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Gurgents Korkmazel, Arthur Rimbaud's last day on the island, translation by Angeliki Dimouli, introduction by Lefteris Papaleontiou, Athens, editions Vakhikon, 2018

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The Curse of Looting

We looted their shops.
Destroyed their statues.
Speared their pigs and burned
them, with their childhood photographs.
We filled their ditches. Straightened with bulldozers
and built football pitches over their graves.
Inside their memories, we tore down adobe walls.
We cut their trees. Even killed their shadows.

We thought they would never come back.
They came. With our doors' key in their hands...

(Translated by Oya Akin)

The ways in which place and space determine identity, where together these places, spaces and identities are always in motion, is a theoretical issue that is of deep concern to both colonial/postcolonial studies and the literature of partition, partition studies. This new invention of place and space leads Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin to argue that: "place is language, something in constant flux, a discourse in process". This discourse allows for an understanding of place as what Carter calls 'spatial history', a palimpsest that is constantly in the process of reading, writing, experiencing and inventing. Away from the constitution of national identity and the operation of nationalisms, representations of place take on dimensions of invention; experiences, readings and, moreover, constructions of place and space, we might say, are an important key to understanding the literature of Cyprus. This literary production has determined the inevitable invention of the unifying 'identity'

that appears strongly in our contemporary Turkish Cypriot poetic production.

In these literary narratives, the identity approach of Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, Edward Said, Raymond Williams and Jacques Derrida, proves useful, according to whom "where there is no identity, there is identification". This is what Bahriye Kemal mentions: "Thus, through this plural name 'Literatures of Cyprus', I assert that the literatures of Cyprus or literary Cyprus is a transnational world literature (WReC), wherein all the texts are (post)colonial diasporic writings because they are about the cultural and political history of colonisation, partition and conflicting identifications as related to place, space and displacement; these writings operate through combined and uneven development connected to a system of inequality in relation to literary, cultural and language centres, semi-peripheries and peripheries that are outside, including, for

example, Cyprus, Greece, Turkey, Britain and other postcolonial territories".¹

As far as Turkish Cypriot writing is concerned, it is post-colonial and/or partition literature written by citizens of Turkey, citizens of the world, Cypriots, in Turkish or in English and French.

The points of identification with the Greek Cypriot script are eloquently highlighted in the mental fixation and construction of a group of people, which is linked to common narratives and symbols of origin, history or language under a single yet divided location.

The "Vakxikon" publications presented for the first time in Greece the poetry of the Turkish-speaking Cypriot poet, Gurgents Korkmazel. This is the second, as far as I know, important effort by the same publisher to bring the Greek reading public in contact with Turkish-speaking Cypriot poetry; I recall that the poetry of Mehmet Yassin was also presented in the same publications in 2015; it is a book entitled *Angels Avengers*, with an introduction, translation and notes by Z.D. Ainali.

The elegant volume, which is the subject of this article, is entitled *The last day of Arthur Rimbaud on the island* and is an anthology of poems by the well-known poet Gurgents; it is translated by Angeliki Dimouli and is accompanied by a detailed introduction by Lefteris Papaleontiou and an epimeter written by the translator herself. This eight-part publication anthologizes Gurgents' six poetry collections and presents for the first time unpublished poems. The book includes also an interview of the writer to Konstantina Sotiriou. The "Topos" publications in the past, but also the "Vakxikon" publications, familiarize us with the poetry of Turkish Cypriots, who capture in their rebellious writing a "Cypriot" sensibility.²

The emergence of a hybrid cultural identity in our contemporary Turkish Cypriot writing is a major issue, which increasingly attracts the interest of scholars of various disciplines. The study of Turkish Cypriot poetry is an occasion for deepening the concepts of cultural interaction, exchange, mixing, Cypriotism and 'Cypriot literature' and aims to trace the

¹ Bahriye Kemal, *Writing Cyprus. Postcolonial and Partitioned Literatures of Place and Space*, New York and London, Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures, 2020, p. 27. Daniele Nunziata, *Colonial and Postcolonial Cyprus. Transportal Literatures of Empire, Nationalism, and Sectarianism*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. Alev Adil Reid, *Drifting in the Dead Zone in Cyprus: the mediation of memory through expanded life writing*, thesis, University of the Arts London, 2013. Alev Adil, "Border Poetics: Becoming Cypriot in the Dead Zone", *European Journal of English Studies*, 2015, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2015.1091219>.

² Anna Katsiyanni, "The emergence of a hybrid cultural identity: the Turkish Cypriot script", online journal *Comparison/Comparaison* 24 (2014) 75-84. "L'émergence d'une identité culturelle hybride: l'écriture

turco-chypriote", INALCO, *Cahiers Balkaniques*, 42, Grèce-Roumanie. Héritages communs, regards croisés, 2013-2014, 329-346. "Without looking at the map: geographies of memory and the rhetoric of partition in Turkish Cypriot poetry", *Tribute to Cyprus. History, Literature, Art, Nea Estia* 1871 (December 2016) 781-786. "Identities on the move: homelands and languages in Balkan and Turkish Cypriot writing", *Passages, transitions, crossings: aspects of a literature on the move, Proceedings of the 1st International Scientific Meeting*, Memory of D.N. Maronitis, 1-4 March 2017, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki 2018, pp. 583-593. "Identities on the Go: Homelands and Languages in Balkan and Turkish-Cypriot Literature", *Hiperboreea*, no 1, vol. VI (2019) 29-44. Cf. *The raft of discourse. Studies on the mobility of literary works*, Athens, Gutenberg, 2022, pp. 269-306.

political strategy of defending cultural borders through art, and poetry in particular, which contributes to mutual understanding and reconciliation between the two largest communities in Cyprus. The poetic dialogue defines the qualitative formation and development of inter-community relations, the space of the "Other". Cultural dialogue, cultural osmosis, what contemporary critical theory calls cultural hybridism, is being cultivated more and more systematically between the two communities, as can be seen from the extremely interesting publications of Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot literature. The bilingual publication of two important anthologies was an event, we would say, of literary and historical-political importance: An anthology of Turkish Cypriot poetry, translated into Greek by the writer-translator of Russian literature George Moleskis and another anthology of Greek Cypriot poetry, translated into Turkish by the modern Turkish Cypriot poet Gurgents Korkmazel in 2010.

The project of George Moleskis and Gurgents, in 2010, and Angeliki Dimoulis, in 2017, is of historical importance, as the translators overcame many linguistic difficulties to render the Turkish Cypriot scriptures into Greek, sometimes with the mediation of English and sometimes with the help of writers and scholars. Scholars of Cypriot literature, such as Lefteris Papaleontiou, systematically bridge the communication gap by translating Turkish Cypriot writing into Greek (mainly through English), while writing studies and essays. In this case, the role of translation is particularly important, given that we live in the era of linguistic expansionism and homogenization. Because of their participation in the global

market, some Turkish Cypriot writers "consciously or unconsciously build translatability into their artistic forms". Contemporary Turkish Cypriot poetry is cultivated in a multi-cultural-multilingual environment and often uses the linguistic tool of the Other.

The attempt to identify and map Turkish Cypriot literary identity starts, therefore, from the detection of the linguistic codes used by poets. An important element in defining the specificity of Turkish Cypriot writing is its diasporic character; many Turkish Cypriots write directly in English or French, reconciling locality with cosmopolitanism.

Gurgents has written several poems directly in English, having lived at the "crossroads of cultures", in Cyprus, Turkey, but also in the uninviting cities of London and Manchester. His poetry manages to retain elements of national identity by merging the indigenous with the international element. Cypriot mythology and anthropogeography are a common cultural asset between the two communities; indeed, in recent decades there has been an increasing tendency to explore 'Cypriotism', Cypriot literary identity, in the poetry of Turkish Cypriots. 'Cyprocentrism', the trauma of memory and the ardent desire for peace provide the common ground for cultural osmosis.

The emergence of the Turkish Cypriot hybrid poetic identity in Gurgents' poetry is constituted by the 'appropriation' and 'adaptation' of elements of ancient myth, topographical memory, linguistic deposits of the Cypriot dialect and 'Cypriot idioms', but also by 'protest' against the partition of the island and the policy of the settlers. The incorporation of 'Cypriot idioms' in his poetry is an important feature of Gurgents' writing,

which broadens the linguistic and cultural horizon of Cypriot literature.

Although a Turkish-speaking, Gurgents identifies himself as a Cypriot poet; the poet opposes the policy of the Turkish settlers and turns to the pain of the Other, with whom he shares a sense of loss, even expressing a desire to be closer. The wish for peace, for social security, for the creation of a harmonious and united community is strongly reflected in his narratives; The island's palimpsest historical stratification, linguistic diversity, Cyprus' multilingual environment, settler politics and partition are all factors in the formation of a rebellious writing. Gurgents ironically discusses the erotic coexistence of foreign languages, the duality or rather the fluidity of identity. His poetry often deals with topographical memory, the ancient Greek myth is active with bold metaphoricality, while his subject matter is dominated by an emphasis on Cypriotism, with the aim, as I mentioned above, of achieving convergence with Greek Cypriots.

Gurgents declares that he is not a political poet, but he is, in fact composing poems of political ethics, full of cracks, which highlight the geographically and linguistically "homeless" poetic subject. This is a heretical writing, which deviates from the canon of contemporary Turkish literature. The interest in the traumatized birthplace, the use of mythical and historical symbols of the island, lost homelands, the perception of otherness, internal migration, shattered identity, and sexuality are just some of its themes. His language unfolds the grammar of grief, war, loss, undermining nationalism, religious and sexual orthodoxy.

Of particular interest, however, is

the similarity between the poetry of Gurgents and the French poet René Char, as both are activists; in their poetry there are distinct common places (militant poems, the drama of the missing persons, the myth of Rimbaud), but also a common way of processing emotion and recreating the real world through the rediscovery of an inner reality. Gurgents' moral, political and artistic constitution, the simplicity of his vision and expression owes much to the fruitful dialogue with the poetry of René Char, as he, moreover, mentions.

Apart from his political poems, his erotic and existential poems are of interest. Of the younger Turkish Cypriot poets, who seem to be heading towards a more individualistic poetry, towards a more transnational model of writing, moving away from the trauma of 1974, Gurgents emerges as the most heretical in his rhetorical expression, capturing a drastic irony in his poetry which houses many subversive and ideologized versions of ancient and literary myth.

In the poem, "No poetry... water", (*Devouring the Asphalt*, 2000), for example, the dominant myth of Aphrodite, which metonymically symbolizes Cyprus, is overturned.

The "mythologizing of locality", that is the literature of the hometown, the literature of locality, according to the most common term (*Heimatliteratur*), processes the "experience", the unavoidable nostalgia not only of space, of place, but mainly of (lost) time, of childhood, adolescence and youth, and aims to transform the deposits of memory into "literary" discourse. The obsession with birthplace, the poetics of localness can easily slip into localism, exuding the air of an acute nationalism, Lizie

Tsirimokou observes.³ Gurgents' writing, with its corrosive irony, avoids this danger, as it draws on literature's always inexhaustible source of history, elevating the local to the timeless and universal. As far as the construction of a topographical memory and the collective imaginary are concerned, images and words of Cyprus recur in his poetry: the domestic Cypriot lizard, the *kurkoutas*, the "Mediterranean", "Cyprus" and its synonym, the "olive tree".

The plundering of history, the violence of division, the trauma of partition permeates his poetry in various ways, which is increasingly becoming a fragmented mirror of the multiple transformations of memory, national-cultural consciousness and identity over time. Partition continues to be a key theme in the rhetoric of Cypriot poetry as long as the Cyprus issue remains unresolved and Nicosia remains the only European city within the walls. His poem "Your Wall" from the collection *The Samiamid* (2015) is emblematic.

The "delirious" passage of historical experience into language is what defines this writing, which captures the transitions, the fluidity, the enclosure, the aspects of emotion determined by geopolitical circumstances, international relations, the politics of mother countries.

In the poem "Arthur Rimbaud's last day on the island", which gives the title to the book of anthology poems by Gurgents, the narrator as a personification of the literary myth Rimbaud complains about the deadlock of writing and politics. Arthur

Rimbaud travelled twice and worked in Cyprus.⁴

The central image of the poem echoes the poetic subject's defiant desire to fly to urinate over the island, like Tristan Tzara over Paris. Strong tones of beat questioning, Allen Ginsberg's writing and the rebellious underground poetry or echoes of the myth of Rimbaud can be traced in Gurgents' poetry.

The study of his poetry, which is fertilized by the writing of Nazim Hikmet, Paul Celan and other important poets, proves to be important both for the history of Cypriot studies and for the reception of Turkish Cypriot poetry in Greece.

In summary, one can say that his experiential, emotive poetic discourse functions as a testimony or a mirror to the formation of hybrid and diasporic identities, while the notion of Cypriotism emerges as unstable, heterogeneous and multifaceted in these fictional narratives of a literature on the move.

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³ Lizi Tsirimokou, "The mythologizing of locality", *Internal speed*, Athens, Agra, p.p. 334-335.

⁴ For the reception of the myth of Rimbaud by Greek Cypriot poets, see Yiannis E. Ioannou,

"La reinvention de Rimbaud par la poésie chypriote", *Transtext(e)s Transcultures, Journal of Global Cultural Studies* 2 (2007) 178-184.