Antitésto
Against the Ρεύμα
Current

An Evening
Celebrating the Writing
of Kay Cicellis
THE PROGRAM IN HELLENIC STUDIES
DEPARTMENT OF CLASSICS
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

Against the Current
Αντίθετο Ρεύμα

An Evening
Celebrating the Writing
of Kay Cicellis

Monday, March 31st, 7:30-9:00 p.m.
Philosophy Hall, Graduate Lounge

Edmund Keeley (Princeton)
Karen Van Dyck (Columbia)
John Chioles (N.Y.U)
Ersi Sotiropoulou (Writer)

A reading of the short story "Translation"
by Jennifer Van Dyck

Letters and tributes from friends and admirers
including Nikos Fokas, Anne Germanakos, Kerin Hope,
Niki Kanagini, Ruth Padel, Stavros Petsopoulos

An exhibit of books and manuscripts in English and Greek
by Ioanna Theocharopoulou and Elena Tzelepis
TRANSLATION

Once upon a time there were two sisters who lived together in a village on a small island. They were both spinsters, probably ugly and certainly poor; either of these reasons, or a combination of both, may account for their spinsterhood. When the story begins -once upon a time (once, and once only?)- they are already elderly: Parasceve sixty-five, Jacobina sixty-two. The names: I've had to change them a little, disengage them from their local form, for they looked awkward in a purely phonetic transcription from the Greek: Paraskeuô, Yakoumnô. There was this problem of the stress on the last syllable, which can't be rendered in English (worse in French, where every word is stressed on the last syllable); all the tenderness and jocular familiarity heaped on that last, drawn-out syllable is completely lost. So I used the Gordian knot method, as most translators must do sooner or later, and cursorily lifted the two sisters out of their geography and plumped them in the free zone, the open spaces of once-upon-a-time and anywhere-in-the-world. There they now hang, gently swaying, the mystical effigies of Jacobina and Parasceve. (Second intervention: I'll make Jacobina the eldest. Their names sound better in that order.)

To bring them back to earth, back to the original story recorded in the old, ill-printed book that contains the island's chronicles: Jacobina and Parasceve were the daughters of a seaman, who had spent most of his life sailing the seven seas on cargo-boats. Their mother had died young; they could barely remember her. She is only mentioned in a brief passage in the chronicle, when at some point in the story Jacobina exclaims: "Woe to us, sister! We lost our mother in our tender age, and look at us now, ignorant of the ways of the
world and without a place in the sun!" (I won't even try to convey the juiciness of the local dialect used by the chronicler. On the contrary I'd rather widen the gap between the two idioms; translation in this case would degenerate into an incestuous mess.)

Thus Jacobina ascribed all their misfortunes to their mother's loss. Their father certainly wasn't much help. The chronicler calls him the sisters' 'lord and master'; he wielded absolute authority in lieu of the husbands who never came; and as such he was supremely indifferent to the two lowly creatures circulating in his shadowy household. On his shore-leaves, his face gravitated away from them, seawards, intent on the next voyage; or to put it more simply, he'd swing his jacket across his shoulder and stride out of the house, without a word, to join the men's world down by the waterfront. Not a word—not a single word? Surely there is some exaggeration, some simplification here. Did he never tell them of his voyages? Had he no tales of adventure for the two wide-eyed girls, did he impart nothing during the long winter evenings when he happened to grace the house with a longer presence?

From what follows, there couldn't have been much of that. Occasional hints, probably, casual references to the great ports he had visited: Genoa—Marseilles—Liverpool even, way up north! A sentence or two, fragments that remained unconnected, leaving the sisters more puzzled than ever. They huddled together in their ignorance (Jacobina invoking the lost mediator, the first translator: "O Mother, why did you leave us so soon?") and never dared ask him to explain, to fill in the blanks. At night in their narrow beds, they sometimes wondered aloud; and the more they heard and wondered, the more they relinquished all claims to the wide, dangerous world their father hinted at.
When the old seaman died, the confines of their universe narrowed even further. The rare outings of their girlhood were gradually given up; these had consisted, mainly, of the annual litany on Saint Nicholas' day at the monastery on the north coast of the island, followed by dancing, drinking and pig-roasting; and the religious procession in the first week of Lent, when the icon of the Holy Virgin was carried in pomp from the upper village to the main village down by the sea. These occasions receded in the sisters' memory till they joined their father's flotsam tales in a similar unreality: strange alarming adventures floating like icebergs out there in the inimical world. Looking back, they trembled at the thought of their youthful daring. Had they really ventured so far afield, miles away at the upper village, miles away at the monastery on the north coast? Among all those people! Among the noise, the music, the smoke from the roasting pigs! Had they actually been to these places? Such expeditions, such audacity!

Day by day, behind their thick, ivory-colored crochet curtains, the memories and the images dwindled, and even the map of the village in which they lived grew blurred in their minds. Two brief itineraries remained to break up the unchartered regions that surrounded them. Itinerary I: visits to the fishmonger down the street to buy a handful of sardine or mackerel, as a variant to their old women's diet of vegetables and milk. Itinerary II: visits to the Municipality to collect their father's pension.

They always followed the same route, unswervingly, looking neither right nor left, holding hands as in childhood; Jacobina and Parasceve, holding hands as if their lives depended on it; and scuttled back to the safety of their bolted door, where they ate their fish, counted their money, sighing with relief at having made it once again.
The chronicler mentions only one exception to the sisters’ routine during their endless middle age. "Only once in all those years," he says (I quote freely), "did they emerge from their seclusion. The Mayor decided to put up street-lamps in the main village. Suddenly one night, the streets and squares, the waterfront and jetty blazed with light." Bright yellow light, unlike daylight, more brilliant and at the same time deeper, lined with darkness, with dramatic shadows that singled out things and molded shapes the way the uniform light of sun could never do. The sisters were unable to resist the temptation; they put on their paisley head-scarves, clasped each other by the hand and went out to see the great sight.

It’s a wonder they didn’t get lost in the transformed village, the bright unfamiliar streets. The chronicler does not record their conversation during the Great Night Outing. Were they excited -dazzled-struck dumb? All we can do is imagine Jacobina and Parasceve, hand in hand, keeping close to the walls of the houses, clear of the mainstream of strollers that moved down the middle of the street. The shopwindows all lit up, displaying things that glittered as never before; the cafés, full of dark silhouettes against yellow backgrounds, the light making the humming voices louder; and above the lighted streets, the houses stooping slightly like faces over a fireplace, with a different, attentive stillness, while the windows on the upper floors, in contrasting darkness, appeared suddenly mysterious, concealing something. In all this strangeness, one no longer thought of looking up at the sky—but if one did, by chance, it would recede, float off, no longer a lid, a roof, but a void, with all the stars blotted out.

The peregrination, crammed with all these new sights, must have seemed endless to the two sisters. They were probably jostled and nudged and greeted loudly by their fellow-villagers who wished to share their excitement and pride
at the village's new acquisition. But there was no reply, only frightened glances from the two thin shadows that slid along the walls and hurried away from the light.

The chronicler mentions the immense weariness that overcame the sisters at the end of the Great Night Outing: "And Jacobina said to Parascève: 'These revels are all very well, sister, but my feet ache so much that I can barely take another step!' " And still holding hands they groped their way home and collapsed on the wooden sofa, on the stiff, crochet-covered cushions; and such was their exhaustion that they skipped their visit to the fishmonger that week.

And now the count-down begins; now comes the 'once' of 'once-upon-a-time'; action lunging forth, making a mark, a sudden breach through which the real world invades the small stuffy house and drags the sisters out into a glaring exposure far harsher than all the street-lamps of the Great Night Outing. Something happened. Two men had a quarrel in front of the sisters' house. They drew out knives. One of them was severely injured. The sole witnesses of the incident were Jacobina and Parascève. So the police said they must sail forthwith to the neighboring island of S. to appear in court for the trial.

The chronicler makes a marvelous job of the sisters' lamentations upon receiving the summons. Alas, most of it would be utterly lost in translation, once again; even the Gordian knot method won't do; it would amount to mutilation pure and simple. So I widen the gap as before; in fact, I cross over from direct to indirect speech, hoping dimly that a kind of silence will thus be formed in between, a silence in which some stray notes from the sisters' voices might be heard: Jacobina's voice, shrill, a few notes higher than her sister's,
leading the lament, Parasceve's holding a quavering bass, as they both cursed the moment the two men stopped in front of their house, placed the blame on Beelzebub, who surely had a hand in all this ('woe, woe to us!'), appealed to their fellow-villagers, to the world at large, reminded them of their orphaned state, their debility, their ignorance, swore on their mother's grave that from the moment the quarrel between the two men had started, they had hidden in the cupboard, more dead than alive; in fact, their souls had practically taken leave of their bodies ('woe, woe'), so that it stood to reason they would be no use as witnesses.

"We saw nothing!"
"We heard nothing!"
"We know nothing!"

Loudly and passionately they proclaimed their only truth: they knew nothing; all their lives they had known nothing. Without ears, without eyes in the life-proof house.

They went to the Mayor. They went to the Police. They begged and wept and took solemn oaths, affirming their negation, struggling for their non-life. It was all in vain. There was no way out of it: to court they must go.

Back in their house, just before their departure for the island of S., there reigned the bustling, almost festive atmosphere that precedes island funerals; the fruitful blend of ritual and practicality. "They knelt and crossed themselves repeatedly in front of the family icons," says the chronicler, "they made up a large bundle of wild fresh vegetables—" (a present for the kinswoman they would be staying with on the other island? a gift to ingratiate the lawyer? or simply a heroic resolve to stick to their habits, to their almost monastic diet, no matter
how far they travelled, to what alien and distant lands?) "they secured the shutters-" (obliterating the ivory-coloured crochet curtains) "locked the door and hid the key in a flowerpot-" (marjoram, sweet basil, lemon geranium).

Says the chronicler—but he's given me this awful itch to add and complement, and off I send the two sisters back into the house because they forgot to put some extra oil in the oil-lamps in front of the icons, enough oil to keep the flame burning during their absence—and had anybody bothered to tell them how long the voyage would last, or would it have meant nothing to them anyway, two days or three or seven: meaningless numbers lost in the immensity of the voyage. And what did they wear, apart from the paisley head-scarves wrapped tightly round their heads, the scarves of the Great Night Outing? Black of course, black from top to toe, black as for funerals and as for the Sunday visits they never paid, black because they never forgot they were orphans, their mother dead long ago, condemning them to a wretched life of ignorance, their father dead too, after having dangled before them the bright, bobbing danger-signals of a forbidden world.

In the early morning they proceeded to the waterfront—Jacobina and Parasceve, not hand in hand this time, but linked together by the bundle of vegetables that swung between them. The sea-air hit them in the face; the sea was choppy on this ominous morning, so they wrapped the ends of their scarves across their mouths, swathed and muffled themselves in the face of the rude green breeze. The captain of the caique was kind to them; he helped them aboard, steadied them on their tottering black-stockinged legs and led them to safety, down in the hold, out of the rude wind and the salt spray from the rising waves. He placed the sisters carefully on the wooden bench that ran along the sides of the hold, and told them to be patient and fear nothing.
Here there is a sort of break in the chronicler’s story. The captain placed the sisters on the bench firmly, the way you place a box on a shelf or a jug on a table, and they froze on the spot, didn’t move an inch, didn’t utter a word throughout their stay on the boat. Sheer terror froze them into immobility and silence. Up to this point, the chronicler had followed the two sisters closely—playfully, tenderly, if you wish, but at any rate with absolute fidelity, recording their words and gestures, recording their non-life as it failed to evolve within their unmarked days and nights. But at this point, he takes leave of them for a while, he abandons them totally to themselves. He shuts them away in the hold and obliterates them from our sight. He wants to bring us up into the real world for a while, above deck, where the captain is discussing the weather with the other seamen. And so I am brought irresistibly into the immediate present tense. There is a fresh north–westerly wind blowing, and it looks as if it will get worse out at sea. Some of the other seamen think it would be safer to wait an hour or two; others advise postponing the journey altogether. The captain is undecided; his passengers—mostly men, tradesmen with business on the neighbouring island—are waiting impatiently on deck; they want to be off. He finally decides to sail out as far as the breakwater and see how the wind behaves out there. So the boat describes three or four widening circles in the harbour, each circle more labored than the previous one, and the last circle reaching slightly beyond the mouth of the harbor, at which point the tall waves nearly bring the boat to a steeply rocking standstill. The passengers on the deck are drenched. The captain swears loudly and decides to turn back. Three hours have gone by; up there on the deck time is clearly marked. The boat heads inland, where the other seamen are still waiting and watching along the waterfront, preparing to put on their ‘we-told-you’ faces. They fling a few ironical comments at the caique across the water. Having succeeded in annoying the captain thoroughly, they now offer compensation by helping him to manoeuvre the boat to its mooring place.
The disgruntled passengers jump ashore. The last of them gone, the Captain prepares to go off for a stiff drink at the seamen’s café. Suddenly he remembers he has two more passengers in the hold. He goes down to fetch the old things, finds them as he left them, except that their faces are whiter, their eyes closed, their paisley scarves slightly askew. The captain forgets his bad temper and assumes a jovial fatherly manner: "Well, girls, how have we been getting on?"

"O Captain, have we arrived?" they ask in their old quavering voices.

The Captain was famous in the whole Archipelago for his practical jokes. Could he have resisted this perfect occasion offered to him on a platter? Of course not. And so the Switch was effected, on the spur of the moment, on the wings of chance, a wayward child of inspiration, light words carried by the wind, only to solidify instantly into drastic agents.

"We’ve arrived, yes, indeed, all safe and sound," said the Captain, helping them out of the hold, bundle and all.

"God bless you, Captain, health and wealth and good fortune to you to the end of your days!" And then they begged him to add one more favour to the great kindnesses he had showered upon them, and tell them where to go and what to do, for they were helpless and ignorant creatures, etc., etc. (the tenacity of that life-refrain, the adhesiveness of their chosen label).

The Captain reassured them. Nothing to worry about, he said, nothing to fear. They couldn’t possibly lose their way here; for this island was no different from their own island back home.

"You’ll see," he said, smiling broadly, "you won’t be able to tell the difference."
And so Jacobina and Parascève straightened their paisley scarves, re-connected themselves to the swinging bundle of vegetables, crossed themselves three times and staggered forth into the brave new world that opened up before them.

They walked in silence for a few yards, until the fresh sea-air blew away the dizziness, the terror of their recent ordeal, and the color crept back into their tissue-paper checks.

Parascève came to a sudden halt. She's got to speak - I've got to let her speak, I can resist no longer.

"Jacobina," she said.

"What is the matter, sister? Why do you grip my arm so hard?"

"O sister, do you see what I see? There's Saint Nicholas, our parish church, or am I mistaken? And right behind it, is that not our good Mayor's house?"

"You are not mistaken, sister. And why shouldn't it be the church of Saint Nicholas? And why shouldn't it be our good Mayor's house? Didn't you hear the Captain say that this island is no different from ours? So why shouldn't it have a church of Saint Nicholas and a Mayor's house? This is only as it should be!"

There began a splendid antiphonal discourse between the two sisters as they progressed in their new/old world, towards the discovery of what they had always known. Parascève asking the questions, timidly at first ("and the war memorial, sister? and the bench where the captains like to sit? and the Three Wells under the plane-trees?") and Jacobina answering with growing
confidence that it was only to be expected, people lived here, didn't they, so why should they be without their own war memorial, and where did Parasceve expect the captains to sit unless on a bench like the one back home?

And each fresh similarity strengthened Jacobina's faith in the marvellous simplicity, the perfect reflection that coupled the two islands, in a horizontal version of a landscape mirrored vertically into a lake, house to house, tree to tree, church to church. The correspondence was total, the world was one. And she soared upon escalating waves of ecstasy, waxed passionate, a true visionary, as she answered Parasceve: "Yes, yes, sister! And the fish-market! And Florence's lace-shop! And Captain Garlick's café! And the public lavatories by the jetty! And the paving-stones, the pot-holes, the broken doorstep at the Municipality that our Major never got round to fixing!"

A minute wedge of doubt, as Parasceve dared to ask: "Do they have the same Mayor then, sister?"

An infinitesimal pause - but Jacobina was too far gone for doubts. "A Mayor is a Mayor wherever he may be, sister!" she said forcefully, "and the same great matters weigh upon a Mayor's shoulders whether here, there, or anywhere, so that there is no time for broken doorsteps."

"But Captain Garlick, sister," said the incorrigible Parasceve, "pinch me if I'm dreaming, but isn't that him in person sitting outside his café, smoking his pipe?"

Jacobina grew impatient. "Can't you see, sister? If this place's got Captain Garlick's café, it's bound to have Captain Garlick as well! Use your brains, sister. It wouldn't be Captain Garlick's café unless Captain Garlick owned it!"
"Shouldn't we say good-day to him then?" Parasceve asked shyly.

Jacobina gripped her arm in alarm. "Sister, whatever will you think of next? You will do no such thing! Would you have these strangers think we are forward creatures, who have come here a-courting? At our age? Come to your senses! That is Captain Garlick, but it isn't our Captain Garlick! So look away now, and keep your eyes on the ground."

"He's not the same man, then?" asked Parasceve.

"He is the same, and not the same," replied Jacobina sublimely. And Parasceve gave up at last, surrendered to Jacobina, as was her custom. With a little sigh of relief, she said: "The Captain was right—how could we possibly get lost here, since everything is the same? Only I wonder..."

"What now?" said Jacobina sternly.

"I was just wondering, sister, if it is the same everywhere, on all the islands, all the places in the wide world; or is it just this island?"

Jacobina had reached the apex of her vision; from there she loftily surveyed the great central model that absorbed, but did not annul, all diversity. "It is the same everywhere, of course," she said firmly. "Don't you remember our father saying that come to think of it, there's not that much difference between our island and other lands? Didn't you hear him say that other places have nothing that our island hasn't got? "The whole world is like home to me', those were his very words. And he should know—a man who spent his lifetime travelling! Don't you trust our own father, sister?"
Paraseve nodded, bemused into a kind of peace. And they walked, marvelling and acquiescing, caught in the ever widening circle that encompassed the globe and turned it into one great prototypical equation. "And they crossed themselves with trembling hands," says the chronicler, "muttering praise unto the Highest who in His wisdom had fashioned such a perfect world."

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I've got to come up for air. The chronicler's text has got me in its grip. During the last few pages I've kept asphyxiatingly close to it: instead of writing away from it, I've simply been writing over it, in a differently colored ink. A process of osmosis has occurred; I am growing infected by the quaintness, the assumed voice of the chronicler. I gave up the rather desperate solution of indirect speech and succumbed to the temptation of direct speech (the whole dialogue between the two sisters as they wander through what they believe to be the village of S.). I can feel the pull of the other text growing stronger every minute; I am clearly trapped within its magnetic field.

The invincible power of the 'story'! I long to disrupt it, to break up the cement that encases it, make holes in it, so that I can burst in and out at will; break the whole thing up into pieces, then watch them coalesce and reform into something unknown.

So I've produced this break, with considerable effort. Only to discover with horror that it corresponds exactly to the break in the chronicler's story, just before the end. The sudden halt is useful, it serves the story well, because Jacobina and Paraseve have now reached the brink of their illusion and can go no further. The disclosure is imminent. Pause before you leap, hold your breath, stand still upon the needlepoint of suspense.
To hell with suspense. I resist it. There should be no suspense here, only a gentle disintegration. It is so obvious the illusion has to come to an end. A simple question should be enough to bring it about.

In their rapturous wanderings the sisters finally approached their own neighborhood. And they saw their next-door neighbor, Thomas the blacksmith, sitting on his doorstep as usual, drinking his mid-morning coffee. And heard him addressing them cheerfully: "Good-morning to you, ladies! Bad luck about the weather. When do you set off to S. again?"

In a way, it’s a pity he asked that question. If he had been at work instead, if the sisters had gone a few steps further, they would have come upon their own garden, their own pots of basil and marjoram, and found their own key lying in the usual hiding-place; and there would have stood before their eyes their own home-away-from-home, the divine universal replica at last complete. They would have entered the house as if in a dream, vaguely expecting to find Jacobina and Parasceve waiting for them, the same and not the same—who are we, sister, where are we, here or there, perhaps here, there and everywhere, sister, a paroxysm of identity, all barriers finally obliterated as they sailed unhindered into their own doubles and became one.

But the question was asked, I can't ignore it. The sisters did not answer it. They glanced at each other in sudden horror, while all around them arose a chorus of mocking voices from the band of small boys who had been following them throughout their peregrination, suppressing their laughter as they waited for the come-down. A storm of derision now broke loose. The boys informed Thomas the blacksmith of the great misunderstanding, and how it had come about. A tremendous story, an enduring myth, that would be told again and again to succeeding generations on winter evenings, was at this moment in the making.
The sisters listened, ignorant—again, always—of the fact that they were about to be immortalized. Their horror had now turned to shame. They shrivelled up and scuttled away from the mocking chorus towards their house. Pale as ghosts, their scarves pulled over their faces, they disappeared from the scene of their humiliation. And entered their house—their one-and-only house, unlike any other in the world—there to end their days, never to be seen again.

The trial, says the chronicler, was postponed, and then postponed again, indefinitely. The lumbering machinery of justice saw to that; the trial probably took place many months later, when the sisters were safely dead and buried.

What the sisters did about food in their new state of total seclusion the chronicler does not say. Perhaps kindly neighbors left a dish of soup on their doorstep every day or so; perhaps they lived on gruel and herb tea from the diminishing stores in their cupboard; perhaps they lived on thin air, descending gradually into limbo, withdrawing stubbornly, step by step, from the wicked tangled world that had so cruelly betrayed them.

Most of the islanders forgot about them, except for the small boys, who are always good at ferreting out mishaps and misfits. On idle afternoons, when other games lost their attraction and time dragged heavily on their hands, their last and unfailing resource was to gather outside the sisters' hermitage and chant in unison:

"Who will take us to the island of S.,
The beautiful island of S.?"

And then, with a delicious shudder, says the chronicler, they would hear, "two thin quavering voices calling out as if from the grave: 'Children of Satan! May
you never see a fair day! May the sea tear the shirts off your backs! May the wind break the windows and doors of your houses!"

After these imprecations d'outre-tombe, the house would settle back into silence, and the two sisters, incarcerated in their uniqueness, would proceed to wither away into death.

And here the chronicler, ends -in front of the opaque door. And I am forced to end with it, after having flapped and lapped around the final image like water around a sinking ship. I have done my digressions, my tentative variations -and I wonder, has the chronicler won the day, after all? Has my cannibalism been in vain? I've tried to dislodge the story from the book, to let it loose like a stray dog in the streets. And for a moment, glancing back at my handwritten pages I saw disrupted lines, erasures, parentheses, asterisks, notes in the margin: a perfect disorder, a tumble of possibilities. But meanwhile I have re-read TRANSLATION, I have corrected it and have now almost completed typing it, neatly. Any moment it will congeal into another text. O Jacobina, O Parasceve, I have betrayed you too; after your brief outing you lie trapped once again in a paper enclosure that reaches only as far as this sentence, which is finishing, which has to finish.

KAY CICELLIS

Kay Cicellis had an uncanny sense of how unreal reality really is. Her writing is characterized by sudden flashes, a twist, a turn, a moment of hesitation when the ordinary is unmasked for its utter impossibility yet inevitability.

Born in Marseilles in 1926 she wrote first in English and later in Greek - novels, novellas, short stories, articles, reviews, petitions, translations, radio plays. Her books have been published in the States, the UK, France, Spain, Japan, Brazil and in Germany in Heinrich Böll’s translation. Titles include the novels and novellas No Name in the Street (1952), Death of a Town (1954) and Ten Seconds from Now (1957), The Way to Colonos (1960), as well as two collections of short stories published in Greek To Χαμένο Πάτωμα (1984), and Ο Χορός των Ωρών (1998). The latter received the Greek National Prize for short story in 1999. Her highly regarded translations from Greek introduced the work of Tsirkas, Lorentzatos, and Galanaki, among others, to the English-speaking world. During the dictatorship in Greece (1967-1974) she played a crucial role in rallying Greek writers to oppose the regime.

She died in Athens in June 2001.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Program in Hellenic Studies wishes to thank Greek Ministries of Culture, and of Foreign Affairs and The Onassis Public Benefit Foundation for their financial support, also Karen Emmerich, Dimitris Gondicas, Lila Paleologos, Vangelis Pelekis and Ioanna Theochropoulou for their assistance with this event.
This booklet was designed
by Lila Paleologos & Vangelis Pelekis
in Mykonos, Greece.

March 2003