

A. R. RANGAVIS
THE VOYAGE OF DIONYSUS

A. R. Rangavis (Rangabé) (1809-1892) is one of the most prolific authors of modern Greece; and it is certain that no-one reads his poetry entire. If he still has a reputation as a poet, it is certainly as a minor poet, a poet —on T. S. Eliot's definition— who does not have to be read whole¹. But I shall argue here that «Διονύσου Πλοῦς» (1864) is a minor masterpiece in a light vein².

To stick up for Rangavis nowadays undoubtedly requires swimming against the tide: everything seems to be against him. The poet, who boasted a somewhat disputable descent from Byzantine emperors, was a member of an anachronistic class, the Phanariots; he was the man who wanted to change the words of the Greek national anthem in an archaizing direction³; he completely failed to recognize the value of the poetry of Whitman⁴, while including in his history of modern Greek literature no fewer than 746 authors⁵; above all, he appeared to believe that ancient metrics and ancient sensibilities could be revived in the modern era, as he proclaimed in these dotty lines of 1840:

“Όταν άνέστ’ ἡ ἀρχαία Ἑλλάς, καὶ ὁμοῦ ἡ ἀρχαία
αἴσθησις, πρέπει μ’ αὐτὴν ν’ ἀνιστῆ κι ὁ ἀρχαῖος τῆς στίχος⁶.”

But even if he had his absurd side, Rangavis' 'Voyage of Dionysus' has been recognized by Palamas and by various modern anthologists as a success⁷. And perhaps it is not unworthy of our attention, not just for its intrinsic value but also

1. T. S. Eliot, 'What is Minor Poetry?', *On Poetry and Poets*, London 1957, p. 39-52.

2. A. R. Rangavis, *Ἄπαντα τὰ Φιλολογικά*, vol. 2, Athens 1874, p. 149-72.

3. See conveniently K. Palamas, *Διονύσιος Σολωμός*, ed. M. Chatzigiakoumis, Athens 1970, p. 35-7.

4. G. P. Savidis, *Πάνω νερά*, Athens 1973, p. 84.

5. A. R. Rangabé, *Précis d'une Histoire de la Littérature Neohellénique*, Berlin 1871; see F. Roidis, *Ἄπαντα*, ed. A. Angelou, Athens 1978, vol. 2, p. 314.

6. Quoted in Th. Orphanidis, *Τὰ Ἄπαντα*, Athens 1915, p. 153.

7. In Palamas' *Ἄπαντα* there are numerous brief references; see his vol. 17, the index edited by G. P. Savidis and G. Kechagioglou, Athens 1984. The poem has been anthologized by Apostolidis (complete) and Trypanis (in part).

so that we can begin to understand the formless void that the poetry of the nineteenth century between Solomos and Palamas is for the reader of today. Linos Politis puts it memorably, in a metaphor to which we shall return, when he speaks of Rangavis' archaizing stanzas, like the neoclassical houses of Athens, as having their share of pretention but for all that being not without a certain charm⁸.

I shall assume here a knowledge of the hundred five-line stanzas of the 'Voyage of Dionysus'; and for the background to the poem I refer the reader to the excellent note by Mario Vitti⁹. What I propose to do in this paper is to consider the 'Voyage' as an example of that kind of poetry which derives its energy from *metamorphosis*: in its relation of a tale of metamorphosis; its adaptation of its source materials into a new form; and its remoulding of standard form into something distinctive.

It has been argued by Charles Tomlinson that much poetry is helpfully to be seen as metamorphosis, and indeed may derive much of its energy from actually describing metamorphosis¹⁰. This is very much the case with the 'Voyage', whose opening stanzas do much to prepare the reader for what is to follow:

<p>Ἡ ἕκτασις τοῦ ἀχανοῦς Αἰγαίου ἐκοιμᾶτο, κ' ἔβλεπες δύο οὐρανοῦς — ὁ εἷς ἦν ἄνω κυανοῦς, γλαυκός ὁ ἄλλος κάτω.</p>	<p>Ἄλλ' ὅπου νότος εἰς γλαυκὰς ταινίας τὴν ἐφρίκνου, τί ἦτον; ὄρνις ἢ ὀλκάς, ἦτις ἐτάνυε λευκὰς τὰς πτέρυγας ὡς κύκνου;</p>
<p>Αἰ διαλείπουσαι πνοαὶ τοῦ ἕαρος ἐφύσων ἀμφίβολοι καὶ ἀραιαί· μακρὰν δ' ἐφαίνοντ' ὡς σκιαὶ αἰ κορυφαὶ τῶν νήσων.</p>	<p>Ἦτον ὀλκάς, οὐχὶ πτηνόν· ὡς δ' ἔφθασε πλησίον, μέλαν ἐφαίνετο βουνόν, καὶ τὸν ἰστόν του Τυρηγῶν ἐκόσμει ἐπισείων.</p>
<p>Ἡ δύσις, πύλη φλογερά, λαμπρὰς ἀντανακλάσεις ἠκόντιζεν εἰς τὰ νερά, ὡς ἂν ἐνέμοντο πυρὰ τὴν πλάκα τῆς θαλάσσης.</p>	<p>Μόλις ἐπήνθουν ἀργυροῖ ἀφροὶ περὶ τὴν τρόπιν, κ' ἐνόεις ὅτι προχωρεῖ, διότι ἔσχιζεν εὐρὺ τὸ ἔχνος του κατόπιν.</p>

This may look at first like a lavish and conventional piece of scene-setting, but it in

8. L. Politis, *Ἱστορία τῆς νεοελληνικῆς λογοτεχνίας*, Athens 1978, p. 174.

9. M. Vitti, *Σημείωμα στὸ 'Διονύσου Πλοῦς' τοῦ Ραγκαβῆ, Ἰδεολογικὴ λειτουργία τῆς ἐλληνικῆς ἠθογραφίας*, 2nd edn., Athens 1980, p. 143-52.

10. C. Tomlinson, *Poetry and Metamorphosis*, Cambridge 1983.

fact sets a scene of mystery in which not everything is what it seems. There is not one sky but apparently two; the winds blow 'uncertain'; the distant islands are like shadows; there are fiery reflections in the water as if the water were on fire. What is it approaching? Not a bird but a boat, which appears at first white (its sails seen from afar) and then black (as its bulk looms above the point of view). Its bow barely breaks the water, and you can only tell that it is in motion from the wake behind. This whole description, which one is tempted to call cinematic, describes not a still life but a scene constantly changing in unexpected ways.

The ground is thus prepared for the three metamorphoses which are the core of the poem: that of the ship's timbers into Bacchic vines and *thyrsi*; that of the pirates into fish; and finally that of Ariadne into a goddess and of her hair into a constellation. At the centre of the poem, architecturally and thematically, is the changing of the ship by the god into a Bacchic object; in this scene the poet uses his full battery of virtuoso effects (stanzas 60-1):

Αἴφνης ὠγκώθη, ὡς μεστός
 ἔαρινῆς ἰκμάδος,
 κ' ἑρράγη τρίζων ὁ ἰστός —
 κ' ἐξέφυ εὐρωστός βλαστός
 κομῶν ἀμπέλου κλάδος!

Στεφάνας πλέκουσα πολλάς,
 ἠρτήθ' εἰς τὰς κεραίας,
 κ' εἰς πυκνὸν θόλον ἢ φυλλάς
 ἐκάμπτετο — καὶ σταφυλάς
 ἐβλάστησε γενναία!

The process of the growth of grapes is followed from its first beginning: spring sap swelling, bursting into a shoot, then the leaves growing all over and finally the grapes making their appearance. The mast, perceived as inanimate, returns to the natural world that created it by way of an intricate and pointed syntax. The syntax of the next stanza too is complex: it begins with a feminine participle whose subject we do not identify until φυλλάς, the last word of the third line. The hyperbaton of κ' εἰς πυκνὸν θόλον ἢ φυλλάς / ἐκάμπτετο stresses the twining of the leaves; and the stanza with 'noble' grapes, noble because generous in size and divine in origin.

But the importance of metamorphosis in the 'Voyage', as I suggested earlier, extends far beyond the set pieces of metamorphosis. Throughout, the weather in which the events take place is subject to continual change; so too are material objects, in which one might expect greater stability; and so are the protagonists themselves. In the divinely initiated storm, for example, the ship takes on the

characteristics of an animate being, in the most elaborate of the poem's many similes (50):

Τὸ πνεῦμα τῶν τρικυμιῶν
τὸ πλοῖον ἀναπνέει,
καί, καθὼς ἔμφυχόν τι ὄν,
ὀρθοῦται, πίπτει πνευστιῶν,
γογγύζει καὶ παλαίει·

(Note the stress here on cognates of πνέω: πνεῦμα, ἀναπνέει, ἔμφυχον, πνευστιῶν). Even when an object is not actually seen as animated, its changing of roles may ingeniously be used to mark the action: take the case of the oar (κώπη). In stanza 8 the oar is described as rowing without any operator of the oar being specified; in stanza 33 we find that the oarsmen have left the oar behind as they embark on their attack on the young couple; in stanza 34 it becomes one of their weapons; by stanza 69, with the boat speeding along by divine power, the oar has left the scene. The pirates themselves undergo a sort of metamorphosis even before their literal one on shore: the arms that they stretch out towards the girl (44) are made inert by sea-sickness (52), and their cries of menace (32) are replaced by cries of fear (75). In all this the poem exhibits a dry humour which is not too common in Greek Romantic poetry; and it is humour above all which dominates the treatment of Dionysus and Ariadne. The former in the poem is fairly colourless, really just a *deus ex machina*, and the light is cast on his lover, the central subject of the poem, and an unexpected one. Undercutting all the divine miracles is a picture of Ariadne as all too human. At the height of her love (21-2) she starts to fret about her love's identity; while reclining on a bed of flowers after her rescue from the hands of the pirates she weeps for the ruthless miscreants in pity (81); even after the god frees them from their suffering, she is still not contented, provoking the poet to the sole gnomic utterance of the poem (8): "Ἀστατον χρῆμα ἢ γυνή / ὡς ὁ ἀήρ ὁ πνέων. This is a clear recollection of Virgil's observation, made without tongue in cheek: 'varium et mutabile semper / femina' (*Aeneid* 4.569-70); in the context of the 'Voyage', with all its changes of weather, it is highly pointed.

Things and persons in the 'Voyage of Dionysus' are undergoing continual metamorphosis; but the role of Ariadne in the story as told by Rangavis alerts us to a metamorphosis which the poem itself has undergone by virtue of a generic change from a hymn to a romance. (The poet subtitles it, neutrally, a Διήγημα, a tale). With respect to this, the author's note is illuminating:

This little poem is an imperfect translation of the small frieze on the monument of Lysicrates. To be sure, neither in the frieze nor in the Homeric Hymn to Dionysus nor in Philostratus (*Imagines* 1.19) is there a woman. But these ancient mythical stories are neither so fully known nor so certain with respect to their details that alteration is always impermissible. Naxos was the

island in which took place the love-affair of the God and Ariadne, and it was to Naxos that Dionysus was sailing when the Tyrrhenians seized him; the God met Ariadne on the island Dia (Philostratus, *Imagines* 1.15), which was not Naxos but another island near Crete. Nothing prevents us, accordingly, from supposing that it was while taking the girl from Dia to Naxos that he fell into the hands of the Tyrrhenians.

The ‘Voyage of Dionysus’ is tongue-in-cheek —Christopoulos was not the last Phanariot to draw on the ancient inheritance for far from serious purposes— and so is this accompanying note with its plausible pseudo-scholarship. (Rangavis was of course an archaeologist of note). Moreover, the content of the note completely overturns the initial claim that the poem is a ‘translation’ of the sculpture. Here, then, we have two degrees of metamorphosis: first a change of form from sculpture to poetry, and secondly a change of *genre* in poetry. The first is teasingly hinted at in the seemingly run-of-the-mill hyperbole in the description of the girl(15):

Ποία ἐντέλεια! Εἰκῶν
ἐφαίνετο μαρμάρου,
θαῦμα τῆς τέχνης γλυπτικόν -
ἀλλ’ ὡς αὐτῇ δὲν ἦν λευκόν
τὸ μάρμαρον τῆς Πάρου.

The girl was not like marble, among other things, because she was not on this frieze. And the ‘Voyage’ is not like a sculpture (*pace* Politis) because it can allude to the plastic arts in this teasing way.

The poem’s transformation of its sources extends further than this one example. In picking on the salient points we may show that the ‘Voyage’ is not just about a particular metamorphosis —whose classical status is shown by its presence in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*— but is itself a metamorphosis:

1. The scene depicted on the choregic monument of Lysicrates (334 B.C.) is of the pirates leaping from the shore, having been lashed by satyrs with *thyrsi* while Dionysus watches; in the Homeric Hymn (vii) the pirates leap from the ship. By combining sea and land in one account of the story, Rangavis has emphasized the process of change more strongly.

2. The maritime part of the ‘voyage’ combines the two pictures of Philostratus the attack on the pirates (1.19) and Ariadne (1.15). At a more general view, this effects the transformation of the poem from a hymn celebrating the god’s powers to a romantic *epyllion* telling a tale of love. The contrast of the two is made explicit by the concluding words of the poem, Τοιαύτ’ ἡ θεία ἀμοιβή / κ’ αἰ τῶν Θεῶν κολάσεις!

3. It is not the crown of Ariadne that becomes a constellation, as at Ovid *Metamorphoses* 8.176-82, but her hair, a more vivid case of transformation, as the κόμη becomes a πλόκαμος of stars.

All these elements, and others not mentioned, make the 'Voyage' not just the retelling of a given story but the creation of a new story out of traditional elements. The *doctrina* of Rangavis' light narration becomes apparent once we think about its sources; and the moral of the story as a whole, in this version, is not the customary one. Given that it is really Ariadne who motivates the miracles, the moral in the end is perhaps 'amor vincit omnia', a not un-Ovidian sentiment.

The ancient flavour of the 'Voyage' is of course partly accounted for by the presence of a very learned vocabulary: words such as λησταί, νεανίας, λαίλαψ we can find in the Homeric Hymn. And on the page the stanzas have an ancient look; though these too are an example of metamorphosis, for they have been made out of the everyday political verse. What we have—and it is a large part of the poem's charm—is an interaction between archaism and the familiar. The reader is not deterred by an extreme archaism, as we can see from the following famous stanzas (16-18):

Τῶν δροσερῶν της παρειῶν
 ὠμοιάζον τὰ κάλλη
 τὸ ρόδον τὸ ἐρυθριῶν
 ὅταν στοιβάζεται χιῶν
 κ' εἰς τὴν χιόνα θάλλη.

Ἐπὶ τοὺς ὠμούς της χυτῆ
 κατέρρεεν ἡ κόμη,
 ὡς ἡ σελήνη δ' ὄρατῆ
 εἰς χρυσᾶ νέφη, ἐν αὐτῇ
 ὑπέλαμπον οἱ ὠμοί.

Πλούσιαι πόρπαι πρὸς στολὴν
 διάλιθοι συνεῖχον
 τῆς κόρης τὴν ἀναβολὴν
 κ' εἰς τὴν χρυσῆν της κεφαλῆν
 τὸν πλοῦτον τῶν βοστρύχων.

Each stanza rhymes ABAAB, and amounts to two iambic fifteen-syllable couplets rhyming both at the end and at the caesura, with an extra half-line (eight syllables) sandwiched between the couplets. The effects achievable are comparable to those of Kalvos' stanzas¹¹. The special function of the third line in each stanza—which is important for the handling of an ancient theme, distancing the form as it does from the more or less journalistic *katharevousa* couplet—is that it retards the natural the couplet movement without abolishing it; it forms a key element of a style which

11. See classically G. Seferis, *Δοκιμές*, Athens 1974, vol. 1, p. 179-210.

aims at the avoidance of patness and the production of the unexpected. The great majority of the stanzas do not break into a structure of couplet / half-line / couplet but are woven together as a complete sentence which has to be followed through to the end of the stanza. Stanza 18 is a good example describing as it does the holding action of the brooches.

Another virtue of the form, one which is particularly appropriate for the conveying of the process of metamorphosis, as a look at any of the relevant stanzas will show, is that the stanza's possession of three monosyllabic and three disyllabic rhymes can produce a strong degree of assonance. Although it would be fair to say that the poet's powers of description are more out of the ordinary than his ability to handle the direct speech, the poem reads remarkably easily today, although we have got out of the habit of reading long poems. It is above all the chosen form that produces the quality of surprise in a lapidary style (with numerous hiatus) that is entirely appropriate to the subject-matter.

To expatiate further in this vein on a piece of light verse would be heavy-handed, especially since the neatness of the 'Voyage' has been acknowledged. But it is worth ending with some comments on what for most readers is seen as the insuperable barrier to the enjoyment of the poem, its archaizing linguistic idiom. That the poem's idiom would present difficulties to the uneducated reader is indisputable; but whether it presents real difficulties is perhaps open to question. A stanza of straight description like 37 includes no word that is not part of what is called *κοινή νεοελληνική*:

Φύλακες ἔστησαν τακτοὶ
 εἰς τὴν ὀπήν τοῦ σκάφους —
 κ' ἐκλείσθη ἡ καταπακτὴ,
 κ' ἦν εἰς τὰ σπλάχνα του φρικτὴ
 ἡ νύξ, ὡς εἶν' εἰς τάφους.

The problem with the 'Voyage' is one, not of intelligibility, but of expectations: the modern reader is apt to find that all poetry written in *katharevousa* (with the Seferis-endorsed exception of Kalvos) *ipso facto* unacceptable. Here, as elsewhere, the shadow of the Language Question is one that we could do well without. We should be prepared to consider poetry in this sort of idiom as an experiment not without merit, comparable perhaps to the use of classical metres in some English poetry. That the question of language is the symptom, not the cause, of the 'Voyage's' unacceptability can be shown by a comparison with an English contemporary of Rangavis and the way he is viewed by influential critics.

Let us take the most famous passage of Swinburne, the chorus from *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865), picking on the following three stanzas:

The full streams feed on flower of rushes,
 Ripe grasses trammel a travelling foot,
 The faint fresh flame of the young year flushes
 From leaf to flower and flower to fruit;
 And fruit and leaf are as gold and fire,
 And the oat is heard above the lyre,
 And the hoofèd heel of a satyr crushes
 The chestnut-husk at the chestnut-root,

 And Pan by noon and Bacchus by night,
 Fleeter of foot than the fleet-foot kid,
 Follows with dancing and fills with delight
 The Maenad and the Bassarid;
 And soft as lips that laugh and hide
 The laughing leaves of the tree divide,
 And screen from seeing and leave in sight
 The god pursuing, the maiden hid.

 The ivy falls with the Bacchanal's hair
 Over her eyebrows hiding her eyes;
 The wild vine slipping down leaves bare
 Her bright breast shortening into sighs;
 The wild vine slips with the weight of its leaves,
 But the berried ivy catches and cleaves
 To the limbs that glitter, the feet that scare
 The wolf that follows, the fawn that flies.

In subject-matter this passage has evident affinities with the 'Voyage of Dionysus'; but there are stylistic affinities too: a complex stanza-form that relishes the possibilities for emphatic enjambement; sustained alliteration and assonance; antithesis and repetition. And metamorphosis is prominent here too. But this sort of poetry, and this poem in particular, have come to be seen as representing a whole type of poetry that is undesirable. F. R. Leavis views the passage with considerable hostility, he speaks of its belonging 'to a specialized poetic order, cultivated apart from ordinary living'; goes on to make the accusation that 'The dependence on the tripping onrush of the measure, which rushes by all questions, and upon the general hypnotic effect (the alliteration playing an essential part in both) is plain'; and concludes that 'one word will bring in a train of others less because of meaning than because they begin with the same letter or chime with like sounds'¹². And

12. F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation*, Harmondsworth 1978, p. 223-4.

William Empson concedes, 'It would be true, perhaps, to say that he feels it more important to keep up his effect of texture than that, in any particular case, the meanings, the chord of association, should show through'¹³.

Now these are objections of the sort that people would make to the *katharevousa* of Rangavis if they paid it any attention at all; and it is important to recognize that *katharevousa* is not intrinsic to this sort of poetry. (It is important to notice, too, that two of the charges against Swinburne would have to be mitigated in the case of the 'Voyage'. In the first place, Rangavis' metre is, as we have seen, adapted from the staple measure of Greek poetry and is not an extravagant novelty. And secondly, the fact that Rangavis' tongue is firmly in his cheek makes his revival of Hellenic mythology and scenery much less open to criticism). That it was not *katharevousa* itself that was responsible for the bad poetry of nineteenth-century Greece but rather an attitude of mind which was not helped by the existence of *katharevousa* was recognized by two penetrating critics. Roidis wrote, in his classic essay 'On contemporary poetry in Greece' (1877):

Of Homer myth tells that he was blind; but in his verses descriptions there is apparent not a trace of blindness: while, on the other hand, if the verses being written today survive for mankind in the future, it will be justified in supposing from what appears in them that in the mid-nineteenth century there lived in Greece a whole generation of sightless rhapsodes¹⁴.

And Alexander Pallis came up with a sheaf of such examples in his book *Brousos* (1923), in which he showed how various poets, Homer not excepted, had misdescribed the real world¹⁵. The point was squarely and amusingly put by these two critics; but we have seen that in the 'Voyage' Rangavis was not attempting to describe the real world but doing something more slippery, the description of metamorphosis. The objection to the 'Voyage of Dionysus', if one wished to make objections to a light-hearted competition-piece, is not that its poet uses words from an archaizing vocabulary but that he lives in a world of words. Even this objection can be turned on its head in the face of undoubted technical mastery, as Eliot concluded about Swinburne:

the object has ceased to exist... the meaning is merely the hallucination of meaning, because language, uprooted, has adapted itself to an independent life of atmospheric nourishment... The bad poet dwells partly in a world of objects and partly in a world of words, and he can never get them to fit. Only a man of genius could dwell so exclusively and consistently among words as Swinburne¹⁶.

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13. W. Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Harmondsworth 1977, p. 193.

14. E. Roidis, *Ἄπαντα*, vol. 2, p. 298.

15. A. Pallis, *Μητροφύλαξ*, ed. E. Moschonas, Athens 1975, p. 28-31.

16. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*, p. 149.