



To cite this article:

Gauntlett, Stathis. "Pleasures and Pitfalls of Englishing Greek Fiction." *The AALITRA Review: A Journal of Literary Translation* 12 (December 2017): 6-15.

aalitra.org.au

Australian Association for Literary Translation

Pleasures and Pitfalls of Englishing Greek Fiction

STATHIS GAUNTLETT

University of Melbourne

Abstract

This paper focuses on three scholarly translations of Greek fiction into English, published over the last twelve years: *The Last Varlamis* by Thanasis Valtinos, a contemporary text of indeterminate genre, whose translation was published in Birmingham and launched with some fanfare in London in May 2016; the modern Cypriot novella “*The Gangsters*” by Lefkios Zafiriou, whose translation was self-published in Melbourne in 2005; and *Erotokritos* by Vitsentzos Kornaros, a 10,000-verse Cretan Renaissance romance that took a team of three translators five years to translate and annotate for publication by an Australian learned society in 2004. My reflections on the experience of Englishing these quite different texts raise issues specific to translating from Greek (a highly inflected language with a history of diglossia, transliteration problems, and local politico-cultural minefields to negotiate), but also some challenges or vexations of more general applicability (such as dialect, intertextuality, postcolonial translation, mission creep, publishing and reviewers). Their remembrance is tempered with recollections of how the translation process variously enhanced the pleasures of a literary text.

I first came to literary translation with an ulterior motive. I was hoping it might be an avenue to close collaboration with selected Greek authors and an opportunity to probe their sense of their own works. I was not disappointed: translation brought me some privileged insights and cemented some enduring friendships. However, I soon realized that the avenue is also strewn with pitfalls: for a start, authors are not always the best judge of how to render their words in another language.

My favourite illustration of this arose when I was translating the short story “Addiction to Nicotine” with the author Thanasis Valtinos (of whom much more presently). We reached a point in the story where a villager invokes blackbirds of evil omen: “*Kou-rou-nes!*” she intones rather melodramatically. Valtinos wanted something more dialectal than “crows” or “ravens”, for the sake of local colour. Strictly speaking, “kourounes” is not dialectal, but the overall linguistic context was. So remembering the Scottish ballad of “The twa corbies”, I put in “Cor-r-r-bies!”, to the considerable delight of the author. But when I asked a non-Greek speaker for an opinion of my translation as a piece of English, he told me that he was greatly perplexed at the sudden appearance of a Scottish highlander in the middle of the Peloponnese. This was a bad case of anapopism, the spatial equivalent of anachronism. So I reverted to “Ra-a-avens” (Valtinos, “Addiction” 741) – to the considerable disappointment of the author. I have been on my guard against such incongruities ever since. Even the most illustrious translators are guilty of anapopism – the great E.V. Rieu was a serial offender: he places a boomerang and a ballroom in his translation of Homer’s *Iliad* for Penguin Classics (Homer 435, 444).

My earliest translations were published in Australian literary journals, unadorned by analysis or commentary, and they did not count as research productivity by the Australian Research Council criteria of the day. Translation remained for me an unaccredited *parergon*, until on the cusp of the new millennium I was persuaded by a classicist colleague, the late Gavin Betts, to join him in producing a scholarly translation of the *Erotokritos*, a massive verse romance from Renaissance Crete. He argued that if we added annotations and a learned

commentary, the bean-counters could not refuse to regard it as academic research. Classicists were scoring the full five points for annotated translations of ancient Greek texts – so why not Modern Greek?

This time, the interpersonal pleasure of the translation process for me would not derive from working with an author – Vitsentzos Kornaros was a contemporary of Shakespeare and had been dead for almost 400 years. The allure this time was the prospect of collaborating with a scholar of the calibre of Gavin Betts, whose superlative knowledge of all Greek had already been applied to translation of ancient, medieval and Modern Greek texts. (This is to say nothing of his geniality and generosity.) “Team *Erotokritos*” soon expanded into a troika with the addition of an expert dialectologist, Dr Thanasis Spilias. Our *modus operandi* revolved around working-lunches: Gavin would distribute a preliminary draft of a slew of verses a week in advance, and we would then discuss, refine and annotate them over lunch. We lunched and laboured together weekly over five years – the *Erotokritos* is as long as Homer’s *Odyssey*. We resolved any disagreements by majority vote; none of us always got his own way, but it was a very harmonious and convivial collaboration, punctuated with much raucous merriment. The final product was handsomely published by the Australian Association for Byzantine Studies as volume 14 in the series *Byzantina Australiensia*, having first been scrutinized by the two general editors of the series, and expertly refereed by two Cretan Renaissance specialists.

The issue of dialect arose again. The *Erotokritos* was written in Cretan dialect, long before standard Modern Greek became centred on the southern mainland dialects. The result of this historical accident is that, although it is still immensely popular all over the Greek-speaking world, the *Erotokritos* now seems rustic to speakers of standard metropolitan Greek. But that is not how it would have appeared to its target readership, the intelligentsia of Venetian Crete in the early 17th century. So the triumvirate of translators resolved to render the *Erotokritos* into the standard modern English of our target readership (Kornaros, *Erotokritos* ix f.).

We also decided to turn the verse into prose, not attempting to replicate the rhymed iambic couplets of the original. None of us was a poet. Besides, there was the cautionary example of a previous English translation of the *Erotokritos* into verse to deter us. This verse translation was produced by Dr Theodore Stephanides, a redoubtable polymath and all-round Renaissance man – poet, physician and natural scientist. (He is perhaps best known as the botanical mentor of Gerald Durrell and hero of the latter’s memoir *My Family and Other Animals*.) Stephanides rendered the 5,000 rhyming couplets of the *Erotokritos* into as many heroic couplets of English, a truly Herculean feat for a single translator, but he often sacrificed meaning for form. In the worst instances, he traduced the whole ethos of the poem in his quest for rhyme and iambic pentameter: at the very beginning Stephanides arbitrarily introduces a “languorous kiss by night” into a poem so strait-laced that the lovers only hold hands through a barred window during their trysts (Kornaros, *Erotokritos* 33). He also violates the decorum of the linguistic register by using colloquialisms such as “fibs” (Kornaros, *Erotokritos* 63). His inspired but inaccurate translation was still in print, but we believed a reliable, scholarly alternative was called for.

The *Erotokritos* is a convoluted story of love thwarted by unequal social status, by incredibly sadistic parents, and by diabolical reversals of fortune which put the devotion of the lovers to the sternest tests. It features a jousting tournament, a brutal war, a fatal sword duel between champions, a miraculous recovery from near-death, a magic potion and antidote, and a protracted recognition scene. True love triumphs over all that – and more. The tone of the poem is as varied as its tortuous plot: among the diverse modes to tax the mettle of the translator are luxuriant lyricism, suspenseful or rapid-paced drama, moralistic disquisition, and technical descriptions of everything from anatomy to weaponry, from the accoutrements of chivalry to those of traditional trades like carpentry and seamanship.

Given the length of the *Erotokritos*, a major challenge for its translator is achieving consistency in rendering recurrent words, which might appear thousands of verses apart. The task of keeping track of key words was greatly facilitated by a four-volume scholarly concordance of the text (Philippides & Holton). The concordance was also of invaluable assistance to the production of our Introduction and Endnotes.¹

Our publication received some favourable notices and plaudits from pundits such as the Professor of Byzantine and Modern Greek at Oxford, who praised both the accuracy of our translation and its “judiciously scholarly presentation, assisting readers without swamping them” (Jeffreys 18). She concludes: “The serious student of European literature of the late Renaissance now has no excuse for ignoring the rich world of the intellectuals of [Crete]. [...] The translators are to be heartily congratulated” (Jeffreys 18). The translation elicited a far less favourable response from a devoted admirer and staunch champion of the legacy of our “rival” translator Stephanides (Hirst). After pointing out some lapses in our purportedly “standard Modern English”, the reviewer took us to task at great length for traducing the poem’s poetic qualities, which his posthumously slighted hero Stephanides had privileged above accuracy. Furthermore, he sought to demonstrate our failure even in the attempt to debase poetry into prose; this demonstration involved subjecting our phraseology to prosodic scansion and resolving some of it into various metrical feet, thereby vindicating Stephanides’s approach and proving that the irrepressible poetry of the original text survived even our perversity. The reviewer also found rhymes in our prose with which to berate us – not to mention “near-rhymes”, such as “much” with “crushed”. The reader must find such “accidental versification” disconcerting, the reviewer avers, and it should have been edited out for the sake of consistency of style. This critic is apparently in denial of the capacity of prose to be rhythmical and even lyrical. What we abjured in our mission statement was the metrical straitjacket that vitiated Stephanides’s translation (Kornaros, *Erotokritos* ix). However, the reviewer concludes that our translation “tells us everything about the elephant except why [...] or how”. Our copious explications of the “why” and “how” of the poetics of the *Erotokritos* in the Introduction and the Endnotes seem to have eluded the reviewer’s attention.

My next translation confirmed my suspicion that justifying one’s choices in detail in an introduction and notes is no insurance against the strictures of a programmatic or wilfully obtuse review. This time the text was a ‘modern’ novella, a short piece of autobiographical fiction written in Contemporary Greek and laced with elements of Cypriot dialect. The author, Lefkios Zafiriou, first published it in Nicosia in 1982 under the fraught title “*Oi Symmorites*”, which I translated as “*The Gangsters*”. The novella is a coming-of-age story set in the grinding poverty of the final years of British colonial rule in Cyprus and the brutality seeded by the terms of decolonization. It is also a good example of the literary fiction of postcolonial identity. I decided to translate it for use in my Cyprus courses as a literary introduction to the recent history of the island for students who were unable to read the Greek original.

The narrative begins with the EOKA² uprising against British rule (1955-59) and ends rather abruptly in 1964 amid the fighting between Greek and Turkish Cypriots that marred the birth of the Republic of Cyprus. The turmoil described in the story would later culminate in the catastrophe of 1974, when a Greek military coup triggered a Turkish invasion that split the island in two, killed thousands, and displaced hundreds of thousands – a disaster out of all proportion to the size of the island. Even though the narration ends in 1964, the novella is

¹ The Introduction critically reviews the current state of scholarship on the Cretan Renaissance, the author, the content and form of the poem, its literary antecedents, its political context (complete with map), and its transmission, reception and afterlife. The Endnotes form a commentary elucidating historical, geographical and cultural allusions, and identifying points of particular thematic and formal interest or scholarly disputation, as well as signalling problematic parts of the text and translation issues.

² National Organization of Cypriot Fighters

inevitably read through hindsight of the 1974 calamity and in the knowledge that Cyprus remains divided to this day, to the extent that two generations of Greek and Turkish Cypriots have never lived together – except as neighbours in North London or Melbourne.

The book I translated was acclaimed as “something new in Cypriot literature” because, exceptionally, Zafiriou refrains from shouting or ranting (Zafiriou, “*The Gangsters*” 8). The events of the 1950s and early ‘60s are chronicled through a child’s innocent eyes around a truly horrendous family drama, and subsequent catastrophes are subtly foreshadowed. The narrator of the story seems to have matured into a somewhat conflicted persona, haunted by nightmarish scenes. Significantly for the translation, the narrator also seems linguistically conflicted: he wavers haphazardly between standard Greek and Cypriot dialect. The use of Cypriot dialect, albeit sporadic, was too important to surrender to untranslatability because it is crucial to the narrative technique: it creates an ironic distance between the child protagonist and the mature narrator – he may have been educated in standard Greek, but he has not renounced his sense of Cypriot identity. Moreover, his use of dialect distances him from that Greek nationalist ideology which seeks to minimize Cypriot divergence from metropolitan Greek culture and strives for complete assimilation into Mother Greece.

In rendering the dialect, one solution might have been to use a regional variety of English. It so happens that the Cypriots have been dubbed “the Irish of the Mediterranean”, because both islands were convulsed by inter-communal “troubles”, so something a bit “leprechaun-y” might have served to render the sporadic use of Cypriot dialect into English. My earlier experience with the “cor-r-r-bies” gave me pause. And my readings in postcolonial theory suggested it was inadvisable to domesticate distinctively local elements to Anglo-centric norms. The history and the contemporary dynamics of the relationship between Cypriot Greek and standard Greek do not match those between Irish English and Standard English — to say nothing of the political reductivism of implicitly equating the two lots of “troubles”. Given that I was translating into the language of the former colonial masters of Cyprus, the potential for offence was all the greater. I therefore resorted to a typographical solution: I typeset the Cypriot dialect in ***bold italics*** in contrast to the plain text used for rendering standard Greek. The sporadic ***bold italics*** would give the reader a visual jolt when set amidst a page of plain text. I duly explained what the visual jolt was meant to convey, both in the Introduction and in a footnote closer to its first occurrence in the text (Zafiriou, “*The Gangsters*” 19, 26).

The novella’s seemingly incongruous title, “*The Gangsters*”, is also politically fraught. Translations of titles of books and film titles can be a bone of contention, and my translation of the title duly attracted criticism from commentators (Zafiriou, *Oi Symmorites*, 83), who simply ignored the detailed justification offered in both my Introduction and Notes (Zafiriou, “*The Gangsters*” 13, 63). The title is enclosed in quotation marks, which function like a pair of tweezers holding the phrase at arm’s length for further inspection. The Greek word for “gangster”, *symmoritis*, has been loaded with political significance since the Greek civil war of the 1940s. In Greece, the victorious Royalists commonly referred to the Communist revolutionaries as “gangsters”, even long after their defeat. Paradoxically, the British colonialists of Cyprus subsequently chose to refer to the Greek-Cypriot EOKA guerrillas as “gangsters”, both in the House of Commons and at the United Nations. This is quite an irony because the leader of EOKA, George Grivas, had led a Royalist militia against the “Communist-gangsters” in Greece. To confuse the issue further, the group of children to which the narrator belonged might also be described as a “gang” of sorts, albeit a gang of innocents. So the signifier “gangster” floats about, and the intended identity of the gangsters becomes quite a conundrum. However, a strong clue to the author’s intentions is supplied by the front cover of the first Greek edition (Zafiriou, “*Oi Symmorites*”). The cover features the woodcut of a tearful child behind barbed wire titled “Cyprus ‘74”, produced by the Greek artist Tassos, which was subsequently sent around the world on a Cypriot postage stamp sold in aid of

refugees from the Turkish invasion. This emblematic image serves as a reminder of the outcome of the events that Zafiriou describes in the novella, and implicitly points a finger of blame at the “gangsters” who overthrew the democratically elected government in 1974 and triggered the invasion. (These gangsters were the thugs of EOKA-B, recruited and trained by General Grivas.) The title and front cover thus combine to keep the ensuing events ever present as an ironic undertone to Zafiriou’s narrative.

In the event, the author supplied me with a different image for use on the cover of my translation. It presents yet another paradox for the reader to ponder: the photograph is of a scene in the novella where the British Governor of Cyprus takes lunch at the Larnaca orphanage, surrounded by members of the narrator’s “gang”. It raises the question of whether His Excellency Sir Hugh Foot might be himself regarded as a “gangster”. It could be argued that, since Sir Hugh’s predecessors hanged and tortured young men fighting against British colonial rule, and since Sir Hugh himself played a role in tying the “Gordian knot” of Cypriot “independence” which led to much subsequent grief, he could thus be seen to qualify as an *ex officio* “gangster”, albeit an exceptionally urbane one.

My rendering of the title as “The Gangsters” was mostly criticized by non-native speakers of English. They were influenced, I believe, by the fact that the word “gangster” has entered Modern Greek as an unassimilated loan-word and in Greek it tends to denote mobsters of the Al Capone variety, as portrayed by Hollywood. The word “gang” has not accompanied “gangsters” into Greek usage, so the nexus with the latter’s etymon, obvious in English, is lost in Greek. In English, gangsters come in more flavours than just those sleek Chicago mobsters who produce machine-guns out of violin-cases—they are also unprepossessing specimens like the Kray twins, and the sort of Cockney thugs that Arthur Daly and his “minder” rub up against. As mentioned in both my Introduction and Notes, what clinched the choice of “gangsters” for my translation was the fact that British officialdom was using this term to denote the EOKA guerrillas of Cyprus. I suppose I could have avoided criticism by translating the title blandly as “The Gang”, but in doing so I would have surrendered the title’s historical and political connotations.

On a more positive note, my enjoyment of the text was enhanced by discussions with the author when he visited Australia as a conference guest, and again later when I visited Cyprus and had the pleasure of acquainting myself with the old town of Larnaca, retracing the steps of the novella’s characters. Another pleasure of the translation process, and the intensely close reading of the text that translation demands, was the discovery of many intertextual resonances with other works of Modern Greek literature, including Valtinos’s “Addiction to Nicotine”, which I had also translated. I resolved to signal such textual nuances in my Translator’s Notes and to make a scholarly edition of my translation.

Less encouraging was the discovery that the novella had been singled out for savage criticism by the Greek nationalist sector of Cypriot politics. Even after the fiasco of 1974, unrepentant nationalists deplored Zafiriou’s depiction of ordinary Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots living together harmoniously and even denounced his use of Cypriot dialect as treason against Mother Greece. They were aghast when the novella was awarded a State Literary Prize (Zafiriou, “*The Gangsters*” 13). Not wishing to enter the minefield of local politics, I resolved to produce not just a carefully considered translation but also an even-handed, scholarly introduction and notes. In translating the text I clearly had to convey accurately the author’s apportionment of blame, but the Introduction and Notes were another matter – they should give readers the means to arrive at their own conclusions. It was no small challenge to write non-partisan pen-pictures of controversial figures like Archbishop Makarios and General Grivas. Clearly, a full and balanced bibliography was also needed to document the notes and suggest further reading.

Mission creep had by now become a full-blown stampede, so for good measure I also included a map and a timeline of events relevant to the story. The initially slender text duly bulked up into a format suitable for publication as a small, free-standing volume.

This segues into the next pitfall – one which left me with a cupboardful of copies printed at my own expense. My quest for a publisher had three false starts over several years. By 2005 I despaired of ever keeping faith with the endlessly patient author and, throwing caution to the winds, I decided to publish the translation myself. I duly set up a “two-dollar” company for the purpose, under a suitably Welsh-Greek trademark: “Delphi Coracle Press”. The end product was rather spartan, but functional and pleasingly uncompromised—it contained all the accretions to the translated text that I deemed important. Distribution proved a worse pitfall: ten years later, I still have a shelf full of copies. Nowadays I would have explored options for online publishing.

Nevertheless, a happy ending of sorts ensued, as an unlikely spin-off from the 2004 enlargement of the European Union to include not just Cyprus, but also Slovenia. When in 2008 Slovenia assumed the rotating presidency of the EU, the publisher Modrijan of Ljubljana celebrated the occasion by issuing the “Euroman” series of Slovenian translations of representative prose works from the other EU member-states. “*The Gangsters*” was chosen to represent Cyprus, and apparently my English translation facilitated its selection and translation into Slovenian. The result was a very handsome hardback edition of the work in Slovenian, complete with introduction and notes based on my spartan volume (Zafiriou, *Gangsterji*). The author was duly feted as a European literary celebrity in Slovenia.

This momentum was maintained in the following year (2009) with a second Greek edition of the novella, published in Athens (Zafiriou, *Oi Symmorites*). It featured a revised text and the Greek editor’s notes, again partly based on my own. A caveat arises here, inasmuch as the author emended the Greek text, causing it to diverge in places markedly from the original text that I translated. This serves as a salutary reminder that the shelf life of translations can be finite for a variety of reasons. Translators of living authors can expect their translations to be marginalized by revisions of the source text, even after many years of dormancy between editions. The changes made by Zafiriou may seem minor overall, but some of them divorce the current Greek text quite significantly from my translation and annotations – it would be ironic indeed if my translation and notes inspired the author’s second thoughts that have now cut the translation adrift. Not so much a pitfall as an own-goal!

And so to my latest round of pleasures and pitfalls, my translation of *The Last Varlamis* by my old friend Thanasis Valtinos, to whom I returned after a hiatus of two decades. This time we collaborated not face-to-face, but by e-mail – a sign of the times. Valtinos in the meantime had become quite a notorious celebrity in Greece. His fictional representations of the Greek civil war caused a major furore in the 1990s, but he had nonetheless won several prestigious prizes, and had recently been elected to the Athens Academy.

What attracted me irresistibly to Valtinos was not his celebrity, but the fact that his text, *The Last Varlamis*, is a masterclass in literary larrikinism – this resonated powerfully with me. *The Last Varlamis* is a monument to textual mischief, replete with snares for the complacent reader as well as pitfalls for the unwary translator. It is vintage Valtinos, featuring much of his thematic stock-in-trade: squalid politics, factional thuggery, intimate domestic intensities, artistic issues – all packaged in a text of indeterminate genre. Is it a historical essay? A fictional novella? Or is it just a formal academic address? It was, after all, read aloud to the Athens Academy by Valtinos in the guise of an inaugural address at his investiture in the Chair of Prose-writing in 2010. I give full details of the background to the text in the Introduction to my translation (Valtinos, *Varlamis* ix). Suffice it to say that in reading *The Last Varlamis* at his investiture, Valtinos regaled his captive audience for upwards of an hour with a caricature of the scholarship of which they are the accredited custodians. It was a parody, moreover, the

extent of which they would realize only some months later when they were able to check the hardcopy and discover the spurious references and apocryphal citations with which he had larded the text. Not for the first time, Valtinos was outrageously riding the boundaries of fact and fiction, authenticity and forgery, and challenging the gatekeepers of national truths to tell them apart. This was larrikinism of a high order, scripted and stage-managed to perfection. His fellow Academicians responded by nominating him for the Nobel Prize for Literature and then electing him President of Athens Academy for 2016.

The range of challenges that *Varlamis* holds for the translator is best illustrated with a few excerpts. The story starts with some historic verse, the tantalisingly brief folk-ballad of Varlamis, which is supposed to date from the Ottoman period:

Three plane trees all in a row / and what thick shade one casts.
From its branches swords are hung / and at its foot, muskets propped
and ‘neath it lies Varlamis.

(Valtinos, *Varlamis* 1)

The narrator then surveys various unsatisfactory scholarly attempts to explicate the enigma of the curiously recumbent Varlamis. Then he conjures up an alternative response to the song in the form of a high-modernist pastiche, a “quasi-folksong” by a fictitious literary poet, using a very different linguistic register – thereby also keeping the translator on his mettle!

Three plane trees all in a row / while Varlamis,
lying supine / on the raft / of his five exquisite verses
ascends the River Acheron.
Was he tall or short / swarthy or fair?
Was he a ladies’ man / like his contemporary Zacharias
—from Barbitsa in the Parnon ranges, that one—
or were this one’s proclivities more dorian?
Futile questionings!
Enveloped in the mists of history / they shall forever remain unanswered.
And his ascent shall continue.

(Valtinos, *Varlamis* 3)

Amid all that nebulous historicity, bristling with artistic possibilities, Varlamis’s ascent (or, perhaps more accurately, his descent) does indeed continue, because Valtinos supplies him with a quasi-documented dynasty. In the process Valtinos spoofs every kind of textual documentation and flagrantly misquotes or “verbals” both the quick and the dead. He turns out a veritable *Who’s Who* of the Greek intelligentsia to bear false witness, from the scholar Apostolakis to the journal-editor Zouboulakis (via the classics Professor Kakridis, the astrophysicist Nanopoulos, and the Nobel Laureate George Seferis, and many more real or fictitious witnesses) all by way of lending a veneer of plausibility to a fabricated genealogy. Cavafy’s apocryphal inscriptions and wilful misquotations pale by comparison. Even Stendhal’s notorious fabrication of 58 of the 73 epigraphs in *Le Rouge et le Noir* seems tame – Valtinos crams as much falsification into a work a fraction of the length. Behind this seemingly impish *jeu d’esprit* lies serious intent: it is an *exposé* in caricature of the very mechanisms by which dominant national narratives can be forged by blithely joining up the dots of dubious evidence.

For the hapless translator though, quasi-documentation posed an additional problem: mission creep, again. Unlike the doyen of Modern Greek literary translation, Peter Bien of Dartmouth College, who had the good sense to direct the English reader to “Google” anything

culturally unfamiliar in his re-translation of Kazantzakis's *Zorba the Greek* (3), I felt duty-bound to assist the non-specialist reader of *The Last Varlamis* to savour the all-important sub-text. At the risk of coming across as a "nanny translator", I effectively undertook to map the fictional element of the text, taking my lead from the fact that the author himself had provided endnotes signalling some of the intertextual references embedded in his text. I decided to build on the author's example and to append Translator's Notes in the form of a minimalist glossary of references. I aimed both to spare general readers the frustration of the wild-goose chase and to facilitate their understanding of the way the text is meant to work for a Greek-reader.

One final pitfall of Valtinos' fiction, capable of driving a translator to distraction, was his compulsive name-dropping. In *The Last Varlamis* he binges on personal names, corporate brand names, placenames – all kinds of proper names. Many of them are fabrications, either his own or those of other fiction writers, in the spirit of his trademark "faction" (a hybrid of fact and fiction). The trouble for the translator is that these proper names tend to be polysyllabic and particularly unamiable to the English eye in phonetic transliteration. Thirty-three years of teaching Greek to English-speakers has taught me that a surfeit of Big Fat Greek names invariably causes terminal confusion and glaze-over. So my translation tries to mitigate the author's profligacy by using forms more familiar to English-speakers wherever possible; thus "Hadrian St" instead of "Adhrianou St". I hope to have avoided making Athens sound like London or Melbourne in the process, but I expect the censure of devotees of rigorous consistency in transliteration, in due course.

In the interim, a couple more brief excerpts from my translation will serve to illustrate some of the features of the text mentioned above. In the first excerpt we see the inglorious demise of the eponymous "last Varlamis" of the title – he was named "Michel" by his French mother, Michelle. Like the recumbent first Varlamis of folksong fame, he ends up lying under a fateful plane-tree:

1944, September 14, the Feast of the Holy Cross. Evening. Michel has forgotten to bolt the back door at Hadrian St., the one opening on to the courtyard. Curfew starts at ten. He's just got time. He goes out and walks briskly in that direction. He enters Hephaestos St. At the far end of the street two men are lurking in a doorway. They stand motionless. He walks past them, his heart racing. He turns left. There's a couple under the plane tree. The man with his back against the tree trunk, the woman astride his knees. Disconcerted, Michel detours to avoid them. The woman leaps up. It's Philitsa. The man tries to pull his trousers up. Michel recognises Sarandis. Two gunshots from right behind him and immediately thereafter two more shatter the night. Then footsteps running away. Philitsa screams out, pointing at a bewildered Michel: 'He knows me.' The footsteps return.

Michel didn't hear the two gunshots, nor the other two. Philitsa was still screaming hysterically: 'He knows me.'

Clutching his gaping abdomen with both hands, Michel managed to drag himself, practically clambering over Sarandis's corpse, and reached the plane tree. He leaned against the foot of the rough trunk, and just before his head fell lifeless beside it, Virginia Varlami came and kissed him on the forehead.

(Valtinos, *Varlamis*, 22)

So the final scion of the putative family tree is severed. But this is not the end of the story; there are more scores to settle, and in this final excerpt Valtinos takes pre-emptive aim at his academic critics through his fictional alter ego, the feisty Rhoxane-Rhea (better known by her Greek initials, "Rho-Rho") and the dissertation she submitted to the Sorbonne, not coincidentally entitled "The Last Varlamis".

Rho-Rho completed and submitted her dissertation in July of 1956. The examiners' reports arrived in Paris in September. [...] One enthusiastic, two stilted and bland. The fourth was a thunderbolt. There was one more to come, but it was already a dead letter. In an exceptionally aggressive manner, Christophe Langlois of Montpellier excoriated the unscholarly tenor of the work and above all the egregious —tacit— treatment of the ending of a recent Greek novel — in its entirety— as historical fact. He threatened to hold it up for vilification before the whole university community. Jean-François Arnaud lived in dread of academic impropriety and feared for the fate of his student. He could discern personal grievances behind Langlois's stern polemics. The hostility was exclusively aimed at him. He discussed with her the scope for withdrawing the dissertation and rewriting the end in particular, inserting bibliographical references.

Rho-Rho refused categorically. She took her leave of her professor and sent Langlois the following note over her own conspicuous signature:

Life is per se a narrative. History is the derivative narrative of the former. When events lose their pulsating vitality and wilt irretrievably, we of necessity place our trust in literature.

(Valtinos, *Varlamis*, 24)

Rho-Rho gets the last laugh in the story, and her riposte to her inquisitor is the punch line to the whole work. Literature touches parts that historiography can't reach.

I would add that the translation process takes the translator to parts of the literary text that mere close reading cannot reach. My experience of having to consider the nuances of every word of the three diverse Greek texts against its supposed equivalent in English, to compare the register, semantic range and cultural/historical connotations of each, and to assess the responses that each can trigger in readers of both source and target language, has markedly heightened my understanding (and, with it, my enjoyment) of how these works function as literature. I have further found sharing these privileged insights in translator's introductions and notes to be worthwhile, both by way of disciplined rationalization of my choices and as a form of pre-emptive justification (albeit not fool proof). The major or minor pitfalls posed by well-meaning authors, unpredictable publishers and dyspeptic reviewers pale into insignificance before these supreme pleasures of Englishing Greek fiction.

This paper is a revised version of a lecture delivered at the AALITRA Annual General Meeting in May 2016.

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