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The Fatalities of Fatalism: Translating S.S. Charkianakis' Poem 'Chrismos Choris Manteio'

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I consider myself very fortunate to have had the opportunity and occasion to deepen my appreciation of the work of S.S. Charkianakis (1935-2019), better known as Archbishop Stylianos of Australia (1975-2019). Charkianakis was born in Rethymon, Crete and studied at the Orthodox Theological School of Chalki in Constantinople, the University of Athens and the University of Bonn, Germany. The author's prolific writings and poems concern matters relating to the human condition and spirituality, and were often inspired by his own life experiences. As a primate of the Greek Orthodox Church in Australia, these works hold importance for the Greek community and Orthodox Christians not only in Australia but worldwide. As an Orthodox Christian myself, I have found that the theologian's poetic works resonate with me.

From the outset, I felt that the title, Χρησμός Χωρίς Μαντείο, played an important part in the establishment of the poem's themes relating to a lost humanity and the ultimate solution in rediscovering faith and spirituality. Written in Sydney in 1983 – 8 years after his election as Archbishop of Australia in 1975 – the poem reflects the poet's musings on his motherland Greece and its estrangement from its spiritual roots. I spent a long time debating how to best translate the title's three words and finally decided upon: *Prophecy Without A Portal*. The word "Χρησμός" is from the root of "χράω" which means "to declare" and can be understood as a prophecy or an oracle, in other words, a divine message. The word "Μαντείο" can be directly translated as "oracle": a divine priest, priestess or place acting as a medium by which divine advice or prophecies can be sought. I decided to take some poetic license with my translation of this word, choosing "portal" to show that there is no medium or opening by which this prophecy can be declared. I felt that a *prophecy without a portal* was a tragedy. An undelivered message. A message that exists and that is waiting to be born, but does not have the opening to do so. I also wanted to use alliteration in the poem's title as I believed it sounded more beautiful and rhythmic.

The poem's first line is repeated another two times within the poem, at the beginning of the third and fourth stanza. As a repeated line, it holds significance and I carefully considered how best to translate it. The word "λυτρώνεται" means to ransom, redeem or release. I chose "redeem" to best indicate how the "τόπος" or "place" (Greece), was in dire need of atonement; having gone down the wrong path, this place, like mankind, now needed to be saved. Knowing the Archbishop's faith and position in a high spiritual office within the Orthodox Church, I felt that the word "redeemed" best fit the text's connotation of sin, error or evil, and reflected more broadly onto the individual human need for redemption.

In my translation of the first stanza, I endeavoured to include poetic techniques such as alliteration and rhythm (techniques in the original source text) which can be seen in the lines "pandemic to purify" and "citizens out of their swaddling clothes". Again, my choice of "purify" was a way of linking to the idea of needing salvation and of making something not just physically but spiritually clean in order to move forward and progress in a positive manner. After much deliberation, I translated the word "γεννοφάσκια" quite literally as "swaddling clothes", with "γεννο" relating to birth and "φάσκια" relating to swathes or strips of fabric used to tightly wrap and swaddle infants.

I chose this phrase as I felt it figuratively reflected not only the helplessness of the Greek citizens but their entrapment. It showed how the citizens, though adult, were backward in their thinking, indicating how the purification needed to go back to the early stages of development. Written shortly after Greece's entrance into the European Economic Community in 1981, the poem questions the Greek government's desire to join the EU and bolster its economic interests.

In the second stanza, I crafted my translation to include further alliteration and assonance in line with the source text. Phrases such as “deprecation of the drachma”, “universal usage” and “achieve in deceiving” reflect my decision whilst also maintaining and enhancing the original meaning. I chose to translate “καλλυντικά” as “cosmetics” as I felt it held symbolic significance in its connection to materialism as well as to false appearances. Whilst superficially the truth can be covered up, it can never be extinguished and will always prevail, thus lies, propaganda and appearances, can “no longer achieve in deceiving”.

In the third stanza, I chose to personify “Nightmare” as an evil and ruthless figure that was responsible for the breakdown of the *place*. Controlling the *night* and the dark deeds that occur under the cover of its darkness, Nightmare is also motivated by greed, causing destruction and decay in the name of “per capita national earnings”. Archbishop Stylianos in his 2003 Christmas Message referred to “materialism and greed” as “cunning devices and vain ambitions” and the world today as a “world of decay and apostasy”. His poem reflects his views of how the Evil One assaults the world of today and brings darkness upon it in the name of worldly glory and organized interests, leading it far from the Church and what is good and sanctifying. The poet's solution to this mess is ultimately a spiritual one, laid out in the final fourth stanza of his poem.

In the fourth stanza, the poet makes six clear comparisons and conveys to the reader that the way to redemption can be easily found by being able to *discriminate* between the following: fasting from dieting; repentance from retraction; optimism from arrogance; incense from drugs; prayer from fatalism. The Archbishop's Orthodox influence can be seen in these final words as he points out where the *place* and *citizens* have missed the mark: in matters of the Orthodox faith such as νηστεία (fasting), μετάνοια (repentance) and προσευχή (prayer). For each concept mentioned, he provides the opposing, worldly replacement. Instead of Orthodox fasting which practises denial and discipline, the Archbishop's poem states that the worldly equivalent is “δίαιτα” (dieting), a practise of restricting food usually motivated by current trends or self-centred ideas about body image. Interestingly he mentions that we need to learn to discriminate “το λιβάνη απ'τα ναρκωτικά” which I chose to translate literally as “incense from drugs”. Again, the poet's Orthodox influence is seen here in his inclusion of incense; an item he would have used countless times himself whilst serving, to bless the people praying. However, instead of this plant-derived scented material, he intimates that evil in the world has led people to prefer ναρκωτικά (drugs): substances that promise happiness, contentment and serenity, which in reality are deadly illusions.

I found the translation experience highly enjoyable due to my love of the Greek language, poetic techniques, etymology and this poem's depth of meaning. In my approach to the translation, I took into account the context of the author and endeavoured to translate as poetically and rhythmically as possible his insights into the world's adoption of fatalism over prayer to God.

Bibliography

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ΧΡΗΣΜΟΣ ΧΩΡΙΣ ΜΑΝΤΕΙΟ

By S.S. Harkianakis

*Δεν θα τολμούσα να μιλήσω για προσευχές, κι
όμως κάποτε σφάζουν ένα αρνί για τις θυσίες.
Γ.Σίφερης*

Ο τόπος αυτός δεν λυτρώνεται
χωρίς ένα πάνδημο καθαρμό
των πολιτών από τα γεννοφάσκια.
Η αλλαγή των κομμάτων στην
Κυβέρνηση
η υποτίμηση της δραχμής με
προπαγάνδα
και ό,τι άλλα καλλυντικά διεθνούς
χρήσεως
δεν κατορθώνουν πια να
παραπλανήσουν.
Ο τόπος αυτός δεν λυτρώνεται
αν δεν συλλαβίσει από την αρχή την
Αλφαβήτα
στο φαί, το περπάτημα, το χαμόγελο
λειτουργίες πρωτόγονες που βουλίαξαν
στη νύχτα
του Εφιάλη για το κατά κεφαλήν
εθνικό εισόδημα.
Ο τόπος αυτός δεν λυτρώνεται
αν δεν μάθει χονδρικά να ξεχωρίζει:
την νηστεία από την δίαιτα
την μετάνοια απ' την υπαναχώρηση
την αισιοδοξία από τον κομπασμό
το λιβάνι απ' τα ναρκωτικά
την προσευχή απ' την μοιρολατρεία.

Sydney-Ashfield, 14-1-83

PROPHECY WITHOUT A PORTAL

By S.S. Harkianakis
Translated by Chrissafina Battalis

*I would not have dared to speak of prayers, and
yet sometimes they slaughter a lamb for the
sacrifices.
G. Seferis*

This place cannot be redeemed
without a pandemic purification
of the citizens from their infancy.
The changing of political parties in
Government
the devaluation of the drachma through
propaganda
and whatever other cosmetics of
universal usage
no longer achieve in deceiving.

This place cannot be redeemed
if it does not sound out the Alphabet
from the beginning
in its food, its walk, its smile,
these fundamental functions that sank in
Nightmare's night
for the sake of per capita national
earnings.

This place cannot be redeemed
if it does not learn to roughly discern:
fasting from dieting
repentance from retraction
optimism from arrogance
incense from drugs
prayer from fatalism.

Sydney-Ashfield, 14-1-83