

POETRY WITHIN POETRY: THE THINKING MUSE¹

Antonis Fostieris

translated by

Irene Loulakaki-Moore²

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Antonis Fostieris was born in Greece and studied Law at the University of Athens and the Sorbonne. One of the younger poets of the Generation of the Seventies, Fostieris made his first appearance in 1971 at the age of eighteen with his collection *The Great Journey*. He was the editor of *The New Poetry*, one of the first post-dictatorship journals, already in 1975. For nearly thirty years (1981-2010), he has been co-editor of the esteemed literary journal *Η Λέξη* (*The Word*) together with Thanassis Niarchos. In 2004, he received the Greek State Poetry award for his 2003 collection *Precious Oblivion* and in December 2010 he received the prestigious Ouranis Foundation Award of the Academy of Athens for the sum of his poetic work.

Fostieris's poetry carries many features of his generation, but there are more that set him apart. His idiosyncrasy distinguishes him from his peers due to the depth of his subjects and his dialogue with the Greek and international poetic tradition that begins with the Pre-Socratic philosophers and Plato and reaches Erasmus of Rotterdam, Descartes, but also Cavafy, Mallarmé and Baudelaire.

After the decades-long stifling domination of Modernism in Greece, with Antonis Fostieris, Greek poetry returns to the ancient sources in order to move on to the Post-modern, continuing while also surpassing Modern-

1. An earlier version of this introduction has been recently published in Italian, see Loulakaki-Moore, Irini (2018), "Poesia nella Poesia – La Musa pensante", *Poesia*, 336: 12-13.

2. Irene Loulakaki-Moore completed her MA and PhD in Modern Greek Literature at King's College London. Her book *Seferis and Elytis as Translators* (published in 2010 by Peter Lang) examines the two Greek Nobel poet's work as translators and their intra- and inter-lingual translations both in relation to the poets' original work as well as the context of the home literary system.

ism.³ His poetics marks a turn and constitutes a new program regarding the role and function of contemporary poetry, while it also proposes a coherent conceptualisation of the role of language and its relation to the truth.

His work is in dialogue with the Modernists but also with poets of Cavafy's calibre, while, at the same time, it transforms traditional expression mainly by testing the transcendental certainties of Modernism. This dialogue deserves further investigation, if we consider that Modernists, like Odysseas Elytis, continued producing their poetic work up to the mid-nineties, often responding to the contemporary poetic climate and not just to that of their generation.

Like the Pre-Socratic philosopher-cosmologists, Fostieris begins from the world that surrounds him in order to explore the nature of time, the limits of reason and the traps of perception and knowledge. In the vein of his ancestors, Parmenides and Xenophanes, Fostieris is continually questioning the ability of language to conceive and convey reality and truth, always making the reader aware of the deceptions that are lurking in "the Way of Human Conjectures"⁴, the limitations of perception and the dangers of unexamined religious belief in ready-made truths.

The sixteen poems of *Poetry within Poetry* (1977) constitute an extremely condensed sample of Fostieris's favorite themes and craftsmanship. Among them we will find poem-towers, verse-branches, verse-staircases and ruins, self-referential poems like M. C. Escher's "impossible objects", but also poems-toys where the reader is invited to a Heraclitean game of solving a riddle and finding meaning.

With the assumption that in poetry the signified is not just the word but also the form, the sound and rhythm, as a starting point, Fostieris invites the reader into a game of decryption with an aim to realise the materiality of the poem and the *constructedness* of language. The poems of the collection constitute a unique sample of Fostieris's ability to orchestrate language, prosody and typographical layout with a dexterity that corresponds to the meaning of each individual poem.

Unlike the Modernist poet-authority, in his journey of exploration, Fostieris does not stand in the centre of his creation, like a unique owner of truth and sole creator of meaning. His poems do not expire within a

3. See Loulakaki-Moore Irene 2014: 93-94.

4. «Δρόμος της Εικασίας» in the original poem of Parmenides, as translated in English by Karl Popper 1998.

formalistic narcissism. Their inherent self-criticism opens the way to pluralistic interpretation. In *Poetry within Poetry* the poet takes us into a tour of his workshop, pointing to the distance that separates his poetry from the consolatory transcendental, but often all too sweeping truths of modernism.

Since antiquity, it has been observed that self-referentiality in poetry is related to irony and subversion. Today, as in antiquity, the Muse of poetry is continually transforming, taking on new roles: she is no longer a godsent intermediary that dictates divine truths to the poet, but rather she is an independent thinker and a teacher of critical thinking. At the same time she is no longer the divinity that validates the authority of a poet whose utterances we are to receive in religious acquiescence. Instead she becomes the one who exposes the author and his thoughts to critical examination.

After a closer look at poems like the ones translated below, readers may feel, more than a pressing need to recite, a more original and personal pressing need to express themselves in writing. And it is precisely this that constitutes the highest pedagogical feature of Fostieris's poetry, as it realises the exhortation of an avant-garde poet, Paul Éluard: «Le poète doit être celui qui inspire plutôt que celui qui est inspiré».⁵

REFERENCES CITED

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Popper, Karl, (1998), *The World of Parmenides*, London: Routledge.

5. Paul Éluard 2012: 77.

POETRY WITHIN POETRY

*Bon dieu de bon dieu que j'ai envie
d'écrire un petit poème.
Tiens en voilà justement un qui
passe
Petit petit petit.*

RAYMOND QUENEAU

1

These words exploded like pomegranate
Onto the doorstep of the times coming.
Like a blast a firework smithereens of stars
Or — more precisely — like a poem
In the fellow men's sky of solitude.

2

Inside a poem it rains incessantly
— *Comme il pleure dans mon coeur* —
And the rain will last for ever and ever
You will find in this book for ever
A sodden leaf.

3

Dead men wander in our poems
Our verses gestate beasts
One day they'll rise from tombs like wombs
And they'll snuggle shuddering
From the chill of time.

4

On the verse I'll write I tiptoe
On the verse I've written I poise;
An unbending branch is the poem
Where I often hang my swing
To oscillate above the black.

5

Here there is not a poem at all
A fountain of dream, an elixir of love —
Only my whimsical imagination
Tiptoeing from the word *Here*
To the full stop after the word Goodnight.

6

Poem of my five verses and five senses
Tower of Babel poem elevating tower
Let your sharp barb carelessly puncture
The towering sky —or the fertile womb—
Of the insanely blind eternity.

7

Now you sleep on briny pebbles
Body of sorrow, bed of time,
Corpse washed up by memory's tide
Unto this poem's
rugged shore.

8

O you my poems
What metal wire has bound us unto death
You, bindweeds round a tumbling tower,
Oh, you my poems I hate you
With this cursed hatred we keep for ourselves.

9

This poem
Is a built staircase
—Like all the rest, a staircase—
For you to climb up its highest peak
To see, behind the lines, the night rising.

10

Here there used to be a poem
Obstacle of time, plume of desires.
It ended up a ruin
It ended up a black and ugly crater
Four or five smouldering verses.

11

This poem writes this poem
It carves its body and feeds itself.
Its words shoot high and fall back down
It cuts a way through the snow of the page —
Astonished I behold its revelation.

12

With this poem we play tonight
I throw it to you and you throw it back
We open it in two and the words spill over.
For if we don't abolish you on time
— You wretched poem — you'll bring us to our knees.

13

At night he dreamed of a verse
Growing endlessly tall.
Piercing the celestial hull
The hyper-stellar ware
Tumbling down.

14

A cloud poem
is suspended in the air.
Let us dance naked —
So that it rains
on this page.

15

This night pours down all my fears.

To thee I turn o art of poesy

Tooth and nail I build a poem

Gasping I enter for shelter

And shut the final verse behind me.

16

The poem.

Motorcycles

And machinery

In the snowy

Landscape.