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Aris Anagnostopoulos

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Aris Anagnostopoulos

Abstract

These three poems were written as part of a long term ethnographic and archaeological engagement in central Crete. They respond to the sense of history that people and place create, as well as the affective aspects of sharing this historicity in the field. They draw inspiration from the themes, wisdom, stories and maxims of the mostly elderly inhabitants of the communities I worked with, but do not claim to represent them in any accurate way. Conversely, it aims to lay open the sediment of affects left by these successive strata of experience in the formation of the writer's self.

The monstrous time

Four-hooved panting breath
falters up the hill
cling of iron on the rocks
upsetting in its path
the remains of aeons of footprints

the young shepherd takes his eyes from the vulture that transfixed him
sees the horse
it is not an animal any more, but a sign:
Master is here

his father owes the Master
quite some heads of cheese
rendered black from the moss
of the cave it's been stacked into

it's been a bad year
the Master, Andrea Cornaro
is not as lyrical as his distant cousin
whose fame is already rising abroad
for his idyllic imitation of Italian epics
in the local language of his native Candia

the Master's tongue sings the adage of the whip

he lives in the great city, he is nowhere to be seen in these parts
but as you turn your head for a while,
to look at a passing cloud,
or hear a distant commotion in your flock,
and the ants take over your loaf of bread
so does the master appear uncalled
in the middle of the day

the master's time is the monstrous time

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to whistle
a simple feat
just put your rounded fingers under your tongue, like so
and blow
blow

but no

to whistle is not as simple as it sounds
his head grows dizzy as he puts his nine years behind his breath
blow

nothing

no sound, just a growing unease
like the first time he found a used cigarette butt on the floor and lit it
outside the coffee shop
the mockery was a branding iron just out of the fire

but no

the clutter he hears is not his beating heart
rushing towards his neck
but something else
something

not heard before in these parts of the world

it resonates a low growl
must be a ghost, an apparition like those
he has been warned against
in stories told at night

he stays, heart panting,
his fingers still covered in saliva, forming an O
like his lips now,
as he sees it

a black
heavy
menacing
thing

rounding the corner
no
eating it

and spitting smoke

the sheep scatter everywhere, he falls face first

lifted by the dirty hem of his shirt amidst the world falling apart
he has forgotten the only prayer he learned at school
now regrets his father took him off it, to mind the sheep
and dreams of the teacher's punishment as his saving grace

a splendid scene, this
the road workers holding a young shepherd by the neck
rock scattered everywhere by dynamite
the birds have taken to the heavens
the animals have vanished
the silence holy like before, broken only by laughter and lewd comments

the tarmac road comes in sudden blasts
like the thunder that suddenly opens the sky above you
amidst the damp fatigue of rain
unheeded, uncaring

development has the surprise of thunder
the time of the road is the monstrous time

-<^>-

She comes out from behind the stone wall she has been using for cover against the wind
more timid than cold
as the men approach the top of the hill
to the remains of the aborted new church

what is she doing here?
she lost her goat
it is probably on someone's table already but

she had this last hope, now as lost as her goat
that the animal may have come here
to eat the tiny yellow flowers that are said to cure anthrax

she says as much to the foreign men
so sure of themselves and so cocky
with their axes and spades on their shoulders

if it weren't for the president she would not have revealed herself
but just roll on her heels down the hill
and then take the long way home
having to salute so many farmers on the way
and pulling gossip behind her
by the long leash of her lost animal

all better than this foreign man
this cranium of a head
on the president's side
asking her for local expressions and words
who leaves, impatient at her silence,
to egg the men on, as they spit in their palms, ready to dig

he keeps a notebook against the wind and occasionally draws something in it
he looks at stones with great interest
he may be crazy, or a man of great powers
or both

later at the kafeneio he pontificates
October is raw up here, he needs the hot coffee before he heads back to the city that once
was Candia
he talks, slowly lost in reverie
of an ancient time before anything the village can remember
before the oldest woman still alive
before the great heroes of the Cretan revolutions

he puts his two fingers together
like he is about to whistle,
but no, he shows how an ancient clay figurine was made
like so
you press the wet clay, pinch it rather
and you have a head
give it two eyes and it will see you to eternity

afterwards, the fire will do the rest

sometimes he wonders whether it is not
the figurines themselves that made the man
now lost forever
- his bones tiny splinters in the dirt -
and not the other way around

I wonder, he said, if the thing makes the man
and not vice versa

but then he was gone
as fast as he came
and nobody ever heard of him again

he was an archaeologist
the men in the coffee shop remembered

and then they decided
that the time of archaeology is the monstrous time.

The Process

I too came up that hill
many times but only once realized there was a village there
unwittingly following the footsteps of the poet's cousin
and his words, lip-synching to a local radio station
whose name, straggling the portentous and the parochial,
drew on that vast epic of love
its writer half-effaced by use
like a coin that has left its heads and tails on the hands of so many patrons
the road is not the road he showed me
in ballet poses, jumping over fences, crouching behind walls
one hand pointing to the ground the other to the sky
trapped inside his leather jacket in a mist of spray

the road cannot be shown
he tried so hard, almost punching the rounded cobbles with his bare hands
kneeling on it, close enough to kiss it in a gesture of supplication
to its enormous past
to its unendurable presence
but I
I never saw it

I could never picture king Minos escaping his idiotic fate
his monstrous family and their depraved kinks
their invention of boredom long before the fact
to make the long process to the mountaintop of Ida
to reclaim his father, a god, everyone presumed,
or some moments of silence inside a hidden cave

I could never picture his bare hand
stooping to pick a thorn out of his hardened sole
his teeth trying the surface of the stone
as he lay half asleep in a forced midday pause

I saw only ottomans,
people as strange as any Minoan king
dragging the metal rings of their cart wheels
in between the cobbled surface of the road
that was once an avenue and now is only a cascade of frogs
lizards
crickets
living their everyday dramas
perhaps as important than any human story
and equally incomprehensible

disbelief you see
is an empty casket
where once was the corpse of a precious stone
and now is replaced by a price tag
a flimsy whiteness
washed in a back pocket
insignificant, unenchanted

prosaic

yet the real jumps mockingly at you
a stoop, a balletic pose, a naive inquiry
a stone in his hand
pray tell me what kind of stone this is then
what kind of stone
a neolithic tool
an egg-shaped accident
that becomes a something in an instant
acquires a name,
a price-tag,
geographic location system coordinates
but it will never be a kind of stone

the path the king took, the path of the master and the distant cousin
the path of so many barefoot migrants
is blocked by an iron fence
and guarded by a leontine german shepherd
the smell of vulture all over it
you better take the dangerous detour through the gorge

I too came up that hill,
unwritten, washed off by disbelief
stretching my umbilical cord from the city that once was known as the world capital of
candy
looking through the rearview mirror
to crossing paths of drunkenness, migration,
and dead-end masculinity horse-powered by Japanese machinery
in four-wheel drives able to scale any mountain.

Once, driving down the road
the driver's door flew open
an invitation to escape
while there was still time
while time was still there

The trapdoor

you see I grew up in this house, the house below this house was not always a keep for animals or a storage room for useful materials. although it was always cold as a freezer, as cold as it is today. it is jammed between other houses, their stone walls are the walls to this house, nobody owns a wall, unlike what is in it. i grew up here, in the company of animals, jammed in between and below us, we slept above them on wooden platforms, we exchanged breaths on countless nights. they kept us warm, we kept their warm memories. then my father built the room on top, the house moved upwards. it was the thing to do if you could afford it. not for size, most had a large family but not the means to expand. they stayed put, we moved up. we kept this, a hole on the ground, a prone door to the world below. i gradually got unaccustomed to the smell - i realized when i first noticed that there was one. a trapdoor to the underworld. To the way the past smelled. may god preserve this trapdoor. It helped us forget our past. It helped us build surprise. maybe it would open one day with a sudden bang, and you would stop weaving on your loom to turn your head in half-expectation, half-horror, to see the face of your future husband - flustered, maybe angry, ready to lift you off your feet and carry you away if you refused to follow. so functions love, by denying to underwrite the already written. or maybe you would expect the purple sign of dusk to sneak unnoticed below, groping in the dark to see the face you once saw reflected on the waters of the well, when you carried the soundless water inside your mouth; fruit-scented, loaded with premonition, so heavy on your teeth, boiling with deliverance. what a strange animal is man, how different does he react when you touch his skin. Violent and tame at the same time, he belongs under this trapdoor, for eternity.

Tracing the lips of the void, or writing poetry in the field,

To be perfectly frank, I do not know where these poems came from. I know, or at least I can claim to remember, where and how they were written. I can also show some of the tassels hanging from their frayed edges to hint at the connections they may have with ideas, hopes, and perspectives in the field. Whether this is of import to other anthropologists, poets or interested readers, I am not certain. But here goes: these poems were written during, and after, a long stint of ethnographic research in the mountainous region of central Crete (2011 to 2019). The research was part of the archaeological project “Three Peak Sanctuaries of Central Crete”, a small-scale research project aiming to study and publish the findings from past rescue excavations, in the area of Malevizi, on the island of Crete. Peak sanctuaries were (quite possibly) ritual spaces at the tops of hills or mountains during Minoan times, several millennia in the past. It is probable that such sanctuaries overlooked quite populated and busy human settlements in their time. Today, the feeling they give to the visitor is one of desolation: windswept places with majestic views and perhaps some stone constructions or scattered finds that retain their silent mystery, even to professional archaeologists.

The villages that exist around this area were, at some point, bustling communities of several hundred people; today, they are mostly occupied by a few elderly inhabitants. The feelings that mark these poems arose from perceptions I was faced with during the first seasons of fieldwork: solitude, abandonment, and time running out for the living. In subsequent readings, I have revised this outlook by offering the idea that abandonment is not the only aspect of urbanization that decimated this local population, and that spreading out from a local place might be a more optimistic way of seeing it—and one closer to the heart of its younger generations. Steeped in the outlook of the local place as I was, however, these poems evoke the perspective of the “friend of the desolate” (*philerimos*), as one peak in the area is called. In this, I was much influenced by local poets who make absence, distance and abandonment a central motif of the distichs (mantinades) they compose, in their own collective way of working through large social transformations and personal fates beyond their control.

Much of the collaborative work the research team did in the area was guided by the community's insistence on recording and preserving ways of life, thought and expression that were slowly disappearing as each elderly inhabitant passed away. This demand attributed a sometimes oppressive urgency to most relations in the field: an interview could very well be the last, and I was, at times, entrusted to save pieces of local lore from oblivion, using the technology at my disposal and my persuasion as a researcher. These poems are the recovered fragments of a motif that repeated itself semi-consciously in my mind throughout these occasions. They do not record or document my thoughts or feelings with accuracy; they are more like responses in writing to an invitation to face powerful absences in the field.

Ethnographic writing is perhaps an expression of the very Janus head of modern consciousness. It preserves, in paradigmatic form, the tension between two extremes: the

flash of consciousness as a *fatum*, as the pure and extreme necessity of human experience of the world, and its temporal duration as the nostalgia of purportedly unmitigated access to immediate experience. Aspects of this contradiction, which represents both sides of the same coin, can be traced in most writing that positions the experience and recounting of alterity as the privileged space that sets anthropology apart from all other social sciences. It is as if the experience of radical alterity secures, for anthropology, the prerogative of that visceral sense of real-life that is absent from the contemporary metropolis. So anthropology has fought a bitter struggle with its twin tendencies of recounting and explaining, of assuming the position of the other *qua* other, or subsuming the richness of ethnographic dwelling into a series of dominant, in every sense of the term, signifiers—society, culture, economy, structure, and so on. Yet one cannot help but wonder if the real division here lies elsewhere, particularly in language itself—more precisely, in the way western modernity has thought about language, at least ever since Hegel, as a condition of the spirit that guarantees the death of the Thing.

Yet, as late Lacan was to point out, there is a remainder in language, in the act of speaking itself, that has to do with the enjoyment of saying. This enjoyment is supported by the auditory aspect of language, embedded in speech. I understand this as a return to musicality—musicality as a rhythm and variation in intonation that can be felt even as a piece of writing is typed on a computer screen: the tug and pull of words and expressions in my second language—English—as they are silently pronounced and anticipated as I write these words.

Poetry shares this emphasis: it does not claim to convey experience but is in itself an experience. It has the ability to convey what is left out when experience is turned into words, simply by pointing to this gap, by tracing the lips of this absence, by invoking it. As such, yes, ethnographic poetry can perhaps never become a substitute for other forms of ethnographic description, simply because it cannot be subsumed to description. Yet this is not the point here. The point is the fleetingness of experience as it is caught in the double bind of living and nostalgia.

I wrote these poems because I felt something was missing. After several years of research in the area and after the resulting publications, talks, presentations, conference panels and post-conference imbibed discussions, the oppressive sense of a void, of something left unsaid, always persisted. Much like the negative space in painting that has a shape of its own, this absence was pushing its way into a palpable presence.

If this came out in a nostalgic mode, this is simply because I am already positioned by my personal history on the side of nostalgia, leading me to identify this mode in the field and keep it inside me: the sediment of unsaid words and inexplicable feelings. But also, it comes in the way of a working through of very palpable losses felt while in the field: my grandmother, who died during the fieldwork season of 2016 some kilometres away from where my research mind was, and Christos, perhaps the single most important interlocutor in the village, who passed away in 2019 after he had well outgrown the century. The myopic

fixation to the end of living, encrusted in the nostalgic tone of these poems, was rectified, in a way, by two things: one is the ability of these persons to live the everyday, in an extended temporality unaltered by the obvious shortness of their remaining time. The other is the ever-receding horizon of a deep past, materialized in the presence of clay figurines and other vessels discovered in the Minoan peak sanctuary near the village, dating several millennia before the present.

It was during the close observation of one of these clay heads, pinched at the nose with the fingers of a human now long dead, that I had a strange thought: at time scales so large, is it possible to begin thinking that it was the figurine—durable, persisting, present—that shaped the human hand that made it – perishable, moldable, absent – rather than the other way around? Perhaps. In the same way, the materiality of these texts is what really traces my contours and brings me to where I stand today as a palpable absence.

Aris Anagnostopoulos is an anthropologist, historian and writer. His research focuses on the poetics and politics of the past. He has done ethnographic research in several archaeological projects in Greece and has published extensively on Ottoman heritage in Crete. His experimental fiction invents writer personas to investigate issues of memory, archive, gender, science and artistic production, in collaboration with visual artists.

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0358-991X>