

Mother Tongues and Other Traumas by Dr. George Syrimis

There is a reason they call it ‘mother tongue’: the constant proximity, the body’s contact, the coos and ahs, the steady gentle stream of words and sounds; an infant’s reality is a sonorous body. Then there are sentences and a few years later, letters. And then as you grow up, the pleasure of sharing the same books with the one who gave birth to you. There was the time too when she called to wish me happy new year, but instead of speaking to the answering machine, she gave me a lesson in the metaphysics of writing and presence. She hung up, wrote down her wishes--in formal standard Greek and in the formulaic manner of Christmas cards--and read them back to the recorder. She spoke a dialect and wanted to be comprehensible and proper to the casual and indiscrete ear, similar to the way she wore her Sunday dress during church or doctor visits, when she was to undergo some authoritative mental or physical scrutiny. Then there was that day on July 20, 1974, when she ran delirious, as we were abandoning the village, with five children in her wake, clothes hurriedly stuffed in plastic bags, and a husband away at war, shouting to all and none: “Ας όψουνται οι αίτιοι! Ας όψουνται οι αίτιοι! Τώρα εν να κλαίου ούλλες οι μανάδες.”¹

I had never heard the phrase before. It had archaic connotations and in such cases the oral register has to reach far back into the collective memory banks of the dialect. Under normal circumstances, an eight-year old is not accustomed to his mother bursting out with incomprehensible language into new and unimaginable emotions. The stability that language confers to a child and the calm parental affection it makes manifest are

¹ The phrase loosely translates “may those responsible be faced with the consequences.” The problems had been the verb *όψομαι* and related to the more common noun *όψη*.

shaken by the unknown and the unstrained, especially when the source of that atavistic darkness is one's own mother. I did not understand the meaning of her shadowy curse—I was more certain about her ominous prediction—but I understood from the tone of her bawling and from our co-villagers' astonished silence that my mother had transgressed some invisible and as yet unarticulated line. She had shattered a certain communal silence that for years had confused contained violence with civility. The myth of tranquil and quaint village life, of satisfaction of basic needs, of proximity to a frugal but merciful nature had been irrevocably disturbed--as if a donkey delivering groceries at your door was the essence of the good life or that the Garden of Eden that is childhood is free of Cain and Abel. On the morning of July 20, 1974, when Turkish bombers stormed the summer skies as they targeted the military camp one village over, my mother's ominous curse released the floodgates of language that were to baptize me into political consciousness.

That summer, war taught me that violence is a form of knowledge, that words are possessed by ghosts, and that silence can create and transform worlds. And that these worlds, together with the sanctuary they impart on a child's imagination, can be instantly withdrawn by a furious mother's anguish over her oldest son's fate, who, at the prime of his eighteen years, was lying injured and unattended at some hospital in Lefkosia—week-long and round-the-clock curfews did not allow hospital visits. My brother was nineteen and serving his military duty at the time. He was shot by Greek fire on the morning of Monday, July 15, 1974, during the coup that precipitate the Turkish invasion, under unknown circumstances that he has since refused to disclose.

It took many years and the bringing together of diverse, and often conflicting, sources of information for this knowledge to coalesce; fleeting admissions by family members clashed with school textbooks sent from Greece, segments of which were already blacked out before arrival. At school, our first assignment was to rip out the page with the rising phoenix behind a guarding soldier, the Greek dictatorship's symbol. There were also the images of a funny bald man in the weekly Greek newsreels at the village cinema that only some of us laughed at; by the time I started elementary school, the customary and lice-prophylactic buzzing of hair before the beginning of term had already begun to be called a "Patakos." The occasional admonitions and stern warnings too: "Do not tell your teacher which newspaper your father reads!" After 1974 and the restitution of democracy in Greece, came television, newspapers and then in adolescence literature and Kazantzakis's *Fratricides*--What Greek civil war?! I remember vividly Makarios' return and, of course, music. An unforgettable concert with Mikis Theodorakis and Manos Hadjidakis in the fall of 1974, cathartic and painful like the undressing of an old and still bleeding wound.

The malleable imagination of childhood is a potent analgesic. It was a happy childhood and like most happy childhoods, inevitably and subsequently romanticized. What must have been a political minefield for our parents was a playful chess game for us children. Black and white, Greek and Turks, thieves and cops, cowboys and Indians all blended reality and fiction into a game of rival parties, armed to the bone with make-shift bows and arrows and occupying deserted trenches and guards-posts, constructed in the early 60s during inter-communal violence. My village apparently had been a hotbed of bloodshed in 1963. But summer for us children was the season for another type of war.

Once school was over, I too ran after the older boys of my clique and hung out at the deserted Turkish school, which served as our headquarters. Its cool and empty water tank was our armory. A dry riverbed separated the village into two: an abandoned northern Turkish side and a southern still inhabited Greek section. We were still innocent enough that our imaginary splitting of our otherwise flat village into two different camps was limited to the invisible line between “up” and “down” and did not extend to the Left-Right line all adults were familiar with. For the grown-ups, orienting one’s self must have been a lot more taxing. As a child, I relished this fiction of ignorance, unaware of the hushed realities that made its bliss possible. Three years before my birth, Turkish Cypriots still lived in that part of the village, numerous and prosperous enough that upon their departure the Greeks looted their possessions without hesitation or scruples, as if entitled to them. The official oral family record admits that an aunt of mine had also gone to get some chairs but was turned back on account of her family’s political allegiances. As in other armed conflicts of this kind, those who fought the most claimed the most so Right-wing families, still basking in the glories of the first EOKA, had exclusive rights. Back then, the chess board was clearly demarcated. It was years later that I understood that in politics the pawns can easily flip sides, that the black or white square one occupies at any point in time is only temporary, that the possibility of mobility in the long run renders everything gray. After the invasion, communists turned into prosperous capitalists while still active in the Party, and avowed anti-communists made fortunes exporting shoes to the Soviet Union. Eventually the stability of the political system, foreign aid, sound economic policy—a fortified welfare state in combination with extensive support for private initiative—and the trauma of displacement, occupation, and division tempered the

fanaticism of earlier days. The original lines are still nominally there but movement across parties is common making coalitions across the political spectrum the rule. As for the verdict of history, my history that is, Greeks won the economic battle and Turks the military. But politically, Cyprus still remains a country of losers.

At the time, however, the clarity and intransigence of adult divisions—vertical between Greeks and Turks and horizontal between Left and Right—did not disturb the haunted illusions of childhood. I ran and played through them all year round, through empty streets, deserted houses, windowless and doorless, happy childhood hideouts of forgotten memories, other people’s abandoned homes just a few steps away from my own. We were, naturally, oblivious to the fact that soon enough *we* would be on the run, *our* possessions scattered, and *our* modest homes converted into grandiose memories of peaceful co-existence. Little did we know that our childhood epic battles were an innocent, if not entirely harmless—a broken nose here, a sprained limb there--, mimicry of a more sinister kind.

When travel restrictions were lifted in 2003, my mother and I found an old Turkish woman living in the two rooms that were left of our house. She had been from our village and had fled in 1963 to live with her sister in the enclave of Gonelli. In the late nineties she returned to her village to find her house demolished so she moved into our own. To my surprise, my mother had trouble recognizing our house let alone its current occupant. After the invasion and division of Cyprus, we Greeks sprawled “Δεν Ξεχνώ” on every conceivable corner of the island, particularly at legal entry points, to remind ourselves that we were in fact forgetting. My mother faced the substitution of homes with a stoic indifference, as if caused by an act of God and not by the work of men. The woman who

ran through her village cursing for a justice, that carried also the faint bitter taste of revenge, had moved beyond the futility of return. When I later asked her whether she wished to go back she replied “What for?”

In the year immediately before 1974, there were other different forms of displacements and returns too: the men who were members of EOKA B' only came to their homes at night to visit wives and children. Καταζητούμενοι they were called and partook in the mythical cowboy fantasy we watched fanatically on television—the term “Wanted” translates into “Καταζητείται.” We children somehow always knew of their clandestine appearances. They were seamlessly woven into the fabric of our imagination, players in a game of hide and seek for grown ups. They had other names too: *patriots*, *ethnikofrones*, *Eokavitatzides*, victims of a different kind of utopian fraternity. For them the myth of Makarios held no power. The assassination attacks their movement instigated with support from the Greek junta only magnified his epic image and, in turn, blinded even more those who believed in his infallibility. The week of the coup they came out of hiding. As soon as their game was on, ours was suspended. They carried real guns, kept us homebound in the middle of summer. We burned the leaflets we children had indiscriminately collected from the Soviet pavilion at the International Fair a month earlier out of fear that they might be discovered during the house searches half the village was subjected to. Months later my family found refuge on the grounds of the International Fair in Lefkosia, where we built a make-shift shack out of compressed wood. It was to be our home for six years until we moved into an apartment in a refugee camp in 1980. My family was spared of the house search on account of my father's habitual silence on politics and my sister's recent engagement to a fellow-villager of right-wing associations.

One of those mornings of the five-day coup, my mother, my middle brother and I stood in our yard watching our neighbor Athena on her knees begging the armed men who came to take her father, brother and fiancé away: “Αφήστε μου τον ένα! Αφήστε μου τον ένα!” One of them, a Greek officer engaged to village girl, shouted to us: “Μπες μέσα, κυρία Ειρήνη!” Later in life when this incident acquired a literary reference, I had trouble understanding Antigone’s choice for a dead brother at the peril of a living fiancé.

Experience had exposed me to more dire dilemmas. On that fateful Saturday, the same Greek officer was the only one who dared confront my mother. Rifle in hand, he walked up and reprimanded her: “Δεν κάνουν έτσι οι ελληνίδες.” My youngest aunt intervened, grabbing him by the throat and threatening: “Να σου δείξω γιω ίνταλως κάμουν οι ελληνίδες.” A formative and simple lesson in national identity: the meaning of “Greek” is a matter of debate. A few days later, he received a Turkish bullet in the throat. In the mayhem of the war this purely coincidental wound embroidered a ribbon of unforgiving fatalism around the chaos that prevailed, as if a sense of providential justice still applied.

During those years, the choice between Greek or communist exhausted the realm of the possible. Since the early 90s and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the options relaxed and paradoxically all sides—there were more than two now—lost the wind beneath their wings. The center of gravity shifted, the state sought other allies and sponsors. An *Enosis* of a different kind occupied everybody’s mind and ignited their aspirations. We were gradually and surely becoming “Europeans.” We were bypassing both Greece and Turkey. Besides the required legal and economic adjustments, the island engaged in little discussion about the implications the union with Europe would or should have on our shared identities, as Cypriots and as Europeans, on the cultural profile the

island would contribute to this community, or on the social values we would need to safeguard or discard.

In the spring of 2001, I attended a bi-communal festival of Greek and Turkish Cypriots within the Green Line. Other than a handful of Turkish students I had met in Boston during my graduate years, I had never been in contact with a congregation of the dreaded “enemy.” I was smiling to myself thinking of a high-school teacher, a member of EOKA in the fifties, who had acquired the nickname “Τουρκική λαίλαπα” on account of the catachresis he made of the term. I was mildly nervous and exceedingly curious. I strained to hear who was who. From a distance, I found myself resorting to residual racial stereotypes in an effort to determine participants’ ethnic identity. Being predominantly a meeting of left-wing parties, I watched as one adolescent Che Guevara t-shirt attracted another and as fellow villagers recognized former bonds and friendships obscured by wrinkles. And I felt a profound sense of shame; I knew all too well that I--and whoever else that first person pronoun *I* shared communion with whenever it was amplified to *We*--ought to be ashamed for having lived to the age of 36 before such contact could be possible.

I was moved. I was genuinely moved, for half an hour. After that, indifference crept up, a mild boredom at how unremarkable and inconsequential our differences were. I imagined a community without a need for tolerance, without integration or assimilation, without even an attachment to that new orthodoxy that goes by the name of diversity. Indifferent to what people looked like, to which God they prayed to, to what language their mother brought them into. I was indifferent to what the sounds of their words for ‘peace,’ ‘freedom,’ ‘justice,’ and ‘happiness’ were. I had had enough of words. I

remembered a favorite Greek poem, a sad one about moving in the crowd not recognizing anyone and not being recognized by anyone. I thought that alienation may not always be that bad after all and that certain allegiances will always have to be lost for Cypriots to move on. I walked freely through the crowd imagining a community of apathy and where difference made no difference.

Dr. George Syrimis is the Associate Chair of Hellenic Studies Program and a Lecturer in Comparative Literature at Yale University.