

# Transferrings through the Mosaic of (Literary) Landscapes

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*The House with the Eucalypts*, first published in 1975, constitutes a collection of poems in Greek by Dimitris Tsaloumas. In a bid to transmit these poems to a wider, always appreciative English speaking readership of this writer's creative output, and as a means of extending the parameters of the Tsaloumas canon, I decided to translate them into English. Though a daunting task, the process also proved singularly productive in that it afforded me a profound level of affinity with each word, nuance and silence within a framework of biculturalism and bilingualism. The island of Leros is the unifying image that binds the threads of the collection together. Sight, smell and touch all revolve around metaphors radiating the specificity of that particular spot that the poet perceived as his particular home (land) — his *topos*: a place that belongs to him and that he belongs to in terms of primordial birthright. Although the atmosphere is that of journeying back through the mists of time, Tsaloumas' evocation is neither nostalgic nor romantic, but very lucid in its portrayal of island life in the 1940s. Memory reaches an apotheosis of form in this collection, fortified by the desire to attain a mosaic of antithetical facets as encompassed within physical and metaphorical boundaries.

Some years ago, I travelled overseas for a short while, during which time I chanced upon a literary seminar. One of the speakers was a professor of English literature of some renown who airily proclaimed that the study of living writers was a dangerous pursuit, of dubious scholastic merit, in that the passing of time had not decreed their value. I recall this greatly unsettling me. I had just entered the realm of literary research through my keen interest in contemporary Australian literature written in English and other languages. I started to seriously question issues of value judgement and literary criticism, and how all these vital considerations impacted upon the study of such talented contemporary Australian writers as Antigone Kefala, for example, as opposed to Milton or Keats. Although such circumspection inevitably led me in circular motion back to where I started, the process was a valuable one in that it gave me what I now cite as being the confidence of clarification. I concur with Wellek and Warren's terse declaration that

“if many second-rate or even tenth-rate authors of the past are worthy of study, a first-rate or second-rate author of our time is worth studying too” (Wellek and Warren, 1980:44).

In *The House with the Eucalypts*, the poems meandering around this notion of what I have collectively referred to in this paper as *topos* are profoundly moving. The threads of island and exile intertwine into a finished tapestry of intricate texture. I initially used the word *landscape* but then decided to take the liberty that bilingualism affords and transliterate the Greek word τόπος. The Oxford Greek-English dictionary cites τόπος as meaning: country, native land, place, village, town, land, position, spot, locality, location, scenery, landscape. *Topos*, of course, has another meaning; one that is specific to literary studies and widely used by literary researchers. Abrams lists it under the general heading “Motif and Theme” and offers the following by way of definition: “A motif is an element — a type of incident, device, reference, or formula which recurs frequently in literature. [...] An older term for recurrent poetic concepts or formulas is the *topos* (Greek for ‘a commonplace’). The term ‘motif’ [...] is also applied to the frequent repetition of a significant phrase, or set description, or complex of images in a single work” (Abrams, 1988:110).

All of these shades of meaning, in varying intensities, permeate Tsaloumas’ poetic discourse. When viewed within this particular conceptual framework, it becomes immediately clear that no other poetry collection of Tsaloumas encompasses such specificity of place within its very title: *The House with the Eucalypts*. Upon reading the first poem in the sequence *Introductory Note* it also becomes immediately clear that we are not dealing with some romantic evocation of an idyllic life spent in the homeland, the nostalgic reverie that characterises so much of the literature written by first generation immigrants to this country (Kanarakis, 1987). There are, of course, some images of the island that are so beautiful as to be intoxicating — “The sun arose and set off fires/within the azure embrasures of dawn” — but these are few and far between.

Elucidation is called for at this point. In his memorable book *The Greek Islands*, Lawrence Durrell who, for both personal and professional reasons, spent many years on the Greek islands after World War Two, had the following to say about Leros: “[It’s] a gloomy shut-in sort of place, with deep fjords full of lustreless water, black as obsidian, and as cold as a polar bear’s kiss. Leros means dirty or grubby in Greek, and the inhabitants of the island are regarded as something out-of-the-ordinary by the other little Dodecanese Islands” (Durrell, 1978:154). It is important to note that the idyllic nature of the Greek islands is a fairly recent phenomenon; a commodity largely manufactured by the Greek government as a means of resurrecting an economy at a dangerously low ebb. That is, “The Greek Islands” largely came into being as a sort of semiotic signpost of sun and exotica for the masses as late as the 1960s. Prior to this they were outposts of foreign occupation at worst, and centres of misery and starvation at best.

It is not surprising then that many of Tsaloumas' later poems in collections such as *The Barge* and *Falcon Drinking*, written in English from the 1980s onwards when the poet's annual pilgrimage to his island during the Greek summer became an established feature of his life, are more rich and luscious in their reflection of island life. In contrast, *The House with the Eucalypts*, written in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s during the harsh years of voluntary exile and isolation, reflect the island as he left it, as he *remembered* it: a harsh, often treacherous enclosure with exile hovering precariously between evil and salvation. Tsaloumas finished high school in the Italian language, with foreign rule being the social and political milieu within which he moved; island and exile enmeshed in a sort of symbiotic existence:

My friends, even though I boasted, I wasn't  
among the ones with wings whom lack of wind  
brought down. And in the sky I didn't ask  
the path to dawn to sleep with the stars.  
I sinned on the reefs. I made mine the fire  
and shamelessly enjoyed the light  
disdaining the nobility of the winds,  
until the sidelong glance awakened  
and the becalmed seas trapped the sails  
and mists wrapped all. I seek to find my house  
but from the farthest reaches of the earth,  
  
burning and tall the tower looms of silence  
where the barbarians' trample is heard,  
and the mother rejects her child, and the child its mother.

Fifth poem in the sequence *The House with the Eucalypts*.

This collection can almost be seen as constituting an ode to memory as it lives out past harshness and treachery within a physical landscape reflecting, and being reflected by, the psychological landscapes of the poet. In "The Distant Present", where Tsaloumas focuses on his development and maturity as a writer, he notes that

I found myself wandering in a twilight of suspension between a world of memory that had by now solidified, as it were, into a kind of real presence, and an everyday reality that remained stubbornly incongruous and absurd [...] for there hovered in the background demanding, insistent, resentful, the old foresaken world, haunting an ever deepening perspective, forcing comparisons, providing standards, offering wisdom (Tsaloumas, 1984:62–65):

Because time has this strangeness,  
that you no longer take the dry river bed,  
your sister the oleander, to go down  
and meet the wind and the foam on the shore,  
but rather the wind comes right at you  
as you sit in the middle of the courtyard

and shakes you and gathers at your feet  
 every kind of withered leaf, sweepings  
 which you study carefully to orientate yourself.  
 You fret that you can't make sense of it all,  
 and because it is as if they've divided your soul  
 and left you the smallest part,  
 you try to speak and say nothing  
 you try to think and only see  
 you try to sing and your tune drips bitterness.

Fourth poem in the sequence *Introductory Note*.

In the very first poem of the collection, Tsaloumas is emphatic in his use of the possessive pronoun to reinforce the totality of ownership of this landscape that is to progressively unfold before us: “All these are *mine*”. The good and the bad, the hideous and the beautiful, the unspeakable and the joyous — all these disparate, often antithetical, facets are encompassed within the physical and metaphorical boundaries of this place, this *topos*, the exclusivity of which is generated through the poet's particular memory frame. This very powerful assertion is then followed by an image of extraordinary depth, the effect of which is to cast a mood of underlying universality over all the poems:

all these are mine and their silence,  
 even deeper than the roots of time,  
 nestles in the hollows of the heart.

The following quotation from Jung's writings on psychology and art is effectively crystallised in the three lines quoted above: “the work of art has its source not in the personal unconscious of the poet, but in the sphere of unconscious mythology whose primordial images are the common heritage of mankind” (Jung, 1976: 318–21).

It is all too easy when reading *The House with the Eucalypts* to dwell on the first section with its twenty beautiful and profound poems, and to effectively ignore the second part, *The Peculiar Songs of Master Yiannis the Rake*. These poems appear to constitute a conglomeration of nonsensical lyrics that contrast incongruously with the pervading mood and depth of the first part of the collection. However, given that Tsaloumas is a writer who takes his writing very seriously and has always steadfastly refused to adorn the page with assorted embellishments for their own sake, I concluded that these poems must somehow complement the other poems and, furthermore, must add their own particular stamp to the overall atmosphere generated throughout.

If the first half of this collection reflected *topos* within physical and psychological parameters, then the second part seemed to exemplify the notion of *topos* within the aforementioned literary context. That is, these poems abound with the constant repetition of all manner of folksong techniques, particularly Greek

folksong techniques, which would be familiar to Tsaloumas from his childhood. Most of the poems have as their title the first line, or some other line, of the poem itself. While this might not be a folksong motif as such, it is most certainly a tool of folklorists who have used it so extensively as a means of naming songs that it has now become an established motif. We have the technique of the rhetorical question followed by negation thereby heightening the dramatic atmosphere; compound words abound throughout, as does the use of tautology. Birds are used as symbols for migration and the threefold effect (of the good, better, best variety) often attains an evocative crescendo. Dialogue is repeatedly used for dramatic effect, as is the plethora of religious evocations to all manner of saints and the Mother Mary (Ioanou, 1966).

However, what I found to be the most powerful topos pertaining to these poems is not so much that of Greek folksong technique, obvious and constant as this is, but that pertaining to the realm of the theatre. To be more specific, the accumulative voice of these songs reminds me very much of the lyrical utterances of the Fool in Renaissance literature, particularly that of the Fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Master Yiannis' songs, like those of King Lear's Fool, serve two purposes: firstly, they provide relief, in the form of lyricism and humour, from the essential tragedy of the events unfolding before us; secondly, they provide incisive commentary upon the main drama, thereby shedding light on an oppressive atmosphere of darkness. By encasing this commentary within the framework of folksong, a literary form steeped in the oral tradition of a people and certainly pre-dating that of the written word, Tsaloumas has deftly given us a glimpse, once again, of the workings of the collective psyche, the collective unconscious. The following poem "I took the path to the mountain" constitutes a fitting reflection of the above notions:

I took the path to the mountain  
to see how the rock stands  
and I saw at its roots the mind  
struggling in loneliness.

I took the path to the woods  
to see the wolf at dinner  
and I saw in the darkness the mind  
grow nails and spill blood.

I took the path to the sea  
to see where the waves break  
and I saw at the edge of the mind  
sin throbbing.

I took the road to the wilderness  
to cure my bitterness  
and I saw in the shadow of the fire  
my friends promenading.

An intricate analysis of the translation into English of each of these poems, albeit a fascinating prospect, would clearly be outside the scope of this paper. The sheer volume of information entailed in such an enterprise would constitute a book in itself. As a means of illustrating the numerous linguistic and cultural meanderings the enterprise entails I have decided to focus on one particular aspect of this translation that was particularly difficult; a concept that proved challenging, infuriatingly resistant to transference from one language to the other. There were numerous examples to choose from but the one that shone by virtue of near impossibility of transference in all its subtleties was that of the series of Greek words used to denote the wind.

Winds and breezes are an integral, ever-present part of island life; indeed, they are a central feature of Tsaloumas' topos. Very windy days mean no fishing; the primary basis of an islander's livelihood. A storm at sea can render a whole village beside itself, frantic as to the fate of the loved ones on board the vessel awaited on shore. On a metaphysical level, the wind is an intangible link with forces beyond the island itself: a link with other lands, whether or not they may be seen from the island. A strong wind heightens the senses as a myriad of aromas waft through the air. The wind, then, is a central feature of island life. It can mean the difference between joy and tragedy, abundance and starvation, sickness and health, communication and the despair of enforced isolation. From the very first indirect reference to the forces of wind ("it's as if the wave swelled up within you") it is clear that this natural phenomenon is going to be inextricably entwined with the process of memory; it is, moreover, obvious that the difficulties in translating will stem not only from the specificities of the word itself but also from the complexity of metaphor within which it is ensconced.

In the second poem of the *Introductory Note* the word άνεμο is used in such a way as to denote the seeming diachronic nature of winds, their ephemeral nature and agility of movement serving to enhance linkage between geographical entities and disparate epochs. As a suitable translation I chose the English word "wind" although given the atmosphere engendered, "air" would have been an equally legitimate contender:

But you get angry now that your landscapes  
come and beg incomprehensibly  
with the bitter persistence of the beggar  
claiming movements dispersed in the wind  
that still weigh down the beaks of birds.

The fourth poem in this sequence contains the word "άνερα" twice, in two consecutive lines. What is fascinating here is that "wind" is used to denote two contrasting states: one pertaining to life in the past when the wind was actively sought and, then, in the present when it serves to disorientate the speaker in his moment of private solitude. Once again, the wind seems to serve as an incisive portent to the

vicissitudes of memory. The fifth poem in the *Introductory Note* serves as a classic example of the “wind” and the endless referentialities and problematics associated with translating it within the context of this collection of poetry. Precision and meticulousness of craft are beautifully encapsulated here. The order and symmetry of the spectacular botanical gardens that are so striking a feature of the Melbourne landscape are completely shattered by the onslaught of winds. There can be no more obvious a contrast between the present and the past than in Tsaloumas’ choice of words to denote these forces of nature. Σοροκάδες, that wonderfully potent word whose hard consonants contrast so effectively with the slumber-like intonation of the previous words, contains power through terseness — an effect that is simply not encapsulated in the translation “fierce south-east winds”. This particular island wind is further complemented by the use later on of “ανεμολλιάρα ανεμοζάλη”, the alliteration and assonance again not echoed by the somewhat oblique, pallid by comparison, “wild-haired storm”.

The last poem of the *Introductory Note* once again has that play between “αέρα” and “άνεμο” which seems to have assumed an air of demotic tautology given its constant recurrence. This time I decided to translate both words with “wind” even though the second word usually means “air”. “Woman’s voice in the air” somehow doesn’t have that sense of transference of sound along a torrent of currents that the forcefulness of wind has inherent within it. I do, incidentally, also consider “a woman’s voice crying out in the wind” to be one of the most haunting images in all of Tsaloumas’ poetical output.

This continual preoccupation with the forces of winds is, once again, exemplified in the very next poem, entitled “Elegy”. However, there is a stark antithesis in feeling here. Whereas in the poems comprising the *Introductory Note* the wind was delegated to the realm of natural forces the transience of which permeates time and place, here it assumes treacherousness of mode:

Because they knife-nailed the  
wind to your door.

Here the wind is encased within the evil intent of some sort of enemy, and inflicted upon the speaker as an unwanted commodity causing fear and insecurity. Perhaps because the intent was so obvious, the word “wind” here I perceive as being the most straightforward to translate in all the collection.

The reference to winds in the sequence of poems entitled *The House with the Eucalypts* serves to greatly enhance the complexity of mood discussed thus far. In the second poem in this sequence, the wind is encased in an atmosphere of hate and battle. There is froth and mayhem on the shore and the stance of the speaker reflects the palpability of geographical space and transplantation of such through memory: the palpable and intangible entwined through the transference of form and matter that winds entail. This particular and peculiar image (this conjoining of the topos with Tsaloumas’ psyche) has been so often repeated throughout

this collection that it could actually be deemed a motif, a topos, in the Tsaloumas oeuvre. This motif certainly pervades the fourth poem in this sequence, a poem that contains some memorable challenges for the translator! Although the word *μελτέμια* was conspicuously absent from most Greek-English dictionaries at my disposal, I was not completely unfamiliar with it as I had heard it at numerous family gatherings and knew that it was some sort of wind. When I consulted the *Oxford Greek-English Learner's Dictionary* the following vague offering came up “etesian yearly wind”. As far as any sort of translating possibilities were concerned that might render the word accessible to non-Greek speakers, the immediate future looked decidedly bleak. I then decided to refer to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. I looked up the word “etesian” and things started to fall into place. “Etesian winds (blowing annually in the Mediterranean from North West for about 40 days in summer)”. So, I decided to translate *μελτέμια* with “north-west winds”. However, this shed no light on the nature of the wind. I may as well have left the translation as “wind”; both references were equally vague, with the latter at least having the grace of poetic laconism. I then decided on “hot-summer winds” as the only solution encompassing some sort of effective transference of meaning. But I then found that the rhythm was jarring. Finally, through intuition rather than cognitive reasoning, I decided to revert back to “north-west wind” in the singular — the *s* of the plural seeming superfluous. This poem is a particularly memorable one for me in that, despite the difficulties in translation, it strikingly fuses Australian and Greek landscapes through the haunting images of the eucalypts:

All day long the seagulls battled the north-west wind  
 as eucalypts rustled above and immortal sea-roar  
 pushed back the borders of the mind. Don't talk to me about other seas  
 you who have never learned the Siren's tongue.  
 Your suffering's been turned to crystal in my kilns  
 and I've studied secretly your dreams  
 in the shade of the poppy. Great is your glory,  
 Lord. Even though not a bridge remains  
 nor thread to guide one safely through  
 beyond the sunlight falls  
 These days my fountains have all dried up  
 but whenever I go to another well to drink

a snake stands upright in the trough  
 and looks at me and my eyes bleed  
 as your cry shines like the bronze of a churchbell.

And what of the second part of the collection, *The Peculiar Songs of Master Yiannis the Rake*? There seems to be an alliance forged here between oral and written literature. Although these songs were initially written, their inherent lyricism and use of many folksong elements place them within an oral tradition in terms of atmosphere generated. In any case, on a larger scale of perception, I fully concur with



Wellek and Warren's viewpoint that "there is a continuity between oral and written literature which has never been interrupted" (Wellek and Warren, 1980:47). When reading these songs, moreover, preparatory to translating them, I was reminded of a comment made by Susan Sontag, in her article "Against Interpretation": "In a culture whose already classical dilemma is the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability, interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art" (Sontag, 1965:6). Although a cynical comment, it seems to throw some sort of light when considering why Tsaloumas would place twenty-two beautiful, profound poems next to eighteen seemingly nonsensical ones. I have tried to analyse this only to come to the conclusion that there is a danger in over-analysing the thought process that preceded their inclusion. Like the utterance of the Fool in *King Lear*, there can be no question that these poems provide, through music and humour, incisive commentary on the profundity that has gone on before.

As far as translating *The Peculiar Songs of Master Yiannis the Rake* is concerned, there is also a peculiarity in terms of the number and type of references to winds. In the first half of the collection, there are twenty-two references to winds as opposed to nine references in this series of songs. Moreover, although the rhythm and rhyme renders these poems almost impossible to transfer into English, the actual translating of the winds is somewhat easier due to the more literal meanings entailed. Although the wind is depicted as having healing properties, the primary image engendered is that of degree of cold or forces entailed, as in the song "Denial", for example:

In the special beds they grew pale hemp  
and opium, with great  
order and method  
so that the mind could stand the onslaught  
of silence in the island of darkness.

Of what use am I to you now my son,  
when in your brain, wherever I look,  
I see useful things?  
You will find the winds blow cold,  
and bitter is the sea-roar's foam.

Finally, I consider it important to place these poems within a historical perspective. This collection was the first that Dimitris Tsaloumas wrote in Australia. They were written in Greek in the early seventies. These *Peculiar Songs of Master Yiannis the Rake* provide a link with the folkloric tradition that constitutes Tsaloumas' past. It is almost as if he willed a convergence of oral and written poetry into a memorable whole where vividness of metaphor and atmospheric depiction of island and exile reign supreme.

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