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Ludo
John
Melappan of figural for pu NAMAR
Cambridge
Modern Tendencies in Cypriot Poetry

1974 was a turning point not only for the history of Cyprus but ^{for} out here in general, including of course poetry. The year 1960 however should have been the turning point, the year in which Cyprus became independent from British occupation, the last of a series of occupations which one after the other have lasted the whole length of the island's history, in short, thousands of years.

In 1974 the young ^{Cypriot} democracy was newly immersed in the fascinating game of creativity ^{both} in the arts as well as in economy, a game which Cypriots had just discovered for themselves, a game which ^{some} other countries had already tried. In the midst of this creativity the lightning struck. The Turkish invasion, with all that followed after it, the bloodshed, the refugees, the missing, a knife wound which split this small island into two.

To the north the Cypriots who speak Turkish, to the south the Cypriots who speak Greek. A knife wound, not only for the land itself or the soul of the people, but ^{also} the emotions. Thus poetry, which this like a butterfly wherever emotion is strong

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found its chance to ~~multiply~~. From 1974 until today hundreds of books have been published in a growing wave of quality, creating the basis for Great Poetry which I feel to be ~~at~~ ^{not far from our} doorstep.

The first years after the invasion emotions were more powerful, more heavily with dense subject matter. Memories were only too recent, passions fresh. The black which women had dyed their clothing became a barbaric contrast to the intense blue of the sky and the gold of the land. There was no home that did not mourn a dead loved one, or a missing person. One third of the population had become refugees in their own homeland. Wandering rootless they sought a place to put down roots anew. On one side the landscape, indomitable and painfully beautiful, the burning sun, the colours of the sky, of the sea and the fields became pierced his vision, contrasts which accentuated ~~was more~~ ^{the} sensitive antennas of the poet.

How can the country which gave birth to love be in peace with death? Legends come a-speak to life, ghosts are awoken, out of the rains come forth shadows and memories.

If you notice dear friends I have not yet used the term Greeks and Turkish Cypriots when speaking of our poets. This is not accidental. For in 1974 the following strange thing took place. Whilst during all the previous years Greek and Turkish Cypriots had lived side by side on all of the island, they had never become aware of this common identity, this common Cypriot consciousness. After the 1974 war, after the bloodshed between the two communities caused by the Turkish invasion, the Turkish Cypriots were violently transferred to the north to settle in the areas where the Turkish army had taken over. The Greek Cypriots were crushed into the south, in hurriedly built houses or others abandoned by Turkish Cypriots.

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With the raising of the false wall came a ^{tragic} ~~heavy~~ realization, the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots began to feel nostalgia for the other half which they were now deprived of. They began to realize that the homeland cannot be only the section on which they were dolized to live but the whole island in its totality. How can the Turkish Cypriot, born in Limassol, cancel entirely from his memory the home of his birth, the neighborhoods of his childhood friends who spoke Greek and with whom he had shared daily bread whilst playing in the narrow streets? How can he be expected to substitute another town or village for that of his birthplace, another place which he sets eyes on for the first time, another home which bears no resemblance to his birthplace and which is crammed with the invisible presence of those who left in a great hurry without even closing the door behind them?

5.

And for the Greek Cypriots it is the same story. How could the inhabitants of Famagusta forget their birthplace? How forget, together with the city, their ancient roots? How could they bear to look at it only from a distance, a ghost town, devoid of human presence where only weeds clog the roads, growing wild amongst the snakes in the courtyards.

After 16 years the invaders still hold the town in their grasp, a pitiful pawn for the bargaining table.

A great wound^{had} suddenly united the two communities - the homeland is one and one only; Cyprus. Greek Cypriots speak Greek, Turkish Cypriots Turkish yet both have the same accent which is peculiar to the Cypriot dialect. This fact is admitted by both Greece and Turkey. Beyond being Greek or Turks the two communities feel

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themselves to be above all Cypriots.

This discovery is staggering. Neither the Greek Cypriots want to give up their land in the north nor the Turkish Cypriots theirs in the south. The division is false. Alien towards the wellbeing of Cyprus is this division. Emotions are yet again powerful, but this time no longer the emotion of hatred, of hostility and enmity, but this time that of bitterness, of pain, even of sympathy towards their old neighbors who also are suffering, also deprived of their homeland.

And in the meantime poetry is slowly working.

Poetry continued being written for some years without the one side knowing what the other was doing. The invaders and other factors saw to it that no contact took place between the two communities who ^{yet} were living so near to one another that one could

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at most hear the others' breathing.

Despite all these difficulties poetry at some point found its beat, discovered those subterranean passages so as to reach its goal. Then followed

the discovery which was even more staggering. For separated by the

barred wind Greek Lyriots and Turkish Lyriots were, in the vast majority, writing basically the same things. I will

give you just a few excerpts from Turkish Lyriots and Greek Lyriots poetry in order to reveal this common source of inspiration which was, of course, the wounded island.

① The parting brought a black shame for those who remained in the summer of 74.

② We who are but a spot on the map of the world, and you have put boundaries between us. This side the Greeks, over there the Turks.

8.

But, both you and I,
we have only half a heart
lets' join them -- full moon.

In the end only sorrow ~~had~~ itself
became tired
waiting the flower of identity to
our breasts .

The problem of a Cypriot identity occupied
both the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish
Cypriots and most interesting
dilemmas ~~that~~ ensued. From the
moment that Cyprus was divided
the powerful need to formalize an
identity was felt. Nationalistic voices
~~that~~ were heard from both sides
began slowly, slowly to die down. Their
echo was off-key. At the same time
the need to make poetry known from
one side to the other began to appear.
Up to 1974 we Greek Cypriots
knew very little about the poetic

cocreativity of the Turkish Cypriots. The same could be said for the Turkish Cypriots - Greek Cypriot poetry that had been written before 1974 was mainly in the heroic, epic style, speaking as it did about the struggle for freedom. The poetry of the Turkish Cypriots was of a nationalistic nature. As far as we know no important poet had appeared up to 1974 amongst the Turkish Cypriots. After 74 a great number of young poets, between 20 and 35 years of age began to appear with their works on the Cypriot literary scene.

Before the invasion the Greek Cypriots basically took the spiritual nutrition from Athens as did the Turkish Cypriots from Ankara. After the invasion a great curiosity came into being regarding what the other side was writing, what was being published.

Very carefully the first contacts took place abroad. With a slight and difficult correspondence we began to receive and to send the first poems. With a thousand difficulties we began to translate since neither of us spoke the language of the other - but we both had the English language in common. (The occupying English had kindly seen to that)

It was then that the emotion was enormous for basically we were making the same statements, they in Turkish, we in Greek.

The Turkish lyrical poetry had the freshness and the natural instinctiveness of a child's poetry as he discovers the world about him. The Greek lyrical poetry was somewhat more "grown up", more philosophical more mature, it had its the wake of great masters whose traces had not been completely lost under the marching feet of so many invaders.

One very well known Greek poetry critic spoke of the "miracle" of modern Greek poetry which was taking place in Cyprus. The same sentiments were expressed by a Turkish critic from Constantinople regarding the Turkish Cypriot poetry. Therefore the conclusion is that poetry had become a bridge between the two communities in a difficult and delicate time of our history. Now, 16 years after the invasion Nicosia remains the only city in the world that is divided down the middle by a false wall. If I stand on our side late in the evening when the cities sounds have died down and shout with force Nesie, my Turkish Cypriot poet friend she will hear me and reply calling me by name -

So, dear friends, as poets did
 its work, we move methodically and
 politics proceed - but more than either
 of these time itself

12 ^{was written} memories
which ever flows, dimming in its flux.

The young people who were born in 74 and who are today teenagers, have never seen the land on the other side, or its people who they are obliged to imagine as wild and ruthless. They have no common memories from ~~their~~ ^{the} homes they had to abandon nor do they remember the speech of their fellow compatriots. The Turkish Cypriot leadership in a short-sighted effort to keep control alters slowly, slowly the demographic situation in the north transferring settlers as workers from Turkey and giving them Cypriot citizenship.

The indigenous Turkish Cypriots, disillusioned, emigrate in their thousands abroad to find work and better life conditions. Recently we heard the dramatic cry of a Turkish Cypriot politician stating that by now

The settlers had become more in numbers than the Cypriots themselves.

The settlers, however, whatever might be their love for the island, do not feel to be Cypriots. The settlers are not intellectuals. They come from the most backward social strata of Arabia. They have many children ~~but~~ ^{and} do not in general, read poetry.

The dangers of ~~the~~ permanent division are now only too apparent. Together with it appears the danger of a culture of specialization, of easy money, of the confused values of our youth. Cyprus is both small and weak, it has survived the private attacks over the centuries but will it be able to survive the ruin's song?

The poets are troubled. They grasp at their roots in an effort to find ~~to find~~ their way. The legendary medieval Queen Regina, nameless, with a birth certificate,

is synonymous with Cyprus who is sometimes identified with Venus, sometimes with Saint Helen, often with Katherine Cornaro, with Ariadne or even with the Virgin Mary ^{myself} ~~beginning~~ to take life within poetry.

To the north of Nicosia, the mountain which raises an open palm to the sky and to this is named "firefingered" throws curses and blessings, so inaccessible yet so near. (So we believe that any other mountain has been sung so much in so short a historical time. The ghosts of Othello and Desdemona haunt abandoned Famagusta. Famagusta, deserted now for 16 years does not remind us any more of the carefree city basking by blue waters.

Now that Europe tends to become one ~~continent~~ homeland for one and all, can a small island be left to die in anguish? I call on the poets and the intellectuals to give a helping hand in this convention of European poets -
Thankyou.