Towards a Language

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"Who can refuse to live one's own life?"

-- Anna Anthimou
to school, passing examinations, everyone struggling in the same way, my brother at the Athens Conservatorium, Father trying desperately to find a job. Mother too. Living in camps maintained by the International Refugees Organisation, all of us defined for the first time as ‘refugees’, a definition and a position that would remain with us.

Suddenly everything in our lives reduced to the most simple elements, unplaced in a country that belonged to other people, a lack of knowledge or intimacy with the landscape, a disconnection in ourselves with what we had been or experienced before, a cut.

The change had a profound effect on the family, on its structure, it broke the unity as we had known it in Romania, each one was thrown out of the group, made to rely much more on their own resources. The struggle underlined both one’s intrinsic vulnerability, as well as the family’s inability to offer much support, and re-arrange the world for us. Not that it had been able to do this in Romania, but there it had not been asked by circumstances to prove it. The change affected deeply the relationship between my parents.

I learned the language fairly quickly – we were in Greece for only three and a half years. I did not do much writing, and the few things I wrote were in Romanian, the language I still felt close to. In retrospect, even though by the time we reached Greece, I already knew Romanian, and some French, Greek surprised me enormously as a language, by its finesse, resonances which constantly brought into play a past intimately connected to philosophical, metaphysical issues. I remember reading a book on Plato that belonged to my brother, and finding suddenly that close relationship between the ideas expressed and their own natural language. It seemed to me then and now, that the landscape, the light, coloured constantly the language and one’s understanding of the ideas, that the essence was one of ease, that is even though a passionate, arguing, sometimes stubborn tone, intrinsically the approach of Greek was one that accepted itself in that position as a natural one, as if thinking, arguing, being passionately involved with life was a natural and accepted element.

What I also found interesting were the roots of the words, and the discovery of how interconnected a language is to a way of life, moral, social, and aesthetic assumptions. I remember the surprise in discovering that ‘areti’, the word in Greek for virtue, came from the ancient verb ‘ararisko’, which meant to adjust, while the Latin derivation came from ‘vir’, man. Obvious differences between the Greeks and the Romans.

Still, the family found it difficult to survive in Greece. At the time of our arrival, at the end of 1947, the country was full of the devastation of the war. Then the Civil War started. And as refugees seem to suffer generally from the same recurrent idea – how to escape – the family began applying again to emigrate. Emigration at any rate was in the air in Europe. Then followed long interviews to prove our suitability, commissions, medical check-ups, and suddenly we discovered that what they wanted from us, “a perfect medical record”, was outside our possibilities. Mother was found to have a small shadow on one lung.

This shadow caused enormous difficulties. A constant postponement, the necessity for Mother to go into hospital for prolonged check-ups and observation, until finally and miraculously (even though she had been cleared, Australia did not want to take us), New Zealand accepted for the first time a boatload of Southern European refugees, and we were on our way to New Zealand.

The most direct and dramatic impact of New Zealand was the climate, and the fact that the country was so green, so totally, so permanently green, at the beginning and after Greece, a very fanciful colour that meant good things.

So we started all over again, less equipped than in Greece, totally lost now because of our lack of language and understanding of New Zealand life and attitudes. Constantly undermined by the cattle-like approach, we were mustered in groups as a special category, unable to be part of anything in a normal way, made to feel that our faces, our gestures, belonged to this outside category with which the locals did not want to become involved.

We immediately set to learn the language. We had made a beginning in Greece, and in the camp at Pahiatua, we did a six month
course in English that equipped most people before they were sent to work or school.

But the difficulties continued afterwards, in this slow intimate process related to the total changes in our life. A changed everyday that automatically imposed a new framework on any analysis we might do, and for which we still did not have the analytical tools. The basic assumptions of a language come out of a way of life, a past history, cultural and moral norms. The language of our past was of little use here, and the one belonging to the country we did not possess.

At the beginning I was too stunned to do anything. Some sort of inner "dyslexia". I was running between Romanian, Greek and now English. Where could one find a basis for anything? How was one to view things? All these combined with long and great difficulties, including major illness in the family.

Still we went on learning, reading. Mother took up her newspapers and books in English, Father his music. I struggled at the University taking subjects that might help me pass – French, Greek.

At home we thought, we spoke, we analysed constantly, going back and forth, working all these happenings, trying to make sense of them, placing them in some form. Listening to life around us, trying to understand it, the people. We had been conditioned since Romania to understand life, a country by its art forms. We were desperate to find New Zealand writers, painters, composers, thinkers. How did they find things? What was their analysis, their image of the country? But these were difficult to find in New Zealand in the fifties. It was as if the country had no past, no voice, everything pointed to Britain. Yet, the landscape, the Maoris, the Maori wars, all implied a locality that was disconnected from Britain.

At the University and elsewhere, because I did my degree mostly on a part-time basis, while holding jobs, I looked avidly for interesting people, or oddities like us. Slowly I began to set down a few primitive impressions of life around me. The most positive gesture that I made towards a serious commitment to writing, was to buy in instalments a small, portable typewriter. This was December 1955.

Still for a long time I could not find a language, or a style that would release any of the things inside. In my last years at the university I began writing short stories and for the first time found the courage to submit them and was amazed that a few were published. Two in a university magazine, and one in Auckland. This was in 1959.

And as I finished the university, as unsolvable events in my life were mounting, I left for Australia.

AUSTRALIA... AUSTRALIA... we entered Sydney harbour a summer morning. The colours of the rock wall at The Gap were warm apricot, the sun was coming down on the waters, the whole landscape shimmering, overflowing with light, with heat, with movement.

I was suddenly released from the greenness, from the rain, the wind, released, at least for the moment, from my inner problems. My past in Romania, in Greece came back as a meaningful experience in a landscape that had similar resonances. Sydney seemed alive with people, activity and intellectual excitement.

When I arrived in December 1959, Australia, it seemed to me, was very interested in discovering itself. Books about Australia were everywhere. I felt that I too could take part in this. The landscape was already feeling familiar, allowing me to survive; the landscape was more at ease with itself, more generous in its attitude. Indifferent maybe, but on a large scale, the very scale allowed for more imaginative potential.

For the first time I began to write as an ongoing, everyday activity. I wrote in the Mitchell Library after work. Typed things out at weekends, surprised myself that I had finally found a voice, at the beginning terribly pleased with my own voice, with a feeling of levitation, of having escaped the constraints of gravity. The climate, the landscape, my own inner release coincided to give me a feeling of euphoria.

I began to submit a few things and some were accepted, and then to give credence to my optimism, a novella I had sent to the Adelaide Advertiser’s Competition won a special prize. Telegrams were coming from publishers, from friends, from the family who was still in New Zealand. Ian Mudie, working at the time with Jacaranda Press was very taken with the novella and tried for many years to have it published.
In spite of the youthfulness of the work, he wrote a very sensitive and warm report about it. P.R. Stephensen, Publisher’s Editor and Author’s Agent wrote offering his services.

For a brief period it was too good to be true. But slowly nothing happened. In spite of Ian Mudie’s efforts, the novella never found a publisher. Except for Australian Letters, Hemisphere and the ABC’s “A First Hearing”, all poems began to be rejected one by one, by all major and small magazines. I submitted them and they were returned. A good year meant two or three poems published.

The editorial comments, when they came, all hinted vaguely at the artificiality of my language, its exaggerated tone, an English with which they could not identify in linguistic or any other terms. An impression that the issues which preoccupied me, which seemed of importance were totally outside local preoccupations, both in approach and essence.

Almost my only support at that time and for many years, was my Mother, who read constantly what I was writing, with whom we had interminable discussions about the past, the present, our problems, literature, aesthetics... She had an unerring sense of style, but was very careful and not destructive in her criticism. I think that this was what sustained me for a long time, a respect for her ability to appraise literature, and the sense that she liked and respected what I wrote.

The turning point came with the seventies. Rodney Hall’s poetry editorship of The Australian, Edward Kynaston’s literary editorship of Nation Review, finally the Whitlam era, the renaissance of the small presses, the setting up of the Australia Council for the Arts, publishing subsidies, which allowed a generation of unpublishable (in commercial terms) writers to appear. A new spirit that gave evaluation to the mind, to intellectual activities, to the arts, to a re-appraisal, re-evaluation of Australia, of life here, connecting it to larger themes, to the outside world, to a spirit of curiosity. To the sudden impression that most things were possible in a matrix of life that had become more inclusive.

All this is a short-lived illusion, to be swamped by conservative forces again, but which imaginatively showed what things could be achieved and that the possibilities were there.

I am asked whether I consider myself a migrant writer or an Australian writer. I can only say that I am both, and that the positions are not mutually exclusive.

The paradoxes under which a writer like myself works are two-fold - on the one hand to express a difference in either tone, assumptions or approach, leads to constant rejections, and isolates one from a community of writers and readers, that place where people who are interested, labour all the time to redefine their cultural reality. On the other hand, the impossibility to absorb so rapidly, or take in wholesale the local colouring, because at the level at which a writer is working, one is dealing with forces that absorb very slowly, take years to change that transformation into an evaluation, a language, a style.

So while on the one hand, society resents the migrant’s intrusion into its (assumed) safe, familiar world, on the other hand it would like to, or confess to wanting to absorb the migrant totally, making him/her the same. Under what conditions would this total absorption take place? No one is certain, but what is constantly assumed is that such a transformation is simple, immediate and possible, and that it is the migrant’s fault if it does not take place.

Still there are signs, especially with the presence now of a new generation born here, which belongs automatically and naturally to two cultures, that of their parents and of Australia, that the cultural oversimplifications that have plagued us, are slowly moving away, that the time may come when the recognition of a different kind of past, would not be a threat, and when all our memories and pasts can play an important role in the development of a culture in Australia and towards an understanding of the landscape in which we live.

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