‘the Middle East’. Any discussion of translation, literature, history, and culture in this zone of indeterminate encounter between heterogeneous cultures and populations is intriguing. The literature of Cyprus has been shaped across a spectrum of languages and trans-cultural relations which may range from confrontation, indifference or mutual exclusion, to creative engagement depending on the social and cultural processes and historical moments. If I begin with the island of my birth, it is both because I can speak from a position where I am written and from which I write, where I am translated and from which I translate, but like many writers I am fascinated by island spaces as metonymy of a world. Fernand Braudel observes that islands are subjected to historical pressures that push them at once ‘far ahead and far behind [...] general history’, dividing them, ‘often brutally, between the two opposite poles of archaism and innovation’ (150). This seems to also suggest a situation of not knowing which time one is in, like Bloch’s famous concept of *Ungleichzeitigkeit* (temporal incommensurability). Time compressed into space, and the spatialisation of the temporal in an island territory, brings dissimilarities next to each other but also a mode of non-comprehension or charged speechlessness in need of translations that opens up for revision what may have been denied or apparently obsolete. A layered imaginative geography, in other words, governs the cultural differences related to cultural contests and national or ethnic divisions.

Translation, like writing, may serve to replenish the layered intertextual and interlingual resources of a culture — deterritorialising one terrain to map another. Deleuze and Guattari have used a tetra-lingual model for the spatiotemporal categories: vernacular (here), vehicular (everywhere), referential (over there), and mythical (beyond), which they use to develop the concept of ‘minor literature’ in terms of territorialisation, de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation. The distribution of the four functions of language and their interplay will change through time and among different groups and communities, and this interplay is more salient within the cramped space of an island. For example, in the context of Cyprus, languages of territorialisation would be Cypriot Greek and Cypriot Turkish, the rural and maternal languages; the language of the island’s various colonisers would have been vehicular and deterritorialising, languages of the ‘world’ that are found ‘everywhere’ such as French and English. The referential,

and reterritorialising languages of sense and culture in the post-colonial nation state would be Modern Greek and Modern Turkish. Also reterritorialising are the mythic languages of the past, of spirituality and religion such as Classical and Byzantine Greek, Ottoman Turkish. Translation redistributes these functions of language, shifts their centres of power and blurs their borders. For Deleuze and Guattari 'minor literature' is written in a major language affected by a high degree of deterritorialisation. It is literature written in a major language but from a minoritarian or marginalised perspective such as Kafka writing in German or writers in former colonies writing in the Langue of the colonisers. A writer in a minor literature is a stranger in the language in which she [or he] writes making other voices vibrate within. As a writer in English in Cyprus and translator into English, I have been involved in the process of 'becoming-Minor'. I will return to this idea and focus on English and literary transculturation in Cyprus in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, but I will first provide a brief historical perspective of language relation and exchange on the island through its long history.

Language relations on the island have been marked by inequalities that have arisen because of conquest, colonialism, or changing demographics impinging on a pre-existing state. Many languages have been used on the island throughout its history. The bronze age Cypriots spoke a language whose script has not been deciphered and may be related to the language of Minoan Crete. Greeks and Phoenicians arrived on the island around the beginning of the first millennium BC and brought their languages with them. The languages of other rulers of antiquity — Assyrians, Egyptians, and Persians — are hardly documented. During the Hellenic and Roman period there was a large Jewish community on the island that became Greek-speaking. With the division of the Roman Empire, Cyprus became part of the Byzantine Empire until 1191, when it was conquered by the crusader, Richard the Lionheart, who sold it to the Knights Templar, and who in turn sold it to Guy de Lusignan in 1192. The ensuing French period on the island lasted three centuries. French became the language of the court and the ruling class, while Catholicism became the official religion and Latin the language of the clergy. The indigenous population retained the Cypriot dialect form of Greek, and the legislation of the Kingdom of Cyprus was written in Cypriot Greek as was the well-known chronicle of Leontios Makhairas during the same period, which was translated into English by Richard Dawkins in 1932 as *Recital Concerning the Sweet Land of Cyprus entitled 'Chronicle' — The Chronicle of Makhairas*. Also in the medieval period, Italian dialects were used for trade in the coastal towns where some Italians settled. The Venetian economic presence became especially strong and eventually the Venetians took control of the island in 1489. During this period some sonnets were written in the Cypriot dialect after the Petrarchan tradition, although some argue that these may well be translations from the Italian. The Venetians ruled the island until it was conquered by the Ottomans in 1571. With a weakening Ottoman Empire, the island became a British protectorate in

1878 still under Ottoman Rule, was annexed by Britain at the outbreak of World War One when the Ottomans sided with Germany, and eventually became a Crown Colony in 1925.

One may find a kaleidoscopic perspective of this cultural history by navigating the *Excerpta Cypriana* — an anthology of translated writing on Cyprus compiled by the British commissioner of Larnaca and published in 1908. Including excerpts translated from various languages into English from ancient times up to the Ottoman period and evoking the gaze of travellers, settlers, Cypriots and conquerors, the anthology evokes the cross-cultural gaze on the island through the millennia: Strabo speaks of the temple of Aphrodite, unapproachable and invisible to women; the Spanish Jew, Benjamin of Tudela, speaks of the heretic Cyprian Jews, Epicureans who profane the sabbath and keep holy that of Sunday; Neophytus, the twelfth-century hermit speaks of England, a country beyond Romania out of which a cloud of English came with their sovereign; Capodilista, a 15th-century Paduan gentleman, marvels at banana trees with fruit like cucumbers, yellow when ripe and very sweet of savour; and a document of Ottoman law professes tolerance toward Christians.

BRITISH RULE 1878–1960

During the first decades of British rule the combination of colonial rule and Cypriot diasporic consciousness yielded a form of colonial cosmopolitanism. It is noteworthy that literary modernity in Cyprus came belatedly, with the advent of British colonialism in the 1880s, the decade that brought the first printing press (a gift from Alexandrian Greeks) and the first newspaper to the island (published in Greek and English). The history of colonialism and print capitalism are crucial in understanding how the nation ‘form’ has spread and tried to impose periodisation and universal schemes of identity in Cyprus as it has elsewhere. The printing press was a catalyst for the production of local literature, translation and criticism. In his PhD dissertation, Papaleontiou notes that in the period 1880–1930, which coincides approximately with the first half-century of British rule, more than 900 texts by about 400 writers were translated by 150 *literati* for local consumption (274). English education in Cyprus, and Cypriots studying in British universities, were important catalysts in this literary activity. In addition, there was a Cypriot diaspora in Egypt, Asia Minor and the Levant which engaged with Eastern languages and cultures. The newly arrived English education and culture which may have given further impetus to knowledge of the East through British Orientalism, brought about its own kind of cross-fertilisation and intervention in the home culture, thus marking the island as a cross-cultural gateway between East and West. The translated texts include both European classical and contemporary literature and Eastern literature (mainly Arabic and Persian). Papaleontiou refers to a lecture given in 1917 by Fasouliotis, a former student at the American University of Beirut, who praises the beauty of the twelfth-century Persian poet Nizami, and speaks favourably of the purity of Nizami’s spirituality in contrast

to the Byzantine Christian monastics (275). These communities of the East Mediterranean Cypriot diaspora dissolved in the course of the twentieth century for various reasons, notably the Asia Minor disaster of 1922, the Suez crisis of 1956, and civil strife in Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s. There is, however, little evidence during the British colonial period of Cypriot literature travelling elsewhere through translation. In the '40s and '50s there were some sporadic translations into English including some poems translated by Lawrence Durrell in *The London Magazine* in 1954.

Colonial cosmopolitan collusions turned into collisions in the 1950s when the anti-colonial movement turned into an armed struggle affecting attitudes toward language, culture, identity and translatability. The relationship of Durrell and Giorgos Seferis to each other and to the island is very telling of the new turn. The two writers became friends and translated some of each other's work. They grew apart as each played different roles in the rival claims and disputes among Britain, Greece, and Turkey over the island. Seferis, an Asia Minor Greek, whose family fled Smyrne in 1922, felt a sense of *nostos* (homecoming) when he came to Cyprus in 1953 and his sojourn on the island led to a collection of poems first published with the title *Cyprus, where it was ordained for me* and then published in *Log Book III* in 1959. He suggests an analogy between his poetic persona and Teucer, who settled in Cyprus after the Trojan War, and cites Euripides' *Helen* in which Teucer states that Apollo has decreed that Cyprus should be his home. In contrast, Durrell, who lived on the island for four years in the '50s, witnessed the rise of fervent nationalism which led him to leave in 1956 in fear of his life. Indeed, it was during the 1950s that English, which was first partially introduced in primary schools in 1935, was taken out because of anti-British feeling during the EOKA¹ struggle in 1955–59. It was re-introduced as part of the official syllabus in 1965–66. Durrell's book, *Bitter Lemons*, is still an important testimony and was a lightning rod for events on the island at the time, prompting criticism of his colonial Orientalist attitudes. In 1964 the eminent Cypriot Greek poet, Costas Montis (1914–2004), wrote a novella-chronicle set in the 1950s, entitled *Closed Doors*. It was intended, as the author states, as a response to Durrell's book, however it was not translated into English until 2004.

POST-INDEPENDENCE

The separate nationalisms of the two main ethnic communities defined the direction of the anti-colonial movement, and after Independence in 1960 the two largest ethnic communities pursued incompatible national trajectories, which led to clashes and the effective division of the island between Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot communities. In 1974 the northern part of the island was occupied by the Turkish military, which resulted in the forced dislocation of forty percent of the population. The role of nationalism has since been strong in the conservative reterritorialisation of both written and oral cultural practices.

In the majority Greek-speaking part of the island this process may be observed in the construction of a literary canon through state publications and prizes, translations and anthologies as well as efforts by organisations such as Cyprus PEN. One PEN publication, Theoklis Kouyialis' *27 Centuries of Cypriot Poetry*, claims a national history that extends across three millennia, and emphasises a Greek lineage from the Kypria Epics of Stasinus (7th to 8th century BC) to 20th century voices. Like other anthologies that deal with contemporary poets and construct the idea of a tradition of Cypriot Hellenism, *27 Centuries of Cypriot Poetry* attempts to illustrate the tenacity of a Eurocentric narrative of unbroken tradition, which narrowly defines cultural frontiers and remains unaware of its own translatability. Although it includes literary gems from Cypriot literature in Greek, it excludes volatile forms of difference such as those that emerge in the Ottoman period. The Ottoman period is described in the introduction as one of creative sterility and nothing originally written in Turkish is included. Cypriot literature in Turkish was also developing separately for the most part with the exceptional literary encounters between writers of the two ethnic groups outside of Cyprus. It was impossible in the period 1974–2003 to cross the divide unless for exceptional reasons and with special permission. Remarkably, poet and peace activist Neşe Yaşın has lived in south Nicosia since the '80s and struggled with the difficulties of crossing. She has been widely translated and her poem in Turkish 'My country,' beginning with the lines 'My country has been divided in two, which half should I love', has been made into a song in Greek composed by musician Marios Tokkas. The lyrics translated by Cypriot Greek poet Elli Peonidou, and sung by Greek singer Giorgos Dalaras. The song has become an anthem for those working for peace and reunification. Nearly two decades after Kouyialis' anthology, Neşe's half-brother, the poet Mehmet Yaşın, edited *Step-Mothertongue: From Nationalism to Multiculturalism: Literatures of Cyprus, Greece and Turkey* (2000), which includes essays and poetry written in English and in English translation from Greek and Turkish and includes some remarkable examples of pre-modern Cypriot poetry selected and translated from different languages. *Step-Mothertongue* combines essays and poetry that challenge the traditional categorisations of Cypriot literature and the delimitations of the literary itself by including, for example, Phoenician tomb inscriptions in its poetry selection.

Though nationalist separatisms have claimed centre stage in the Cypriot political and cultural mainstream during the last half of the twentieth century, it is worth remembering that the first President of the post-colonial Republic, Archbishop Makarios, played a leading role in the Non-aligned Movement, and that less than half a century later, the Republic is a European Union member state as it continues to be a Commonwealth nation. Indeed, the media prominence of nationalist rhetoric often works to disguise and contain the impact of post-colonial migrations on social and cultural change that became all the more visible by the

end of the millennium. Developments of the island's economy have attracted people fleeing from the post-communist debacle of Eastern Europe and the widespread poverty of South and East Asia. It is now estimated that twenty-seven per cent of the population on the south of the island is foreign-born. The north, meanwhile, has been importing thousands of impoverished Turkish settlers in response to the depopulation caused by Cypriot Greeks who fled to the southern part of the island to escape the invading Turkish army in 1974. It is now estimated that Turkish settlers outnumber Cypriot Turks.

2003 TO THE PRESENT

These radical demographic changes and the partial opening of the checkpoints on April 23rd, 2003, which allowed north–south crossings for the first time since 1974, opened translators to new potentials or confrontations. At first the crossings were flooded by Cypriots from both sides in search of lost homes and villages. While the sudden unleashing of energy at the surprise opening of the checkpoints has died down and more than nine years later there is still no political solution for reunification, the ability to cross easily has enabled the fermentation of new relationships and communities across the divide.

The buzz of excitement after the first border-crossings brought together poets who attempted to destabilise established attitudes toward questions of historical knowledge, national allegiance and cultural affiliation. In one of the first meetings, I met Jenan Selçuk and heard him read his fine poem 'The Date-Palm' in Turkish. I quote an English translation in full:

I am a tree, a date-palm
 in some Mesaoria cemetery.
Civilisations buried in my shade,
their bones
my roots.

Forty curly-haired slaves rowed
the boats
 which brought us from Egypt.
My grandfather a Hellene wearing an earring
my circumciser an Ottoman barber
a boy kidnapped into the Janissaries
 a pederast.

I was apprenticed
to Aphrodite in spring
 Zenon in winter.
You may not have realized!
I was the model for the Lusignan architects.
Inherited from Venetian merchants
this sweet tongue,
 chasing pleasure
 Roman Byzantium...

have an additional line to explain one word. Regrettably in my view, because the detail of *devşirme* particularises the ‘conversion’ into a local historical context and charges the affective body and the imagery of the poem. Many conversions, inversions, reversions take place in a multicultural society as they do in translation and are articulated in the tropes and turns that are taken along the path of ‘crossing over’ in translation. When I read Mehmet Ali’s translation with reference to the Janissary, I remembered vividly a story I read many years ago by the nineteenth-century Greek writer, Georgios Vizyinos, called ‘The Only Voyage of His Life’. Part of the story tells of a young boy whose family dress him as a girl to avoid abduction by the Janissaries and he assumes his male identity once again when he reaches puberty and marries.

Movement across languages through the places and spaces of the island are often marked by the kind of intensity that comes from both shared and contested references and histories, and processes of naming and renaming. Niki Marangou maps out the territory in an apparently detached way that allows the tensions and connections to emerge in the disjunctions among layers of names, images, historical and social details. This is most evident in her poem ‘Street Map of Nicosia’:

Looking at the street map
of Nicosia and its suburbs
Fuat Paşa Street ends on Dionysou and Herakleitou
Defne Yüksel on Hermes Street
Yenice Şafak on Leontiou Makhaira.
in the vicinity of Flatro Bastion
on old maps the river cut through the town
but Savorniano, the Venetian, changed the flow
to fill the moat with water.
There on Sundays the domestic servants
from Sri Lanka spread out their shawls
and eat together.
The palm trees remind them of home.

(trans. from the Greek by Xenia Andreou)

In translating the above lines, one becomes involved in choices of transliteration, so that translation, and walking through the streets of Nicosia with Marangou, becomes a ‘nomadic of intensities’ (to borrow a term from Lyotard). The negotiation involved for the translator pulled in multiple directions among territorialisation, reterritorialisation and deterritorialisation becomes very apparent in the transliteration of place names. Transliterations often involve sites of habitus-governed translational strategies. For example, this also occurred in Turkey where there were Turkish-speaking Greek communities (Karamanlides) who wrote Turkish with Greek letters, and Greek-speaking communities who wrote Greek using the Turkish alphabet. An earlier draft of the translation of Marangou’s poems into English, transliterated the Turkish street names from the

Greek script in which they were written in the original poem. The effect on the ear was that of a speaker of standard Modern Greek pronouncing Turkish names without the sounds of the diacritics and without the palatalisation. For example, Yenice Şafak was written Yenidze Safak — if the transliteration wanted to help the English speaker pronounce it, it should read Yenije Shafak. The palatalised fricatives are not found in the phonetic system of standard Greek although they are found in Cypriot Greek vernacular speech. Similarly paşa is pronounced ‘pasha’ by Turks and Cypriots alike (whether Greek or Turkish speakers) but the standard Greek would read the ‘sh’ as an ‘s’. Paradoxically, a Cypriot Greek would more closely approximate the Turkish pronunciation by reading the English spelling. I suggested leaving the names in the poem as they are on the actual street signs, and allow them to enter their own process of signification. The reader will confront the names in variable ways each with their own socio-ethnic linguistic and stylistic habitus, their mythic and historical memory. Like the translator, the streetwalker and reader will react differently when confronted with the street signs depending on where their subjectivity is situated in the interplay of sign, sound, and name. The names themselves function as signifiers that test the boundaries of the mythic past which constructs our cultural memory, and the erasures that have taken place. I was familiar with the Greek names taken from classical antiquity, and with the name of the Cypriot medieval chronicler Makhairas. I wondered about the Turkish names. I also wondered about the fact that the Greek names are written only in Roman letters in the poem whereas on street signs they would be in both Greek and Roman script. I discussed the Turkish street names with two of my Turkish-Cypriot writer friends who assumed the names belonged to the Ottoman past. We also recalled in our discussion that the Roman script for writing Turkish dates back only to Atatürk, so if Fuat Paşa Street, for example, is named after an Ottoman vizier, he would have written his name in Arabic script at the time. The change of script is another kind of erasure or a deliberate turn of direction from past ideology and culture as the Republic of Turkey distinguished itself from its Ottoman past by adopting another set of values and epistemology, and another alphabet and language revolution that attempted to exclude words of Arabic and Sufi origin. This complex cultural politics of past and present have been wonderfully explored in the novels of Orhan Pamuk and Elif Şafak.

As a Cypriot writing in English, I find myself always in the tensions and ambivalences on the edges of different languages. For example, the word I hear for a feeling and image may come to me in the word of the vernacular Cypriot Greek as my grandmother would have said the word. In my poem ‘Find Peace,’ I was caught between using a word like ‘epsimo’ or ‘pekmez’ and eventually settled for ‘grape molasses’ in the lines that follow:

And then glimpse at your kith
 Far and away now
 Damascene plums on rooftop terraces
 Skins charred shielding their flesh of gold

Taste their blood
Thick like grape molasses

I became caught between intensifying the meaning by stripping it from the sound of the signifier or allowing the intensity to draw on the vernacular word and territorialise it in the rural grape culture and the sound of my grandmother's tongue speaking of grape must and molasses vibrating within English. When the poem was published I chose the word 'grape molasses'. In a multilingual translation and poetry workshop, when the poem was translated into Greek, Niki Marangou eventually came up with 'epsimo' whereas the first thought that came in dialogue with other participants was the standard Greek word to designate the same. I preferred the affective shift toward the territory of the maternal local rural past and wondered if I had made the right choice in the English original and might change it for a future publication. In translation, the pull between deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation remains but within a different set of relations and effects.

CONCLUSION

Translation in Cyprus has multiple entry points and demands negotiation for a way though a labyrinthine path to find a line of flight. The movement of translation inscribes an assemblage of relations in their affective becoming and maps the passage of deterritorialisation as seen in the two poems translated from Turkish and Greek previously discussed. This quest for a line of flight is articulated in one of Andriana Ierodiaconou's poem, 'Journey': 'Swallows fly to green days directly, without hesitation/we have been walking for years now and the sea has forgotten us and become a word'(translated from the Greek by the poet) (811). The flight in minoritarian literature becomes an experimental literary process testing limits and boundaries, deviating in different directions, exploring the territory for a way to the sea or the unexpected *nostos* at the end of the above Marangou poem when after roaming the streets of Nicosia we find our way to the moat with the Sri Lankan servants eating among the palm trees. The palm tree's signification is opened to another kind of homecoming and a new narrative and journey of migration through its association with palm trees on another faraway island.

A new generation has grown up since partition, and few Cypriot Greeks or Cypriot Turks speak each other's language so they rely on English as a lingua franca and as a language for mediation in translation. Many poets double as translators and translate each other's work mostly through the mediation of English, spawning an experimental literary dialogue and literary transculturation. This collaboration has recently resulted in the publication of two translated anthologies in 2010. One of Cypriot Greek poets in Turkish, selected and translated by poet Gurgenç Korkmazel (and sometimes using older existing translation), and one of Cypriot Turkish poets selected and translated into Greek by poet Giorgos

Moleskis. Some important new initiatives since 2003 such as the journal *Cadences*, and more recently the Centre for Writers and Translators, have activated the potential of earlier, pre-nationalist forms of cultural cosmopolitanism by bringing together Cypriot writing in English, Greek, and Turkish in the original and/or in translation, and thus provide an alternative perspective and promise of what Cypriot literature might be by setting off different tongues against each other in cross-cultural poetics. The literature is experimental because we are uncertain of the new intratextual relations it will lead us to as it de-codifies perspectives that are not of the established literary culture. In Cyprus, English as a language of literary translation and cultural mediation is complicit with Cypriot English becoming ‘minor literature’, because it has to confront disjunctions of content and expression. Minoritarian poems in majoritarian languages do not express an identity of a minority, but open the potential for another perspective, sensibility and affective attitude by creating new possibilities of speaking, thinking and writing in the performance of translation.

NOTES

- ¹ EOKA (Εθνική Οργάνωση Κυπρίων Αγωνιστών, Ethniki Organosis Kyprion Agoniston, Greek for National Organization of Cypriot Fighters) was a Greek Cypriot organisation that fought for the expulsion of British troops from the island, for self-determination, and for Union with Greece.

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