



PROJECT MUSE®

Re-imagining "Image" in the Poetry of Miltos Sachtouris

Karen Emmerich

Journal of Modern Greek Studies, Volume 30, Number 1, May 2012, pp. 1-19
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mgs.2012.0002>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/475983>

Re-imagining “Image” in the Poetry of Miltos Sachtouris

Karen Emmerich

Abstract

Miltos Sachtouris (1919–2005) has traditionally been included in the “first postwar generation” of Greek poets, many of whom spent time in prison or internal exile for their activities on the left, and whose plainspoken verse is known for its straightforward discussions of war and politics. In order to incorporate Sachtouris’s oblique, surrealist poems into this larger group of writings, critics have often focused on those poems legible as historical allegories, presenting his poetry as steeped in essentially realistic images drawn from the everyday horrors of wartime Greece. Yet the grammatical indeterminacy of his language often renders those “images” ultimately unimaginable. Sachtouris’s work can still be seen to resonate with that of the postwar generation, however, if we look at the quite literal images of his poems on the page. Through a close examination of Sachtouris’s 1945 multi-part poem “The Forgotten Woman,” this article demonstrates how Sachtouris’s linguistic and visual syntax alike explore the political possibilities of the resistant and the opaque, offering a new model for political engagement in writing.

“He was always elsewhere,” writes poet and critic Pavlina Pampoudi in a 2005 special issue of the periodical *Anti* dedicated to the memory of Miltos Sachtouris (1919–2005).¹ “Half up above, half down below. An illegitimate orphan from a race of demons, abandoned on this planet with no instructions concerning everyday life, no qualifications, no knowledge of the spoken language, he survived by speaking in slang, wasting his money and his time, of whose value he had no understanding; he survived by mistake” (66). The occasion of a memorial issue no doubt encourages the lyric impulse, and the picture Pampoudi gives us of Sachtouris the misfit poet, living in the world but not of it, is borne out in almost every piece it contains. We learn of his lifelong unemployment; the sparseness of his tiny apartment in Kypseli; his childish naïveté regarding money (it was “without value for him, like candy wrappers in his hands” [Kalamaras 2005:29]); the financial troubles caused by the unfortunate combination

of this indifference to money and his infamous penchant for games of chance. This practical ineptness is part and parcel, we are told, of Sachtouris's incontrovertible identity as a poet whose double vision may compromise his ability to deal with the here-and-now, but also gives him a keener insight into a deeper sort of reality: for Sachtouris, surrealism was not a way of writing so much as a way of life, "the way he breathed, loved, suffered . . . [b]ecause surrealism means having to do with more than one reality" (Anghelaki-Rooke 2005:30).

Such descriptions turn Sachtouris into an almost stereotypical image of the poet, existing on two separate planes—voluntarily confined to an extraordinarily circumscribed world yet attuned to a reality that somehow surpasses our own everyday experience of things. And the double vision the poet can claim has everything to do, we are told, with his particular experience of the shared history of World War II and its aftermath: Sachtouris is a man marked by history, whose "poetic nightmare"—unfolding in a separate "poetic universe" (Kosmopoulos 2005:38), a "Sachtourian universe" (Polenakis 2005:58)—is, at heart, "nothing other than an excess of reality" (Antiohos 2005:25), the pathological persistence of an "everyday panic" (Varveris 2005:23) held over from those turbulent times. The world he inhabits is conflated with the world described in his work, and the circumscription of both is seen as a symptom of a wound that refuses to heal—one that stands in metonymically for the wounding of Greece itself, through occupation and civil war.

This collective reading or rendering of Sachtouris and his work owes much to Nora Anagnostaki, the first critic to write seriously about Sachtouris's poetry, in a 1960 essay published in the journal *Kritiki*. Perhaps reacting to earlier dismissals of his poetry as too opaque and fantastic, too cut off from the horrific reality of his age, Anagnostaki argued that Sachtouris's poetry had much in common with the explicitly political work of the "first post-war generation," which included figures such as Aris Alexandrou, Manolis Anagnostakis, and Titos Patrikios. But while they became outwardly involved in political struggles and often wrote in ways that addressed those struggles directly, his reaction was different: paralyzed by all he had seen, unable to take concrete political action, he turned inward, closed himself off, and began to write a poetry that reflected his own anguished relationship with the experiences of the recent past. Anagnostaki's interpretation of his withdrawal—even the suggestion that a withdrawal had taken place—infused the poet's actions with their own kind of political significance, incorporating him into the postwar generation as a kind of walking allegory for the suffering of his people and his land. As for the content of the poems, while they might seem surreal, they engage, Anagnostaki wrote, in a "realism

of essence" built on images culled from the everyday horror of wartime Greece (1995:37).

Anagnostaki's essay put in motion a certain mythologization of the poet that has become perhaps the most powerful frame readers have for their experience of his work, an interpretation of his oeuvre as a closed system, a "world" or "universe" composed of "nightmarish images" that are, in the end, only as nightmarish as the world itself. But while I hesitate to question the excruciating reality of some of Sachtouris's "images," or the political potential of such representations, I would suggest that this reading rests on a rather narrow construction of the ways in which the poetic and the political can intersect, and that the desire to see a referential totality in Sachtouris's work keeps us from considering what Marjorie Perloff might call the indeterminacy of his images, which actually resist rather than invite visualization. It keeps us, too, from interrogating the often bizarre linguistic and visual machinery of his work, the ways in which violence and disruption are not only described but also staged in his syntax, and made visible in the bodies of the poems themselves. In the pages that follow, I propose and perform a different reading his work, one that gives increased attention to the syntactical ambiguity and visual idiosyncrasies of the poems themselves. I argue that the grammatical and syntactical undecidability of Sachtouris's language renders many of his images unimaginable, and suggest we turn from an allegorization of content to a reading of form that recognizes the allegorical potential of the visual performance of the poem on the page. In making this move from content to form, I suggest that the politics of this poetry may reside precisely in its resistance to referentiality: Sachtouris's work opens up possibilities for new kinds of visual poetics, new engagements with language and the space of the page.

Images of history? Sachtouris's "nightmare world"

In *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, Marjorie Perloff traces a lineage of poetry in which language is, in the words of Tzvetan Todorov, "freed from its obligations to express and to represent" (Perloff 1999:10). While in the symbolist strand of European and American modernism, exemplified by figures such as T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens, the "relationship of the word to its referents, of signifier to signified, remains essentially intact," the anti-symbolist poetry of Arthur Rimbaud and his heirs works to undermine that relationship. In texts ranging from Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* to John Cage's *Silence*, the "evocations generated by words on the page are no longer grounded in a coherent discourse" (17–18). This lack of groundedness, which Perloff refers to

as “indeterminacy” or “undecidability,” results in writing marked by an “irreducible ambiguity,” texts crisscrossed by “labyrinths that have no exit” (33). For Perloff, moreover, there is an implicit political valence to the work of this “Other Tradition”: its “refusal to ‘mean’ in conventional ways” (34) forces readers to formulate new, more active ways of engaging with the texts in hand.

Perloff’s argument concerning these two strains of modernism doesn’t quite map onto the Greek case (whose literary genealogy is not infrequently overlooked by scholars of European literature); yet her discussion offers a framework for thinking about a similar split in postwar Greek poetry, between writing that seeks what is at least a rhetorical correspondence between word and world, and writing that challenges the very notion of such a correspondence. Yet while the politics of Perloff’s anti-symbolist strain must be extrapolated from the work itself, postwar poetry in Greece is commonly understood to be political from the start. Partly in reaction to what Evangelos Calotychos has described as the “withdrawn, surveying gaze” of the earlier “generation of the ’30s,”² including George Seferis, Odysseus Elytis, and Andreas Embirikos, the young, politicized poets of postwar Greece—many of whom actively participated in the Greek Resistance, and later in the civil war—sought to “reinvest ‘real things’ with a potency beyond the distorting, falsifying control of language and ideology” (2003:204). That reinvestment was to be achieved, or at least attempted, perhaps ironically, through the medium of language: the postwar generation, while “suspicious of a language that seeks to tell the truth . . . still wants to tell the truth” (214). And it seeks to do so in a poetry exceptionally attuned to objects and bodies, which strives—again, at least in its rhetoric—to collapse the distance between words and things, between poetry and action: “Words must be hammered like *nails*,” writes Manolis Anagnostakis, “so the wind won’t take them away” (Anagnostakis 1995:159).

The inclusion of Sachtouris in this generation, though by now conventional, is by no means self-evident. Older by several years than many in the group, as close in age to the younger members of the generation of the ’30s, he was first championed by Elytis and published in the journal *Ta Nea Grammata*. By his own account profoundly uninterested in politics,³ Sachtouris developed an opaque style that differs greatly from the plainspoken, often bitterly ironic poetry of the postwar poets, who made frequent use of the first person plural to create a sense of collective witness. To be sure, critical writings about this so-called generation often divide it into the subcategories of the “political,” the “existential,” and the “(neo)surrealist,”⁴ and include Sachtouris among the ranks of the last. Yet scholars also tend to present the latter two almost as sub-

sidary categories of the first, assuming a political bent to all of these poets’ work, a left-leaning, resistant urge that simply manifests itself in different ways. It is a matter not of *whether* they are political, but of *how* they are. Sachtouris—whose poems are populated by dog-skies, boat-phantoms, people who shoot up like rockets or sprout wings and fly, and never refer to Greece at all, to *our* land, *our* language, *our* anything—is thus incorporated into a group of poets known for their straightforward discussions of the political upheavals of their time primarily through readings that treat his poems as historical allegories. David Ricks, for instance, paraphrases and concurs with Michalis Meraklis’s view that “the images of violence and mutilation that abound in Sachtouris’s verse are coded images of a time it would be dangerous to describe overtly” (Ricks 1998:78). And critics often decode these images in remarkably specific ways. In his reading of “Δεν είναι ο Οιδίποδας” (He is not Oedipus), one of the few poems in Sachtouris’s oeuvre to mention mythical figures, D. N. Maronitis makes a series of metonymic jumps from the House of Atreus (signaled by a passing reference to Aegisthos) to the Greek civil war—still active in 1948, when the volume *Παραλογαίς* (Paralogues) was published—to the violence that shook Athens in December 1944. Maronitis reads the lines “Ένας μεγάλος ουρανός γεμάτος χελιδόνια” (A big sky full of swallows) and “νεράντζια σπάνε τα τζάμια στα παράθυρα” (bitter oranges break the panes of the windows) as coded references to these events: “the *swallows* most likely correspond to airplanes; the *bitter oranges* to bullets and missiles” (1992:87).

As I noted above, this particular way of politicizing Sachtouris’s writing dates back to Nora Anagnostaki’s 1960 essay “‘Difficult Times’ in the Poetry of Miltos Sachtouris,” the first text to offer an in-depth treatment of the poet’s work, and the first to suggest that these poems could be read as direct responses to or reworkings of what Maronitis later calls the “pre-poetic material” of the Greek civil war (Maronitis 1992:87). For Anagnostaki, Sachtouris’s poetry expresses a collective historical trauma—and she reconciles his paralogical images with lived reality by pointing to events themselves almost surreal in their violence and horror: his nightmarish imaginings are as realistic, she suggests, “as images of the distorted bodies at Hiroshima or Hitler’s concentration camps” (Anagnostaki 1995:37). Sachtouris’s literary surrealism can thus be understood as a kind of fundamental realism, a “realism of essence” rooted in circumstances of exceptional violence, and offering images no more horrific than the visual documents attesting to the devastation wrought by World War II. The key points in Anagnostaki’s take on this body of poetry have been elaborated by other critics ever since, and have coalesced into a dominant interpretive mode with regard to Sachtouris’s

work. “In the end,” writes Alexandros Argyriou in 1976, “Sachtouris’s world is recognizable. It is composed of fragments of the real world, a reflection of a reality that was born in and after the second world war” (1990:225). For others, Sachtouris’s poetry still draws on that reality, but presents it in coded allegory, as Maronitis and Ricks suggest, or refracts it through the lens of the poet’s own distorted subjectivity. “It’s not,” writes Nikiforos Vrettakos in a 1960 review of *Ο περίπατος* (The walk), “that the external world doesn’t exist; it does, but from moment to moment it takes the shape of various nightmarish imaginings, following the thread of some central, internal convulsion” (1998:45).

Whether it reflects or distorts, these writers all present Sachtouris’s work as one that maintains a fairly straightforward relationship between text and world, through the mediating force of the image. One of the primary goals of this essay is to contest that reading and to suggest that, like the post-Rimbaudian anti-symbolist writing Perloff champions, Sachtouris’s work actually undermines this assumed relationship of word to referent, and of poetic to real world: rife with grammatical and syntactical ambiguity, his poetry offers a network of fundamentally unimaginable images. While almost any volume would present rich material for my discussion, I will focus on the title poem from a volume published at the beginning of Sachtouris’s career, in 1945, at the tail end of the Axis occupation of Greece—a date that certainly invites the kind of historically freighted reading in which so many scholars have engaged. Indeed, even the title of this volume and poem, *Η λησμονημένη*, which I translate only with hesitation and qualification as *The Forgotten Woman*, does not in fact specify its subject as a woman, but simply uses a feminine passive past participle as a noun, opening up any number of possibilities for an allegorical assignment of a (grammatically feminine) subject to that empty place—a woman, a girl, the country of Greece, poetry itself. Yet as I will argue below, one of the central characteristics of this poem, as of Sachtouris’s work as a whole, is the resistance to this kind of straightforward allegorical reading. While Sachtouris’s style in this first volume is more florid, expansive, and linguistically ornate than the pared-down pieces in subsequent volumes, this early poem offers a host of fragmented images that fail to coalesce into imaginable scenes, and introduces several themes—mutilation, fragmentation, failures of contact and communication—to which the poet will return to time and again throughout his career, themes which challenge the kind of visualization many critics seek to impose on his work.

“The Forgotten Woman”

This longest of Sachtouris’s poems consists of six parts, each of which is presented, both in the first edition (1945:31–38) and in the later collected edition of Sachtouris’s work up through 1974 (1977:29–36), on its own page, headed by a roman numeral, with a separate title page preceding the poem as a whole. And if the title of the poem invites conjecture as to what its past participle might signify—is this in fact a forgotten *woman*? If so, who is she, why has she been forgotten, and by whom?—the first part of the poem makes it immediately clear how difficult it will be for us to answer any such questions:

Δεν είναι αυτό το αυλάκι αυλάκι αίματος
 δεν είναι αυτό το πλοίο πλοίο θύελλας
 δεν είναι αυτός ο τοίχος τοίχος ηδονής
 δεν είναι αυτό το ψίχουλο ψίχουλο γιορτής
 δεν είναι αυτός ο σκύλος σκύλος λουλουδιών
 δεν είναι αυτό το δέντρο δέντρο ηλεκτρικό
 δεν είναι αυτό το σπίτι σπίτι δισταγμού

Δεν είναι η λευκή γριά γριά ετοιμοθάνατη

Είναι μια κουταλιά γλυκό κρασί δύναμη χαράς
 για τη ζωή της λησμονημένης

(Sachtouris 1977:31)

(It is not this gutter a gutter of blood
 it is not this ship a ship for squalls
 it is not this wall a wall of bliss
 it is not this crumb a crumb from the feast
 it is not this dog a dog of flowers
 it is not this tree an electric tree
 it is not this house a house of hesitation

Nor this white old woman an old woman ready to die

A spoonful of sweet wine is strength of joy
 for the life of the forgotten woman)

The syntactical structure of the first seven lines is almost identical: negative third person present singular of the copular “to be” (δεν είναι); nominative of the definite pronoun; definite article; noun in the nominative, noun in the genitive.⁵ It is as if Sachtouris were rehearsing a grammar exercise in a language class, each time substituting a new pair of nouns and changing the gender of the article and pronoun accordingly. But if this is a grammar lesson, it is teaching us a perverse kind of grammar, the kind that may delight but is also bound to frustrate the translator:

when we arrive at the final stanza, we encounter another third person of “to be” that looks just like the ones above, but here could be either singular or plural. In the singular, that verb could equate the spoonful of wine with the “strength of joy,” as I have rendered it above, or could refer to the “white old woman” from the previous line (“She is a spoonful of sweet wine strength of joy / for the life of the forgotten woman”). As a plural, “είναι” could collapse all the nouns from the preceding lines—gutter, ship, wall, crumb, and so on, even the old woman—into a single shared identity, blending them together to form the final “spoonful of sweet wine” (“They are a spoonful of sweet wine strength of joy / for the life of the forgotten woman”).

The translation I offer above is thus only one of many possible interpretations, and is far more fixed in its grammatical rendering than the Greek. With regard to the noun pairs, too, an English translation can hardly avoid fixing things that the Greek leaves fluid. While Sachtouris simply piles nouns in the nominative and genitive without specifying the relationship between them, in bringing this text into English, whose far more numerous prepositions play a much more determinative role with regard to meaning, a translator will likely have to decide whether a “πλοίο θύελλας” is, for instance, a “ship *of* squalls” (a ship comprised of squalls) or a “ship *for* squalls” (a ship capable of negotiating squalls); likewise, my “crumb *from* the feast” suggests a far more specific relationship between the two nouns than does the “ψίχουλο γιορτής” of the Greek. Moreover, not only do many of the noun pairs make little sense—what exactly is a “wall of bliss” or a “house of hesitation”?—but even were we to have some idea, we still wouldn’t know what sort of wall and house they *are*; all we know is that it is *not* a wall of bliss, *not* a house of hesitation.

At the end of this ten-line passage, the reader is thus left with no real sense of the objects and beings supposedly pointed to by the deictic pronouns in each line. And if the opening section greets us with a string of negatives that keeps us from forming any concrete mental image of these objects, the sixth and last section achieves a similarly disorienting effect through nearly opposite means:

Η λησμονημένη είναι ο στρατιώτης που σταυρώθηκε
 η λησμονημένη είναι το ρολόγι που σταμάτησε
 η λησμονημένη είναι το κλωνάρι που άναψε
 η λησμονημένη είναι η βελόνα που έσπασε
 η λησμονημένη είναι ο επιτάφιος που άνθισε
 η λησμονημένη είναι το χέρι που σημάδεψε
 η λησμονημένη είναι η πλάτη που ανατρίχιασε
 η λησμονημένη είναι το φιλί που αρρώστησε
 η λησμονημένη είναι το μαχαίρι που ξεστόχησε

η λησμονημένη είναι η λάσπη που ξεράθηκε
 η λησμονημένη είναι ο πυρετός που έπεσε

(Sachtouris 1977:36)

(The forgotten woman is the crucified soldier
 the forgotten woman is the watch that stopped
 the forgotten woman is the branch that caught fire
 the forgotten woman is the needle that broke
 the forgotten woman is the bier that blossomed
 the forgotten woman is the hand that pointed
 the forgotten woman is the back that shuddered
 the forgotten woman is the kiss that got sick
 the forgotten woman is the knife that missed its mark
 the forgotten woman is the mud that dried
 the forgotten woman is the fever that fell)

As with the first section, we again have a stanza in which the syntactical structure of the lines is identical, though here the reader experiences little of the grammatical difficulty presented by the poem’s opening section: each line is its own complete, and fairly simple, sentence, offering another metaphorical definition of the *lisonimēni*, which I have again rendered as “forgotten woman.” Taken together, however, these lines leave the reader with a jumble of insoluble equations that tell us very little, in the end, about who the *lisonimēni* might be. First of all, despite the recurrent use of definite articles, twenty-two of which appear in these eleven lines, the reader is left with a lingering sense of abstraction: the only particularity about the needle is that it is broken. And secondly, if each line offers another definition of the *lisonimēni*, with the copular acting as an equal sign, those definitions can themselves be conflated, such that the “crucified soldier” is also, in some sense, “the watch that stopped”; the *lisonimēni* thus remains, as Vassilis Hatzivasileiou astutely acknowledges, no more than an “indefinite term,” a “linguistic sign” assigned a number of conflicting, or complementary, referents (1992:36). Meanwhile, the shape of the poem visually enacts a tension between the desire to define and the resistance to such definition. While the left half of this stanza appears as one solid block, thanks to the vertical grouping of the eleven occurrences of “η λησμονημένη είναι” (the forgotten woman is), this orderly structure begins to disintegrate mid-line, since the phrases to the right side of the copular are both semantically and visually distinct, falling into a kind of multiplicative chaos that refers time and again, moreover, to objects whose use-value has been undermined.

“The Forgotten Woman” presents what Perloff might call an “enigma text,” fraught with irresolvable ambiguities and fragmented scenes that never “[coalesce] into a symbolic network” (1999:50). We enter the poem

via a string of negative definitions and exit via another string of positive definitions that, in their multiplicity, confound a reader who might wish to settle on a single interpretation of what or who this *lismonimeni* is. And between are four more sections that not only steadily resist the reader's desire to rationalize either action or imagery, but also refer repeatedly to failures of vision, instances in which vision is compromised or blocked:

Η λησμονημένη απλώνει τ' άσπρο χέρι της
 παίρνει όμως ένα χρωματιστό γυαλί και τραγουδάει
 —Σε φωνάζω όχι μέσα από τ' όνειρο
 αλλά μέσα από τα συντρίμμια των πολύχρωμων αυτών γυαλιών
 μα συ όλο φεύγεις
 τώρα ναι με φοβίζει αληθινά το πρόσωπό σου
 όσο και να τα ταιριάζω τα σπασμένα αυτά γυαλιά
 δε μπορώ πια να σ' αντικρίσω ολάκερο
 κάποτε φτιάχνω μόνο το κεφάλι σου
 ανάμεσα σε χίλια άλλα άγρια κεφάλια
 που μ' αποξενώνουν
 άλλοτε μονάχα το αγαπημένο σώμα σου
 ανάμεσα σε χίλια άλλα κορμιά ακρωτηριασμένα
 άλλοτε πάλι μονάχα το ευλογημένο χέρι σου
 ανάμεσα σε χίλια άλλα χέρια τεντωμένα
 που παιδεύουν τα πόδια μου κάτω απ' τα φουστάνια μου
 μου δένουν τα μάτια με τα μαύρα μαντίλια τους
 με προστάζουν να περπατήσω να μη γυρίσω πίσω
 το κεφάλι μου
 να δω τα μάτια σου να θρυμματίζονται

(Sachtouris 1977:33)

(The forgotten woman stretches out her white hand
 picks up a shard of colored glass and sings
 —I call to you not through the dream but through
 these fragments of colored glass
 but you keep receding
 now yes your face truly frightens me
 however hard I try to fit these pieces together
 I can no longer see all of you at once
 sometimes I fix only your head
 among thousands of fierce heads
 that estrange me
 sometimes only your beloved body
 among thousands of mutilated bodies
 sometimes only your blessed hand
 among thousands of hands extended
 to worry my legs beneath my skirts
 or tie black kerchiefs over my eyes

τρομάζουν τις γυναίκες που νυχτώνονται στα πα-
 ράθυρα. Τώρα πλάϊ στα χείλια του έχουν φυτρώσει
 δυο φυλλαράκια πικρα. Καταπράσινα. Είναι άνθος
 ή άνθρωπος; Είναι άνθρωπος ή άγαλμα; Είναι
 άγαλμα ή απόκρυφος θάνατος. Αυτά τα λόγια
 θα τα ξεριζώσει μετά σαράντα χρόνια η λησμο-
 νημένη.

(Sachtouris 1977:35)

(These words will be uprooted forty years from now
 by the forgotten woman. And shall I say that mir-
 acles happen in this street? No. Miracles happen
 only in haunted churches. Shall I speak of the man
 who became a tree and of his mouth where flowers
 sprouted? I'm ashamed and yet I must speak even if
 they won't believe. The only one who might have
 believed was stoned to death by some naked boys
 before an altar. They wanted to hurt a dog wanted
 to sing a song wanted to kiss a woman. And so they
 killed him and cut him in two with a sword. From
 the waist up they stood him like a statue in a window.
 From the waist down they taught him to walk like
 babies first learning. He didn't look much like a
 statue because his eyes wouldn't turn white. And his
 feet do all kinds of crazy things and scare the women
 who pass their nights at the windows. Now two bit-
 ter leaves have sprouted by his lips. Bright green.
 Is he a flower or a man? Is he a man or a statue?
 He is a statue or profound death. These words
 will be uprooted forty years from now by the forgot-
 ten woman.)

This squat stanza of semi-prose—while not justified like Sachtouris's single prose poem, “Ο εφιάλτης” (The nightmare), the use of hyphenation makes the line breaks seem almost casual or random, as if dictated by the dimensions of the page—is one of very few pieces in Sachtouris's oeuvre to use standard punctuation and fairly conventional sentence structure, which mark it as a different kind of written text. It also both opens and closes with a sentence that identifies the material form of this text as significant: “These words will be uprooted forty years from now by the forgotten woman.” The verb “θα ξεριζώσει” (she will uproot; in order to approximate the word order of the Greek, my translation has turned this into a passive) leaves an ambiguity as to what the woman will do with these words, if she will simply dig them up, uncover them and read, or whether she will uproot them in the sense of destroying, tearing

out by the roots. And even if she does read them, it remains unclear just how much she will understand: just as the third section models a kind of indeterminate sight, this section of the poem is rife with problems of communication or interpretation, from the speaker’s (or writer’s) “need to speak” even though an unnamed “they” “won’t believe” to doubts concerning the identity of the dismembered man, the only one who might have understood: “Εἶναι ἄνθος / ἢ ἄνθρωπος; Εἶναι ἄνθρωπος ἢ ἀγάλμα; Εἶναι / ἀγάλμα ἢ ἀπόκρυφος θάνατος.” (Is he a flower or a man? Is he a man or a statue? He is a statue or profound death.) The syntax of these sentences in this last quoted passage is identical, the difference between question and statement marked only by the use of a question mark or period, respectively. In Greek it is thus even a possibility that the final statement, too, is implicitly intended as a question, if not marked as such.

So many of Sachtouris’s poems are, like “The Forgotten Woman,” plagued by fragmentation: while objects and bodies—human, animal, or something in between—appear in almost every poem, they are rarely described in their entirety; instead, we encounter hands, eyes, and mouths that are not incorporated into any larger entity. Moreover, in presenting identity as uncertain or mutable, “The Forgotten Woman” prefigures a preoccupation with metamorphoses and shifting identities that will remain a constant throughout Sachtouris’s career. His work is strewn with figures that inhabit two states at once, as if in the midst of a transformation that has halted partway: “πεταλούδες-σκύλοι” (butterfly-dogs), “λεύκες-φαντάσματα” (poplar-phantoms), “το φάντασμα-αυτοκίνητο” (the phantom-automobile), “ο σκύλος-ουρανός” (the dog-sky), “ο ἄνθρωπος-πετεινός” (the man-cock). “The Forgotten Woman” also presents an extreme example of a placelessness common to this body of work: Sachtouris often avoids situating his poems in any specific location, real or fantastic. His poems are set, at most, in anonymous streets, houses, and rooms; they are largely devoid of nature, apart from the occasional tree or river and the ever-present sky, the site of much of the action in his work. If the “unreal city” of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* actually corresponds to the “very real” city of “fog-bound London” (Perloff 1999:162), and if Seferis’s “Με τον τρόπο του Γ. Σ.” (In the manner of G. S.), with its famous opening line “Οπου και να ταξιδέψω η Ελλάδα με πηλώνει” (Wherever I travel Greece wounds me),⁶ is set specifically on the Aulis—the boat that in the summer of 1936 would set sail for Egypt, carrying many members of the Greek government into exile—the objects and events Sachtouris describes are, as Perloff writes of John Ashbery’s “Lacustrine Cities,” “impossible to locate in ‘real’ space”; the fragments he offers “belong to no discernible whole” (Perloff 1999:50). Or if there is any whole to be discerned, it is the accretive whole of Sachtouris’s

poetic oeuvre: rather than sending the reader out into the world, his poems—composed in a kind of shattered grammar and drawing on a remarkably “restricted” vocabulary (Papageorgiou 1998:123) of “everyday words” (Argyriou 1990:225) that recur incessantly throughout his work⁷—keep the reader circulating within the realm of language itself.

And Sachtouris’s language, too, exhibits the kinds of “labyrinths with no exits” Perloff associates with the post-Rimbaudian strain. Critics often describe Sachtouris’s poetry as linguistically straightforward. Dallas, one of the foremost scholars of Sachtouris’s work, claims that the poet’s syntax is comprised almost entirely of a “simple parataxis” offering “direct, unambiguously informative statements made with rudimentary linguistic sufficiency”; this syntactical simplicity “holds things together, giving an unruffled appearance to this poetry which expresses, at heart, a deep disturbance” (Dallas 1997:64). I would argue, however, that this façade quickly dissolves on closer examination: as even the few examples from “The Forgotten Woman” have shown, Sachtouris exploits ambiguities in the Greek language that enable multiple readings of phrases and thus multiple complementary or competing interpretations of poems at large. This is, moreover, a trend that becomes more pronounced in later volumes. In the 1948 poem “Δεν είναι ο Οιδίποδας” (He is Not Oedipus), Sachtouris “misuses” the impersonal, intransitive verb “νυχτώνει” (night falls) by giving it both subject and object: “τότε νυχτώνει η σιωπή τους δρόμους,” which might be translated as “then silence nights the streets.” The poem “Τα σύννεφα” (The Clouds) from the 1952 collection *Με το πρόσωπο στον τόιχο* (With face to the wall), meanwhile, ends with the line, “σας Χαιρετώ,” which could be translated either as “I greet you [plural],” or “I bid you [plural] farewell.” And in the poem “Οκτώβριος” (October) from the same volume, the lines “απ’ το παράθυρο βγήκε ένα χέρι / μες στον καθρέφτη φάνηκε εν’ άλλο χέρι / έδερναν τα μεσάνυχτα” (a hand came through the window / another appeared in the mirror / they struck (at) midnight) turn “midnight” into the object of violence—unless, that is, “midnight” is the striking subject of “έδερναν,” or simply the time at which the hands struck some other, unidentified object. Despite the apparent simplicity of Sachtouris’s language, his poems thus offer any number of challenges to his readers on the grammatical level—particularly ones accustomed to poetry that aims at a high degree of narrative intelligibility. And of course the syntactical and grammatical ambiguity that pervades Sachtouris’s work directly impacts the ability to imagine the scenes he presents: how can you visualize a scene if you don’t know whether the speaker is coming or going, whether the hands are striking midnight or midnight is striking the hands?

Sachtouris’s “world” is, in the end, one in which even subjects and

objects refuse to stay in their proper positions. In the environment he creates on the page, however, the positions of lines, words, spaces and gaps are of central importance. I have argued elsewhere that Sachtouris’s non-standard use of the space of the page involves an understanding of the poem as a site for the negotiation of the balance and breakage, the wholeness and fragmentation that are so central to the subject matter of his work.⁸ I will not rehearse these arguments at length here, but will simply suggest that turning directly to the verbal imagery in the poem, as most critics have done, keeps us from seeing the poem *itself* as an image, and from considering the ways in which its shape contributes meaning above and beyond the semantic sense of the words. Rather than simply treating Sachtouris’s oeuvre as a “world” of “images” that refer allegorically to the lived reality of recent Greek history, I suggest that we also consider how his poems themselves work as images on the page. My discussion of “The Forgotten Woman” above has already underlined a number of these elements: the way the quasi-prose nature of section five reinforces its status as a written document the forgotten woman will uproot; the way the repetition of phrases in sections one and six creates visual blocks of text, which then fall apart on the right side of the article or copula, respectively, thus performing the very breakdown they discuss; or the variably indented lines in section three, a much neglected aspect of Sachtouris’s work that critics tend to ignore when quoting from the poems, as do translators when rendering them in other languages. Shifting the focus from imagery to the literal image of the poem on the page can also, as I have argued above, go hand in hand with an understanding of the grammatical undecidability Sachtouris’s work frequently displays, a move which may allow for the recuperation of a political thrust to this work through different means than critics have traditionally offered.

In defense of difficulty

Near the end of her 1960 essay on Sachtouris, Anagnostaki explicitly addresses her fellow critics, exhorting them not to abandon the task of explaining supposedly “difficult poetry” to the masses. Yet this explaining is really a matter of explaining *away* that difficulty: readers must simply be made to see that “incomprehensible” poets are not in fact incomprehensible at all, but “speak as we all do”—and speak of the wounds “we” share (1995:51). In the past fifty years, that “we” has shifted (“we” are, first of all, no longer an exclusively Greek, or even Greek-speaking, readership), as have the circumstances that contextualize our reading of Sachtouris’s work. But at the particular historical moment when she was writing, Anagnostaki seems to have understood her job as a critic to keep

people from thinking that art had drifted away from them; her insistence that Sachtouris's poetry was ultimately something to which "we" could relate stemmed from a social impulse, a belief not only that the "difficult times" of the occupation and civil war had entered Sachtouris's poetry, but also that poetry can and should help us negotiate the aftermath of such experiences.

While I appreciate the desire to read Sachtouris's poetry as politically or socially charged, I cannot agree with Anagnostaki's urge to brush away the difficulty, the opacity, of his work. In the reading I am proposing here, the political force of this poetry rests not on its continual reminder that violence exists in the world—that heads can be severed, bullets fired—but precisely on its invitation to the reader to engage with language and visuality in unconventional ways, its resistance to the easy read. Jerome McGann has suggested that there is often an implicit social or political thrust behind "writing projects which fracture the surface regularities of the written text and which interrupt conventional reading processes" (1988:207). McGann—like a number of critics and poets who argue for what Charles Bernstein calls a "politics of poetic form"⁹—in fact locates the political impulse in precisely that fracturing, which pressures readers to find new, more active ways of engaging with texts that would otherwise remain illegible. Unlike the explicitly politically-engaged poets of his time, who attempted to bear witness in a language as transparent as possible, Sachtouris embraces and exploits elements of language that resist referentiality, while initiating new poetic uses of the page. Sachtouris's poems resist, rather than foster, the notion that words can offer "pictures" of reality; instead, they offer word-puzzles that become more confusing the longer we look.

Moving from an allegorization of content to an allegorization of form, from a discussion of Sachtouris's verbal imagery to a consideration of the literal images of the poems on the page, also allows us to retain an interest in the effects of violence and strife while avoiding the caricature of the poet as passive victim which so many readings of his work have encouraged—including those from which I quoted at the very beginning of this essay. Sachtouris's poems are full of fragmented objects and mutilated bodies. Yet rather than allowing this violence to overpower his poetic vision, Sachtouris treats the poem as a place where violence is both articulated and contained, cultivated and controlled. The poet is not a hapless victim, an open wound that refuses to heal; on the contrary, his poetry engages in an active negotiation of violence that gives structure both to and through the fragmentation of language itself. An increased attention to Sachtouris's formal decisions can thus begin to restore agency both to the poet and to the poems themselves—and, ultimately,

to the reader. Rather than presenting a series of images to be passively processed by the reader, Sachtouris’s work asks the reader to separate subjects from objects, to interpret barrages of metaphors, and to puzzle out the visual cues of the text’s shape on the page. Sachtouris’s linguistic and visual syntax alike keeps our eyes trained on the page, returning us time and again to the material aspect of poetic production. The politics of this move may lie, in the end, in readers’ hands, in the ways in which they read and interpret the visual, material objects these poems comprise.

UNIVERSITY OF CYPRUS, NICOSIA, CYPRUS

NOTES

¹Unless otherwise marked, all translations from the Greek are my own.

²For good discussions of the generational model, its rhetoric and its consequences, see Lambropoulos 1988, as well as Leontis 1990, particularly pages 21–22.

³See Sachtouris 2000:37, 84, 119 and 138.

⁴See Calotychos 2003:178, also the entry “Μεταπολεμική λογοτεχνία” (postwar literature) in the *Λεξικό Νεοελληνικής λογοτεχνίας* (*Dictionary of Modern Greek Literature*), which characterizes the writers of the postwar generation as follows: “The painful experiences of the Second World War and the critical problems that arose in the postwar period fed a new generation of poets and prose writers with existential wounds and an intense ideological and political outlook.” As for the language of the poets of the first postwar generation, it is “spare, almost equivalent to the everyday spoken language, aiming above all at communication” (1407).

⁵One of the seven differs slightly by substituting an adjective for the second noun: “electric tree.”

⁶I am quoting here from Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard’s translation (Seferis 1967:107).

⁷Georgios Papantonakis has compiled a list of every word that appears in Sachtouris’s work, catalogued where they appear and also listed them according to frequency of use. There are over a hundred words that appear twenty or more times, and twenty-five that appear over fifty times; the most frequent include “μέσα” (inside, 207), “χέρι” (hand, 109), “μαύρος” (black, 106), “μάτι” (eye, 97), “αίμα” (blood, 70), “κόκκινος” (red, 69), and “ουρανός” (sky, 68) (Papantonakis 1995:92–93).

⁸See my essay, “Sense Variously Drawn’: The Visual Poetics of Manolis Anagnostakis and Miltos Sachtouris,” forthcoming in a volume on Anagnostakis edited by Vangelis Calotychos (Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011).

⁹See his edited volume of that name (Bernstein 1990).

REFERENCES CITED

- Anagnostaki, Nora
1995 Νόρα Αναγνωστάκη, *Διαδρομή: δοκίμια κριτικής (1960–1995)*. Athens: Nefeli.
- Anagnostakis, Manolis
1995 Μανώλης Αναγνωστάκης, *Τα ποιήματα 1941–1991*. Athens: Stigmi.
- Anghelaki-Rooke, Katerina
2005 Κατερίνα Αγγελάκη-Ρουκ, “Ο Μίλτος Σαχτούρης, ο τρελός λαγός της ελληνικής ποίησης.” *Αντί* 858–859:30–31.
- Antiochos, Giannis
2005 Πάννης Αντίοχος, “Ο παραισθητικός Μίλτος Σαχτούρης.” *Αντί* 858–859:24–25.
- Argyriou, Alexandros
1990 Αλέξανδρος Αργυρίου, *Διαδοχικές αναγνώσεις ελλήνων υπερρεαλιστών*. Athens: Gnosi.
- Bernstein, Charles, editor
1990 *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*. New York: ROOF.
- Calotychos, Vangelis
2003 *Modern Greece: A Cultural Poetics*. Oxford, NY: Berg.
- Dallas, Giannis
1997 Πάννης Δάλλας, *Ο ποιητής Μίλτος Σαχτούρης*. Athens: Kedros.
- Hatzivasileiou, Vangelis
1992 Βαγγέλης Χατζηβασιλείου, *Μίλτος Σαχτούρης: η παράκαμψη του υπερρεαλισμού*. Athens: Estia.
- Kalamaras, Vasilis
2005 Βασίλης Κалаμαράς, “Το επάγγελμα του άνεργου ποιητή.” *Αντί* 858–859:29–30.
- Kosmopoulos, Dimitris
2005 Δημήτρης Κοσμόπουλος, “La voix du reve.” *Αντί* 858–859:38–39.
- Lambropoulos, Vassilis
1988 *Literature as National Institution: Studies in the Politics of Modern Greek Criticism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Leontis, Artemis
1990 “Modernist Criticism: Greek and American Defenses of the Autonomous Literary Text in the 1930s.” In *Modernism in Greece? Essays on the Critical and Literary Margins of a Movement*, edited by Mary N. Layoun, 21–57. New York: Pella.
- Maronitis, D. N.
1992 Μαρωνίτης, Δ. Ν., “Παραμορφώσεις του Οιδίποδα στη νεοελληνική ποίηση.” *Διαλέξεις*. Athens: Stigmi. 77–97.
- McCann, Jerome
1988 *Social Values and Poetic Acts: the Historical Judgment of Literary Work*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- “*Metapolemiki Logotehnia*” (Postwar Literature)
2007 *Λεξικό Νεοελληνικής λογοτεχνίας (Dictionary of Modern Greek Literature)*, 1407–1408. Athens: Pattakis.

- Pamproudi, Pavlina
 2005 Παυλίνα Παμπούδη, “Μνήμη Μίλτου Σαχτούρη.” *Αντί* 858–859:66.
- Papageorgiou, Kostas
 1998 Κώστας Παπαγεωργίου, “Με αφορμή τα *Ποιήματα (1945–1971)* του Μίλτου Σαχτούρη.” In *Για τον Σαχτούρη, κριτικά κείμενα*, edited by Dora Menti, 121–126. Lefkosia: Aigaion.
- Papantonakis, Georgios
 1995 Γεώργιος Παπαντωνάκης, *Πίνακας λέξεων των εκδομένων ποιημάτων του Μίλτου Σαχτούρη*. Athens: Odysseas.
- Perloff, Marjorie
 1999 *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Polenakis, Leandros
 2005 Λέανδρος Πολενάκης, “Επικαλούμαι τη μαρτυρία (Είναι πράγματι τοσο η ποίηση του Σαχτούρη;).” *Αντί* 858–859:58–59.
- Ricks, David
 1998 “The Bottom of the Well: Bloodshed, Ballads, and the Poetry of Milton Sachtouris.” *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 16 (1):73–90.
- Sachtouris, Miltos
 1945 Μίλτος Σαχτούρης, *Η λησμονημένη*. Athens: Ikaros.
 1997 *Ποιήματα (1945–1971)*. Athens: Kedros.
 2000 *Ποιός είναι ο τρελός λαγός; Συνομιλίες*. Athens: Kastaniotis.
- Seferis, George
 1967 *Collected Poems 1924–1955*. Translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Varveris, Giannis
 2005 Γιάννης Βαρβέρης, “Οφειλές μίας γενιάς.” *Αντί*. 858–859:23.
- Vrettakos, Nikiforos
 1998 Νικηφόρος Βρεττάκος, “Μίλτου Σαχτούρη: ‘Ο περίπατος.’” In *Για τον Σαχτούρη: Κριτικά κείμενα*, edited by Dora Menti, 43–47. Lefkosia: Aigaion.

