The poet as witness: Titos Patrikios and the legacy of the Greek Civil War *

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In 1993 Titos Patrikios marked his fifty years as a Greek poet; in 1995 he received the Greek State Prize for his life's work in literature; he has (on my calculation) some seven books in print; and he has been widely anthologized.[1] For all that, his poetry has received relatively little critical attention, and surprisingly few of his poems have appeared in English translation.[2] The general introduction which follows to what has been one of the poet's most distinctive contributions hopes, on a modest scale, to meet both these needs.

But what, to begin with, of the legacy of the Civil War, a subject which is, in Patrikios's earlier work, his overriding theme? The blurb for perhaps the best of the late Alexandros Kotzias's novels speaks, startlingly, of a Thirty Years War; a war, that is, from 1944 (when high-intensity armed clashes first broke out between left- and right-wing forces) and 1974 (when,

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* An earlier form of this paper was given at the following universities other than Cambridge: Birmingham, Oxford, and Queens College (City University of New York); I am indebted to these audiences for their comments. All references made in square brackets in the text here are to Titos Patrikios, *Μαθητεία ξανά* (Athens 1991); all works cited in the footnotes have Athens as place of publication unless otherwise indicated.

[1] See most fully Alex. Argyriou (ed.), *Η ελληνική ποίηση, ανθολογία - γραμματολογία, τόμ. Ε΄. Η πρώτη μεταπολεμική γενιά* (Sokolis 1990), pp. 566-79, with bibliography.

[2] Patrikios's earlier work is discussed in the influential studies of D.N. Maronitis, *Ποιητική και πολιτική ηθική* (1976) and Sonia Ilinskaya, *Η μοίρα μιας γενιάς* (1976), but not in great detail in either case. The only book on Patrikios, Kostas Pappas, *Η ποίηση του Τίτου Πατρίκιου (Στάση ζωής)* (n.d.), is next to useless. There is a generous selection of Patrikios's work in English translation by Carmen Capri-Karka, *The Charioteer* 28 (1986) 42-101, with translation of Maronitis's comments on pp. 35-41; see also Peter Mackridge's versions in *Verse* 5 (1986) 57-8.

with the fall of the Colonels' dictatorship, Greece returned to the democratic fold).[3] Though the thaw in the microcosm, the "Cold Civil War" (1949-1974) occurred before the thaw in the macrocosm, the Cold War proper, acute pressures were exerted on a small but strategically important country which found itself at the shifting edge between the Cold War superpowers. Such pressures naturally had a heavy cost – widely documented in current historical research – for the country as a whole; but they also bore intensely on the preoccupations of Greek poetry, and on the very contours of poets' careers.

Seferis, for example, having hinted eloquently at the Civil War in *Thrush* (1946) (itself echoing Eliot's recollections of the English Civil War in *Little Gidding*), remained silent for the following nine years (though some weak poems preserved in his journals refer to the Civil War), and then produced his Cyprus collection, later retitled *Logbook III*.[4] Elytis, having commemorated the Second World War in what still seems to some of us his most satisfying production, the *Lay heroic and funereal for the fallen second lieutenant in Albania*, waited no fewer than fifteen years to publish his *magnum opus, The Axion Esti*. There he elaborately, and not without vatic self-mythologizing, advances his claim to speak of the Civil War and its aftermath against – among other things – the voice of a group which he suggestively refers to as "the young Alexandrians" or "the new Alexandrians" (οι *νέοι* Αλεξανδρείς). What does he mean by this phrase?[5]

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[3] Alexandros Kotzias, cover of *Αντιποίησις αρχής* (1979).

[4] For the Civil War and Seferis, see Roderick Beaton, *George Seferis* (Bristol 1991), pp. 116-17, and David Ricks, "George Seferis and Theodore Roethke: two versions of Modernism" in: Dimitris Tziovas (ed.), *Greek Modernism and beyond* (Lanham, Md., forthcoming 1997). For a Seferis poem on the Civil War (1949), see *Μέρες Ε'* (1977), p. 140.

[5] Odysseus Elytis, *Το 'Αξιον Εστί* (Athens 1977), p. 48. Tasos Lignadis, *Το 'Αξιον Εστί του Ελύτη. Εισαγωγή, σχολιασμός, ανάλυση* (1977), p. 168 argues that Elytis's target here is rationalism; a slightly different point emerges from the poet's own commentary, which identifies οι *νέοι* της παρακμής ... που δεν πιστεύουν σε τίποτε και κηρύττουν ψευδοεπαναστάσεις: see Giorgos Kechagioglou, "'Ενα ανέκδοτο υπόμνημα του Ελύτη για το 'Αξιον Εστί", *Ποίηση* 5 (Spring 1995) 27-66 (quotation from pp. 41 and 57).

I suspect this may be in part a dig at the laconic, ironic presence of Cavafy among the younger generation of poets such as Anagnostakis and Alexandrou.[6] Elytis seems to be alluding to a group of detractors, poets for whom poetry is subordinate to something else – with the original Alexandrians, to *doctrina*; with the latter-day *epigoni* of Cavafy, to a (social) world beyond the poem. Cavafy classically makes the point that poets can be overtaken by events in his poem "Darius", but by 1959 and the publication of Elytis's poem the interpretation of Cavafy had been (over-)extended by Tsirkas's influential reading of Cavafy's poetry as political allegory.[7] Elytis apparently takes exception to what he sees – not without *amour propre* – as a lack of artistic freedom, a scholasticism, even, in the younger poets' wish to record with painful literalism the events around them, and in their nagging social conscience. The generation of Anagnostakis, of course, quite openly repudiates the Thirties generation, and Elytis in particular, without necessarily falling for Tsirkas's Cavafy.[8] That may seem to leave this "first post-war generation" in a permanently disorientated position, without either the consolations of poetry as an escape or the fervours of the vehemently "engaged" writer.[9] But it also generates a certain problem for the reader outside Greece.

For the poetry of this generation is preoccupied by a sense of "our age".[10] It is in the work of Anagnostakis that this attitude has been taken to its limit, with a sense that *only* this generation can understand itself, while even its apparent or

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[6] On the latter's Cavafian mode see David Ricks, "Aris Alexandrou", *Grand Street* 8.2 (Winter 1989) 120-8.

[7] Stratis Tsirkas, *Ο Καβάφης και η εποχή του* (1958).

[8] Manolis Anagnostakis, "Το καινούριο τραγούδι", *Τα ποιήματα, 1941-1971* (1992), pp. 39-41. Anagnostakis's review of Tsirkas appears in his journal *Κριτική* 1 (1959) 257-61; this opening volume of the journal is a valuable introduction to the perspective of the non-aligned Left poets to which Patrikios was gradually tending.

[9] A good introduction to the question of generations is D.N. Maronitis, *Ποιητική και πολιτική ηθική* (1976).

[10] I take the term, with its connotations of possessiveness, from Noel Annan's *Our age* (London 1990), itself conditioned by war-time experience.

professed soulmates of, say, the Sixties Left can never do so. Of his generation, Anagnostakis commented long after that

> I believe, moreover, that the poetry of that period, or about that period, is, as a document, one of the most gripping testimonies – shall I dare to say it? – even on a world level. Because it clearly antedates what came to us much later from abroad in the form of a poetry of social challenge, concerned protest, etc., and often indeed in a very strident and superficial form.[11]

The same sentiment (against the Beat poets and perhaps their Greek younger imitators such as Lefteris Poulios) underlies several of the short texts in Anagnostakis's little volume of prose texts, *The Margin '68-'69* (circulated privately in 1968-1969). One of the pieces in it is worth referring to here because it gives, with almost miraculous coincidence, an indication of what Anagnostakis means by "on a world level".

Anagnostakis imagines a poet (evidently of the Thirties generation – but who?) politely receiving visitors in his study and discussing the problems of poetic expression in our troubled times; he then juxtaposes the picture of another poet being visited by visitors who are by no means as polite – torturers who are coming to see him in a prison or police cell.[12] The poet's predicament under the Colonels (explored by Maronitis, a victim himself, in his coded essay on Cavafy's "Darius") here takes a fearful form.[13] But it happens to be the exact form it takes in a remarkable passage from Nadezhda Mandelstam's *Hope against hope*, that work which, above all others, may stand as the judge of why modern poetry matters. The affinity of the two passages comes from a shared (though by no means proportionate) adversity across the Iron Curtain, not from a borrowing of one from the other: *Hope against hope* only appeared in 1970 – but it is a close one. Mandelstam's widow writes:

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[11] Anagnostakis, interview in: Andonis Fostieris and Thanasis Th. Niarchos, *Σε δεύτερο πρόσωπο. Συνομιλίες με 50 συγγραφείς και καλλιτέχνες* (1990), pp. 25-31 (quotation from p. 27).

[12] Anagnostakis, *Το περιθώριο '68-'69* (1985), p. 24.

[13] Maronitis, "Υπεροψία και μέθη", in the collective volume *Δεκαοχτώ κείμενα* (1970), pp. 135-54. See also "Athenian", *Inside the Colonels' Greece* (tr. Richard Clogg, London 1972), p. 134.

> The fear that goes with the writing of verse has nothing in common with the fear that one experiences in the presence of the secret police. Our mysterious awe in the face of existence itself is always overridden by the more primitive fear of violence and destruction. M[andelstam] often spoke of how the first kind of fear had disappeared with the Revolution which had shed so much blood before our eyes.[14]

To compare the pictures presented by the Greek and the Russian respectively is not to compare right-wing dominance and intimidation with communist terror, Makronisos with Kolyma. But the fear felt by individual poets under either system was real enough, and Anagnostakis's instinct about the value of post-war Greek poetry as, in several senses, *testimony*, is a sound one.[15] (Greek prose as testimony is perhaps even more familiar to students of post-war Greek writing.[16])

But testimony doesn't always make for easy reading, and not just because it is, more or less by definition, on painful subjects. For those nails of authentic reference driven in by the poet as witness may often reflect distinctly, even forbiddingly, private notions of testimony.[17] Let me give one example.

Anagnostakis signs off his poetic career in 1971 with a quotation from a poem by Patrikios, saying:

> Because, as my friend Titos so rightly says,
> no verse today overturns régimes

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[14] Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope against hope* (tr. Max Hayward, Harmondsworth 1970), pp. 99-100.

[15] This notion is well explored in Henry Gifford, *Poetry in a divided world* (Cambridge 1986).

[16] See Peter Mackridge, "Testimony and fiction in Greek narrative prose 1944-1967" in: Roderick Beaton (ed.), *The Greek novel, A.D. 1-1985* (London 1988), pp. 90-102; Beaton, *An introduction to Modern Greek literature* (Oxford 1994), pp. 237-45.

[17] I take the metaphor from Anagnostakis, "Ποιητική", *Ποιήματα* p. 159; for a helpful discussion of the poem see Dimitris Tziovas, "Η ποιητική της ενοχής και το υλικό σθένος των λέξεων", *Ποίηση* 3 (Spring 1994) 89-107. For a more general treatment see David Ricks, "The best wall to hide our face behind: an introduction to the poetry of Manolis Anagnostakis", *Journal of Modern Hellenism* 12 (1996, forthcoming).

no verse today mobilizes the masses.[18]

The conversational tone is striking, and might seem to be relatively welcoming to the reader; but only by a thread does it convey the strength of a shared outlook rather than mere clubbiness. The doubts that bind this generation are real enough – fighting, internment, exile – but whether they survive to create meaning for later poets and readers will depend on the strength of the poems themselves. The poets of the first post-war generation find themselves in the delicate position of wanting to communicate with later generations, as all poets aspire to, without compromising or simplifying private meanings. The point is made in a poem by Patrikios himself:

SECRET LIFE

I used to talk to you about our secret life
but you knew it from books in foreign languages.
Dates, incidents, explanations –
in the face of such certainties
my secrets were turning into working hypotheses.[19]

The date appended, September '67, when the poet was in exile in Paris, is surely significant.

Here, then, we have a warning that you'd need more of a feeling for place and period than I could attain, let alone convey here. Some of the time, it is true, what Patrikios sets down seems to have a no doubt private meaning without perhaps making what one could call a poem at all:

NAMES

The one thing I can write
is your names.
Friends and poets, forgotten comrades,
Kostas, Manolis, Tasos, Yannis.

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[18] Anagnostakis, "Επίλογος", *Ποιήματα*, p. 176.
[19] Patrikios, *Προαιρετική στάση* (1974), p. 5.

A pen and paper
can be found in all circumstances.
Dec. '67[20]

We may infer that Patrikios is alluding to fellow left-wing poets; we may be aware that in the poetry of Sinopoulos and, as we shall see, in that of Patrikios himself, the use of mere names can acquire considerable poetic power.[21] Yet does such a poem as the above possess aesthetic autonomy? It's a question much of Patrikios's work is not afraid to pose; and at this point it would be worth giving some skeletal information about the poet's life and career.[22]

In a literature so full of pseudonyms, Titos Patrikios sounds rather like one, and it certainly seems an ironical name for a former communist. Born in 1928, Patrikios did indeed attend one of Greece's more patrician schools; though he records of his schooldays his sense of awkwardness as coming from a family of actors.[23] Like many eminent Greek poets, he went on to study at Athens Law School (and later in Paris). But an adolescence in the Forties provided a harder school: Patrikios was involved in a series of communist-led organizations and took part in armed operations by ELAS in 1944-5, narrowly escaping death at the hands of collaborators. As a result, he spent a period in the early 1950s on the prison islands of Makronisos and Aï-Stratis, and a large part of the Colonels' dictatorship outside Greece.

Patrikios's first poem appeared in 1943, his first collection considerably later in 1954; and his poetic work now runs to several hundred not very full pages. With nine collections of poetry, Patrikios looks on the face of it much more prolific than Anagnostakis and Alexandrou, but all but two of his collections are short, and there is also a high degree of overlap between collections, with a number of poems appearing in more than one

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[20] Patrikios, *Προαιρετική στάση*, p. 7.
[21] Takis Sinopoulos, *Νεκρόδειπνος* (1972), pp. 17-22.
[22] I derive this information from Argyriou, *Η πρώτη μεταπολεμική γενιά*.
[23] See on his schooldays Patrikios, *Η συμμορία των δεκατρία* (1990).

collection or arrangement.[24] Anagnostakis and Alexandrou presented the public with volumes of collected poems in 1971 and 1974 respectively in the conviction that these volumes would not be added to: in Patrikios's case, no collected volume exists, and it is a pleasure to report that he remains productive. My discussion here will concentrate on just one phase of Patrikios's work, that perhaps best known to the reading public, which is covered in the volume *Learning process over again* (*Μαθητεία ξανά*) (1991).

It's not necessarily very helpful to describe the poet's style in isolation – I hope to get some of this across later – but it may be said that short, typically unmetrical poems dominate, in a style plain, colloquial and often nakedly sententious. But do aphorisms, however, sharp, make poetry? It's a question which worried an older poet, Takis Sinopoulos, in a stern but thought-provoking review of *Learning process* in its first version (1963), with the title "Poetry, incorporation and testimony".[25] It was at this very time that Sinopoulos was working to blend his own experiences as a doctor in the National Army in the Civil War into his finest poem, *Feast of the dead* (*Νεκρόδειπνος*); and with this high and cherished example in mind he turned his attention to the younger poet's collection.[26] While acknowledging that the subjects were real and pressing ones, he felt with regret that Patrikios's poems were "like drafts of poems", with the personal experiences sharp but essentially unassimilated to public discourse. The argument that newer poets are difficult is a familiar one in debates about poetry; the charge that their poems are unfinished is little less familiar, with Sinopoulos's charge bearing a distinct resemblance to that of Palamas against Cavafy three decades earlier.[27] In both cases we should take the disagreement for an honest one, and then go on to see what we can derive from the poems in dispute. What I aim to show in the

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[24] For textual information see Patrikios's collections *Μαθητεία ξανά*, pp. 185-6 and *Αντιδικίες*, p. 55.

[25] Sinopoulos, "Ποίηση, ένταξη και μαρτυρία", *Εποχές* 8 (Dec. 1963) 68-71, especially p. 171.

[26] For a year-by-year chronicle see Michalis Pieris, *Ο χώρος και ο χρόνος του Τάκη Σινόπουλου 1917-1981* (1988).

[27] Kostis Palamas, *Άπαντα* 14, p. 181: "σκίτσα ιδεών"; compare Sinopoulos's phrase, "προσχέδια ποιημάτων".

main part of this discussion is how far Patrikios succeeds in a form of poetics outlined by Anagnostakis with respect to his own case as follows:

> I sometimes rewrite, restricting them to a few verses, some condensed experiences and things lived, which, if I think they reflect a more general situation, I put in the public domain.[28]

Learning process, then, was the title Patrikios chose for his 1963 collection; we might even call it "apprenticeship", with its suggestion of a task externally imposed, perhaps with penalties – and there is certainly a modesty topos here, with a hint at anything but *maestria*. The version of the collection under discussion here, however, is *Learning process over again* (1991), a volume of 183 pages with some 140 poems, just over half of which appeared in the original edition. The other poems, marked with an asterisk in the table of contents, date from the same period, 1956-1962, and the poems in each section are arranged chronologically. (Many of the other poems from the first *Learning process*, covering the early Fifties, reappeared in a volume of collected earlier poems, *Poems I (1948-1954)*, which appeared in 1977.[29]) The extra word in the new title indicates a revised edition, and to that extent a revaluation of an earlier phase of work in the light of nearly three decades of subsequent experience.

But the reordering is neither a purely aesthetic point (the poems have not been individually revised from edition to edition) nor indicative of a large-scale political reorientation. In the light of the fall of his cherished Berlin Wall, the poems of Ritsos's last collection, *Late, very late at night*, take on a certain ruefulness about old beliefs.[30] Yet while the ending of the Cold War must have given some impulse to the reissuing by Patrikios of poems devoted to the Cold War at its height, he has not availed himself of hindsight. This is partly because his political beliefs were in any case unravelling by 1956, but also

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[28] Anagnostakis in Fostieris and Niarchos, *Σε δεύτερο πρόσωπο*, p. 25.
[29] Patrikios, *Ποιήματα I (1948-1954)* (1977).
[30] See Sarah Ekdawi, "Σφυρίγματα πλοίων: the last poems of Yannis Ritsos", *Μαντατοφόρος* 37-8 (1993-4) 107-17.

because what he has tried to do is not to make a revaluation of the period, but to set out for a reader with hindsight the fullest possible testimony to a period. The judgements and reactions of thirty years ago are not set aside or tampered with, nor yet recollected in tranquillity; but a context is established for the poems in a writer's life and times.

We may, at the risk of over-simplifying, divide Patrikios's poems in the collection into four categories. The first, which will not particularly concern me here, consists of poems about love or family life. Their main function within the collection is to contrast the *par excellence* personal choices of an individual life with those of the collective – exposing a sense of guilt and a feeling that all individual choices are, at this period and from this perspective, little more than self-indulgences.

A second category is devoted to poems about disillusionment with the Communist Party. There is a good deal of letting off steam here, and valuable testimony to the period; but it is unclear that this sort of subject is best handled in verse – though Alexandrou makes a brave stab at it with the opening poem of his third and best collection, "Communication, *à la manière de Jdanov*"(1959).[31] More searching and elaborate accounts have proved possible in prose: Tsirkas's *Ungoverned cities* and Alexandrou's own *The strong-box*.[32] But in some cases Patrikios does manage to link politics and poetry in a compelling manner [89]:

REHABILITATION OF LASZLO RAJK

However much I'd like to I cannot mourn you Laszlo
since I too was visiting your cell back then
in the fearful guise of Peter Gabor,
since I was there when they interrogated you
when they tortured you, when you confessed,
since I continued to condemn you even at the very time
I was starting to hear inside me the cracks opening.
May '56

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[31] Aris Alexandrou, "Εισήγηση à la manière de Jdanov", *Τα ποιήματα 1941-1974* (1992), pp. 73-4.

[32] Tsirkas, *Ακυβέρνητες πολιτείες* (1960-5); Alexandrou, *Το κιβώτιο* (1974).

Here the Hungarian revolutionary, who served as interior and foreign minister before being executed on a trumped-up charge in 1948, is recalled in the year of the Hungarian rising. Not only is his rehabilitation a fruitless one, it is itself destined to be overturned with the Soviet crushing of Hungary. And the poet's own role? One of complicity.

If we set aside the strictly political poems, this leaves two further categories of Patrikios's poetry on which I shall have more to say: poems giving the atmosphere of the times and, in Cavafian phrase, the "domain" of Patrikios's poetry; and, finally, poems concentrating on the difficulties of making poetry itself.[33] Let us begin with the poet's interpretation of the spirit of the age.

Anagnostakis in 1959 wrote of poetry's only real function – its only residual function – as being a form of what he calls "heretical presence".[34] In the case of Patrikios's poetry this may be understood as being, in the first place, a way of seeing. This is not, of course, in the old idiom of Sikelianos, who, at the magnificent high-water-mark of poetic self-belief, understands the poet to be gifted with an ability to see through the veil of appearances – but see through appearances Patrikios does claim to do in, say, this poem from 1959 [161]:

PICTURES OF DAILY LIFE

This house which looks just like the one next door
was where the torture chambers were;
this man, unnoticed in the crowd,
was the informer with the mask;
this lorry, exactly the same
as the others of its model,
took the prisoners to their execution.
We ought to look at things and people
a little more closely.

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[33] C.P. Cavafy, "Κρυμμένα", *Ανέκδοτα ποιήματα (1882-1923)* (ed. G.P. Savidis 1968), p. 151.

[34] Anagnostakis, "Η ποίηση - παρόν και μέλλον", *Κριτική* 1 (1959) 106-11 (quotation from p. 111).

The poem sketches the feeling of Kotzias's novel *Noble Telemachus*, where the son of a racketeer in the Occupation eventually loses his sanity under the pressure of this knowledge.[35]

Counterposed to this is the idea that what we actually get served up with by our rulers is a sort of Plato's Cave, which aims through the administering of opiates to occlude the pain of which the poet properly ought to be reminding us [56]:

AT THE CINEMA

Politely we relax side by side
laugh or are moved
pursuer and hunted
tortured and torturer
lover and husband.
For just two hours in the dark
calm, anonymous and well-disposed.

The general comfort and relative anonymity of the Affluent Society masking darker things is a core feeling in Anagnostakis too.[36] One may still catch a glimpse of this today in the sombre look of people passing Makronisos on their way back from an Aegean holiday.

In the view of Anagnostakis, as with Patrikios, the consequent prime subject of poetry will be the painful, but also – and here he follows in the footsteps of Ritsos's short poems – the distinctively marginal or even crepuscular [24]:

A HALF HOUR

Neighbourhoods briefly change at nightfall
respectable men return from the office
proprietors shut up shop, the squares empty out.
And then gradually there emerge onto the streets

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[35] Alexandros Kotzias, *Ο γενναίος Τηλέμαχος* (1972).

[36] See, above all, the end of Anagnostakis's poem, "Αισθηματικό διήγημα", *Ποιήματα*, pp. 170-2. The role of the Kelvinator refrigerator there is played by a Kenwood mixer in Thanasis Valtinos, *Τρία ελληνικά μονόπρακτα* (1978), pp. 65-83.

girls with twisted legs in their wheelchairs,
half-crazy children, women with faces burnt black,
men with fingers chewed up by machinery.

For just a half hour to get a breath of air
in the empty streets with the windows shuttered up.

A different manner on much the same subject is one of breezy sarcasm, opening a breath of air on things not talked about in polite society – a society whose almost viral powers of sapping the truth are acknowledged with bitterness [28]:

ATHENIAN SUMMER IN 1956

This year we had so many events...
Nonetheless, the summer was the same as ever,
the same ice-creams in the confectioners
and the same concert programmes.
Lots of people were also discussing change
which they located principally
in the restoration of ancient monuments
or in the hairstyles of ladies
some of whom had actually
once been active in the Resistance.

1956 is of course the year of Krushchev's Secret Speech denouncing Stalin at the Twentieth Party Congress; of the Russian invasion of Hungary; of the Suez crisis, which led to the downfall of the Greek community in Egypt; not to mention the continuing bloodshed in Cyprus. But the prosperity of Karamanlis's Greece, the restoration of the Herodes Atticus theatre and so on, militate against any self-knowledge – even among women who turn out in the last verse to have been politically active and risking everything only a decade before.

This notion of the "sell-out" pervades Patrikios's entire *oeuvre*. He sees scars healing, but thinks that it is poetry's most important job to open them again [58]:

GETTING ON

Old friend
comrade from the great days
pardon me if yesterday, as you were preening yourself
on your new furniture,
I was thinking that each piece
had behind it a certain concession,
about a thousand drachmas' worth of prostituted thought
which you were now hawking
without even feeling the need
to make something tragic out of it.

What, then, is the role of poetry? A mordant hint is made in this little poem [57]:

IDYLL

She was drinking an orangeade
in the background hair salons and travel agents
while the fellow next to her
was entrancing her with idiotic verses.
And yet
her name was Antigone.

Here Patrikios satirizes a model to avoid. An unrecoverable literary genre from a lost era here meets an everyday colloquial idiom: a "fling".[37] Poetry seems nothing more here than a way of getting girls; the name of Antigone, accordingly, has been taken in vain. The theme of Antigone, for which George Steiner has provided a rich general exploration, is one which one would like to see explored in modern Greece beyond Seferis's *Thrush*.[38] Giangos Andreadis's interesting but disorderly book, *Τα παιδιά της Αντιγόνης*, certainly doesn't take us far; but food for thought may be found in Conor Cruise O'Brien's defence of Ismene in that distempered year 1968, a defence which Palamas actually made

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[37] "From a lost era": I adapt the subtitle of Anagnostakis's anthology, *Η χαμηλή φωνή. Τα λυρικά μιας χαμένης εποχής* (1990).
[38] George Steiner, *Antigones* (1984).

in a little poem of the 1930s.[39] "The poetry of Antigone and Ismene" would make an interesting categorization in twentieth-century Greek poetry – and it's quite clear with which of the sisters Patrikios and his generation have the closer affinity.

Yet the poetic context as seen by Patrikios abounds in false models; and if one is art for art's sake, another is bombastic heroizing with a folkloric colouring.[40] This comes out epigrammatically in the following poem [137]:

HALF-FORGOTTEN POEM

We are the children of the rain and of the wild lightning
the liberating earthquake of a storm to change the world...

Big words, you'll say, bad poetry,
and I can't even remember who wrote it,
yet in those days that's exactly how we felt.

An attempt to balance up one's past and present beliefs, and a nation's earlier possibilities with what has actually come about, is made with a weight of suppressed sadness in the following poem, dated April 1956 and recalling a district afflicted in the Civil War and later depopulated by emigration – in other words, a world away from the memories of a warm collective life of which the poem only half-ironically speaks [151]:

MEMORIES OF THE VILLAGES ON THE SPERCHEIOS

The smell of stables, of damp grass,
the smell of smoke from wet firewood
the steam from our clothes drying
the blistered feet, the lice.
Sleep in the hay
would come to us hungry as we were and full of optimism
after a poem

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[39] Giangos Andreadis, *Τα παιδιά της Αντιγόνης* (1989); Conor Cruise O'Brien's essay first appeared in *The Listener* (Oct. 1968) and is now in *States of Ireland* (London 1972); Palamas, *Άπαντα* 12, p. 524.
[40] See e.g. Vasilis Rotas, *Τραγούδια της Αντίστασης* (1981).

or a discussion about the distinction
between *kolkhoz* and *sovchoz*.

The poem mentioned here is sandwiched between physical privations almost lovingly recalled and an evidently sterile if not sinister political discussion. It is the fact, not least, that poetry *didn't* have pride of place in those days that shows how happy they were – but now only poetry can bring them back.

All these poems are, it may be said, painted into a corner: each is telling in its own way what poetry is not. With a full awareness of the objections that may be advanced, but with a pretty deep sense of purpose too, Patrikios continues this line of regret in a couple of poems which require little enough commentary [97]:

VERSES 2

Verses which make an outcry,
verses which supposedly stand tall like bayonets
verses which threaten the established order
and with their few feet
make or break the revolution,
useless, fake, boastful,
because no verse today breaks régimes
no verse mobilizes the masses.
(What masses? Between ourselves, now –
who thinks of the masses?
At the most it's a personal release, if not a way of getting a
reputation.)
That's why I no longer write
in order to provide paper rifles
weapons out of verbose, hollow words.
It's just to lift up an edge of the truth
to shed a little light on our forged life.
As long as I can, and as long as I hold out.

August 1957

The principal target here is no doubt Stalinist poets like Alexei Tolstoy or Louis Aragon.[41] At the same time, Patrikios's vocation must also be protected against those who speak too glibly of letting bygones be bygones. Reacting against criticism rather in the manner of Karyotakis's poem "Critique" (and Patrikios has written on Karyotakis as satirist), Patrikios responds with sinister brevity [91]:

LIKE GRAVE-ROBBERS

And if poets in our time smell too much for your taste of
corpses
it is because at night they hang around the cemeteries
like grave-robbers
searching the dead in the hope of finding even a scraping
of truth.[42]

But it is in the last four poems I shall glance at here (poems which do not, I should stress, appear as a group in the collection) that Patrikios most eloquently addresses the almost disabling predicament of the poet – and at the same time the burden of memory which it is his to sustain.

ΤΑ ΛΟΓΙΑ

"Μάνα," της είπα μέσα απ' τα κάγκελα του κρατητήριου,
"σού 'χω μιλήσει τόσο λίγο... Όταν θα βγω..."
Δίπλα στεκότανε ο χωροφύλακας.
Αντιμετώπιζα την περίπτωση
να μην την ξαναδώ ποτέ.
Σαν έπειτα από χρόνια πήγα σπίτι
έπεσε μες στην αγκαλιά μου κ' έκλαιγε,
όμως τα λόγια πάλι βγήκανε φτωχά.
Και πήρα τα ξυριστικά μου σύνεργα
να κάνω μπάνιο και να ξυριστώ.

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[41] Compare e.g. Manolis Lambridis, "Το πρόβλημα των μορφών και η έννοια του σύγχρονου στην τέχνη [3rd instalment]", *Κριτική* 1 (1959) 120-30, especially p. 128.

[42] K.G. Karyotakis, "Κριτική", *Ποιήματα και πεζά* (ed. G.P. Savidis 1988), p. 77; Patrikios, "Κώστας Καρυωτάκης" in *Σάτιρα και πολιτική* (Etairia Spoudon 1979), pp. 250-74.

WORDS

"Mother", I said to her through the bars of the holding cell,
"I've talked so little with you... When I get out..."
The gendarme was standing right there.
I was facing the possibility
of never seeing her again.
When years later I went home
she fell into my arms and started to cry,
but the words once again came out inadequate.
And I took my shaving things
to go and have a bath and shave [134].

The poem is bluntly unpoetic in manner, though, like all four in question, basically iambic – something which intensifies them and distinguishes them from Patrikios's normally more prosaic manner; a sign indeed that we are here going to get as close as we ever do to the pretensions of poetry as traditionally understood. But of course the poem is, in its concise, flat way aiming to suggest the inadequacy of words to feelings. There is in the poem just one splinter of strangeness round which its meaning is irritated and grows: the pleonasm of the last two lines, which draws attention precisely to the poet's awareness (now, in retrospect) of his own clumsiness with words and hence with the larger situations with which words are expected to deal. The two halves into which the poem falls give it a symmetry, and the last lines seal this by revealing themselves as a transcription from direct to indirect speech of the quotidian mumbling of our talk even on the most important occasions: "I'll just take my shaving things and go and have a bath and shave." By a whisker, the poem escapes being a human situation which doesn't get put into words – not, however, by finding new words, let alone ideas (Patrikios, a puritan in this respect in this phase of his career, is suspicious of both), but by making such a configuration as to suggest the poet's hard-won self-knowledge.

A very similar problem, on a wider front, and perhaps with more likely pitfalls, is the theme of "Eight years" [135]:

ΟΧΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΙΑ

Έλειψε οχτώ χρόνια.
Φυλακή, Μακρόνησο, εξορία.
Σαν ξανάρθε,
οι φίλοι τον αγκάλιαζαν και τον ρωτούσαν.
Μ' αυτά που έλεγε φαίνονταν τόσο απλά
τόσο συνηθισμένα...
Κ' έκλεισε για μια στιγμή τα μάτια
να δει ξανά την παγωμένη απομόνωση,
τις νύχτες στη χαράδρα,
λίγο να ξαναζήσει τις αγωνίες της κάθε μέρας
που τώρα, μέσα στη χορτασμένη πολιτεία
αλλάζαν σε κοινότοπες επαναλήψεις.

He was away eight years.
Prison, Makronisos, exile.
When he returned
his friends set about embracing him and asking him questions.
But what he had to say seemed so simple
so ordinary...
And he shut his eyes for a moment
in order to see once more the frozen isolation cell,
the nights in the ravine,
to re-live just a little the agonies of each day
which now, in the well-fed town,
were turning into oft-repeated clichés.

This poem has the same structure as the previous one, once again a gloss on the title in two halves. Eight years is to other people just a short space of time: "he was away" (έλειψε) is from their point of view. The returned exile, by contrast, must make a conscious effort to retrieve (with a non-continuous past, this time) even the painful memories of privation – before the end of the poem reveals a slippage: the continuous tenses are inexorably depriving the subject of his own authentic experiences, and he is starting to repeat himself even within the poem.

Patrikios comes a little closer to embracing a poet's vocation rather than simply trying to avoid unwanted modes of speaking in the next poem [115]:

ΟΦΕΙΛΗ

Μέσα από τόσο θάνατο που έπεσε και πέφτει,
πολέμους, εκτελέσεις, δίκες, θάνατο κι άλλο θάνατο,
αρρώστεια, πείνα, τυχαία δυστυχήματα,
δολοφονίες από πληρωμένους εχθρών και φίλων,
συστηματική υπόσκαψη κ' έτοιμες νεκρολογίες
είναι σα να μου χαρίστηκε η ζωή που ζω.
Δώρο της τύχης, αν όχι κλοπή απ' τη ζωή άλλων,
γιατί η σφαίρα που της γλύτωσα δε χάθηκε
μα χτύπησε το άλλο κορμί που βρέθηκε στη θέση μου.
Έτσι σα δώρο που δεν άξιζα μου δόθηκε η ζωή
κι όσος καιρός μου μένει
σαν οι νεκροί να μου τον χάρισαν
για να τους ιστορήσω.

Νοέμβριος 1957

INDEBTEDNESS

Out of all the death that has come down and is still coming down,
wars, executions, trials, death and more death,
sickness, hunger, random accidents,
murders of enemies and friends by paid assassins,
systematic undermining and prepared obituaries,
it is as if the life I live has been granted by act of clemency.
A gift of chance, if not theft from the lives of others,
for the bullet I escaped did not vanish
but hit the next body which found itself in my place.
So, as a gift I was not deserving of, life has been given me
and such time as I have left
is as if granted to me by the dead
to limn them.

November '57

The mixture of events is familiar from the Cold Civil War: the poem was written before the assassination of Lambrakis in 1963 (the classic "car accident" dramatized in Vasilis Vasilikos's Z and in Costa-Gavras's film of that name) but after the death of the former EAM general Stefanos Sarafis in 1957, in a car crash believed by some to have been an assassination.[43] The dead

[43] Marion Sarafis, introduction to Maj.-Gen. Stefanos Sarafis, *ELAS: Greek Resistance Army* (tr. Sylvia Moody, London 1980), pp. xcviii-xcix.

assume in Patrikios's poem the role of a benign judiciary with theological overtones (the word χάρη meaning "grace" and "clemency"). Hence the last and central word in the poem: ιστορήσω. Instead of using the nearly identical, and perhaps expected, verb, εξιστορώ (or possibly ανιστορώ), "to tell of/to tell their story", Patrikios chooses a verb which, while containing the "story/history" root, and which in ancient Greek may be used in the senses: to inquire about a person, or to make inquiry of a person (or indeed an oracle), is used in the modern language specifically of religious painting. The cult of the dead which the poem then embraces is a quiet, solitary, even wordless one.[44]

We see this attitude expressed with still greater precision and concision in the final poem for which there is room in this discussion [159]:

ΕΠΙΤΥΜΒΙΟ

Αν είμουν πιο καλός ποιητής
θα ταίριαζα γυμνά τα ονόματά σας
σε μιαν ατέλειωτη σειρά να προϋπαντάει το μέλλον
με μόνη τη δική τους μουσική.

EPITAPH

Were I a better poet
I would fit your bare names
into one unending sequence going forth to meet the future
with nothing but their own intrinsic music.

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[44] Emmanouil Kriaras, *Νέο ελληνικό λεξικό* (1995) gives the following definitions of ιστορώ: "1. εκθέτω με λεπτομέρειες και σε χρονολογική σειρά τα στοιχεία ενός γεγονότος... 2. ζωγραφίζω, διακοσμώ με ζωγραφικές παραστάσεις προσώπων και σκηνών από τη βιβλική και εκκλησιαστική παράδοση". The latter sense, of persons, is more natural as the primary sense in Patrikios's poem; yet the poem's last word does at the same time frame the poem in history. For an in some ways similar self-portrait of the poet as an artist working silently in a non-verbal medium, compare the monk in Palamas's *Η Φλογέρα του Βασιλιά* (*Άπαντα* 5, pp. 107-10), of whom the verb ανιστορίζει is used (p. 108).

Once again, heightened emotion, and a rapprochement of a very circumspect kind with traditional poetic aspirations come out in a clearly iambic metre; and of course the poem with its four lines has the shape of a typical epitaph. But the initial hope of poetic power, of memorializing the dead in powerful language, recedes before the gravity of the subject itself. The unmentioned names will stretch like a necklace or a peace chain to meet the future, once again with what could, beyond its everyday sense, be taken as a hint at religious language: the verb προϋπαντώ perhaps distantly echoing ὑπαπαντή.[45]

What then is the poet's task? Simply fitting names together like beads, in something that suggests a closeness to traditional oral poetry. Using mere names with all their randomness to conjure up all the waste of the Civil War was something done matchlessly by Sinopoulos. But what Patrikios has done is different: he has put us in mind of such a project, in a poem which is as musical as any of his get, yet at the same time he renounces it in a poem which suppresses himself in favour of an imagined future.

An apocryphal but illuminating story is told of the American poet James Dickey. On being jailed overnight for a traffic violation, he was seen triumphantly emerging the next day with a fat manuscript entitled *The prison poems of James Dickey*. It cannot be said that political self-deception is absent from the work of Patrikios and his contemporaries (though Patrikios has been his own sternest critic, as we have seen) – but self-promotion is not something of which he could be accused. Perhaps more time will be needed to establish how he stands in relation to his contemporaries, his predecessors and indeed his successors; but his best poems survive as a witness, in more than a purely documentary sense, to a period. In a passage quoted with approval by Seferis, Pound wrote of Henry James's achievement in terms one might well apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to Patrikios's work. In James's work, he writes, we find "whole decades of American life that otherwise would have been utterly lost, wasted, rotting

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[45] The meeting of Simeon and the infant Christ (the Feast of the Purification): Luke 2:22-35.

in the unhermetic jars of bad writing, of inaccurate writing".[46] The decades that followed the Greek Civil War merited nothing less from Greek writers, and Patrikios has in his laconic way made an important contribution of his own.

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[46] Seferis, *Μέρες Γ'* (1977), p. 134. Pound had written this in 1918; Seferis notes it in 1939.