

# **A Lens on Leros: The Poet as Iconographer**

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How did the insular world of Leros, a small island in the Dodecanese archipelago of Aegean Greece, shape and inform Dimitris Tsaloumas's vision and values—both personal and poetic—from his birth in 1921 (the year before the Smyrna/Asia Minor Catastrophe) until his departure for Australia in 1952? It was a departure that was not intended to become the protracted absence that ensued. Initially, Tsaloumas had envisaged that a two-year sojourn in Australia would allow sufficient time for the socio-political situation in Greece to settle in the wake of the Metaxas Regime (1936–41), the Fascist Occupation (1941–45), and the Civil War (1946–49) that erupted following the defeat of the Axis powers. This was not to be the case.

To speak of the presence and significance of Leros in the poetry of Tsaloumas leads ineluctably to a consideration of how his origins—physical and metaphysical, as inflected by the specific culture of that island—exerted a formative influence on the vision and values of the future poet. Both unconsciously in childhood and consciously in later life, the microcosm of Leros became the prism through which perception passed, imbuing his poetry with a distinctive orientation to the interpretation of personal experience and the world as he encountered it.

It is worth noting, in this context, how isolated Leros was, in almost every sense, until shortly before Tsaloumas left it in 1952. Until after 1945, the Dodecanese islands were cut off from the rest of Greece politically and culturally, being under Italian occupation from 1912. Formally annexed by Italy in 1923 following the Treaty of Lausanne, the 'twelve islands,' including Leros, were subjected to an intensifying program of Italianisation under Italy's Fascist dictatorship from 1936. From the Battle of Leros in 1943 (in which the Allies surrendered) until 1945, Nazi Germany was the occupying force on the island, ceding control to British military authorities and their appointees when the Second World War ended. It was only after the Treaty of Paris that the Dodecanese islands were reunited with Greece as a political entity in 1948. Among the implications of this history, whereby Leros was colonised by a series of foreign powers for the first half of the twentieth century, was the fact that Leriots were isolated from Greek culture; Italian became the official language of instruction. Consequently, as Tsaloumas relates, he did not encounter the poetry of modern Greece until much later (Morgan and Gunew 34). In such circumstances, 'Greekness' was at a premium, as it had been under the Ottoman occupation, which began in 1522 when the sultan Suleiman wrested control of the Dodecanese from the Crusader Knights of St John. Ottoman suzerainty came to an end in the Aegean islands only in 1912, when the Italians took control. Political repression notwithstanding, the Greek Orthodox Church, with its Byzantine overtones, provided a bastion, mainstay, rallying point and preserver of Greek identity throughout the centuries of Ottoman hegemony. This long tradition of religious resistance to the erosion of cultural identity was to continue under Italian rule (Isichos 158–63).

Tsaloumas has himself acknowledged the role of Leros in forming him, in a sense, in its own image, in an interview with Con Castan in 1985, early in his Australian publishing career. When

asked whether he regretted spending so many years, including his most creative ones, outside Greece, Tsaloumas replied:

It doesn't seem to matter to me. I lived all my formative years in my own country and since one's fundamental experiences of life in general are firmly rooted there, then that's a world you carry within you, no matter where you travel and where you live; and since you have a language [namely Greek], a medium which by its very nature and origin is peculiarly fitted to the purpose of conveying your responses to those experiences, no matter where they occur or recur, there is no great difficulty to overcome. It's true that you miss the 'right' climate, the proper atmosphere, but I have learnt to recreate that in imagination. Indeed, this arrangement . . . works for me very well. So much so in fact that I don't feel the urge to make poetry during my occasional visits to Greece. (53)

(Castan later qualifies Tsaloumas's assertion that he did not write poetry during his visits to Greece by claiming that this refers only to poetry in Greek, and that Tsaloumas did in fact later write poetry in English while in Greece [Castan, *Dimitris Tsaloumas* 30]).

Certain aspects of the poet's provenance are considered in this essay, in particular, his sense of time—or perhaps it is more apposite to speak of timelessness and place—and evidence of the legacy of Greek Orthodoxy in his poetry. A sense of the nature and extent of those formative influences is discernible in close readings of the poems in the light of some degree of familiarity with Greek and Aegean island culture and Tsaloumas's own articulation of affects and effects. The latter became clearer to him as he reflected on his origins over time and across the intervening distance, both geographical and psychological, separating Leros and Australia. His voluntary exile was to span the second thirty years of his life, giving way to a cyclical, seasonal pattern of travelling between his two homelands in his final three decades. He speaks of this reciprocal relationship between the dual homelands on several occasions, for instance in an interview with Wendy Morgan and Sneja Gunew: 'when I am there [Leros], my experiences are enriched by memories of over here [Australia]; and when I am here, I tend to draw on themes from past experiences in a better world which no longer exists' (33–34).

The spring of language—whether Greek or English—was the aquifer for both Leros and Australia, specifically Melbourne, and poetry the go-between, the medium whereby the two cultures could coexist and become mutually comprehensible. As Tsaloumas writes in his poem, 'Falcon Drinking':

Today is seeing time. Knife-sharp,  
a cruel blade of light cuts through

the brain's greyness

. . .

Close in, at the stone-trough  
hard by the spring of language where

the cypress stands, a falcon drinks.

The cypress ripples in shattered water  
nights of many moons and nightingales.  
The bird stoops shivering to sip  
then tilts its head back skywards,  
stammers its beak and trills  
the narrow tongue. Spilt drops  
hang bright in midair, hard as tears.

(*Falcon Drinking* [1998] 44)

Despite the poetic elements they have in common, there is a striking contrast between ‘Falcon Drinking,’ the title poem of Tsaloumas’s first collection of poems written in English, and ‘The Inheritance,’ one of his late English-language poems:

I’d been seeking a word far into night  
to make a line luminous. Then it was dark news.

Your father’s dead, the farmstead burnt down.  
Your brothers are fighting mad over the land.

Keep to the trail of blood but hold your thirst.  
They have poisoned the village well.

I cross the circle of oil-lamp light wondering,  
come to a snarl of animals whose teeth

gleam hard as though they’d died biting  
into the flesh of a November moon.

I sought a word to brighten up a sombre line,  
I said, not the way to my brother’s patch.

By the stone trough in the yard my father’s cow  
heaves moaning, her eyes the saddest thing

in creation. Women in black stand weeping tears  
that catch a light of stars, a glint of blades.

You’ve come, the voice drones, you’ve come  
into your brightness, the true, the unbetrayed.

(*New and Selected Poems* [2000] 467)

The same distich stanza form is employed in both poems, as are some of the same motifs, though to a different effect: the stone trough, the moon, blades; but the drops of water ‘hard as tears’ have metamorphosed into the tears of ‘women in black,’ and ‘catch a light of stars, a glint of

blades'; a poisoned well supplants 'the spring of language.' The setting is now nocturnal, wintry ('a November moon') and evokes the aftermath of violence: a palpable sense of desolation; lamentation. Although it is the poet's claim that 'I refer to no particular place in my poetry, nor do I refer to any particular time,' 'The Inheritance,' in its allusions to bloodshed, sibling discord, 'dark news,' trauma, and bereavement, suggests that the poet is haunted by memories of events that prompted his voluntary exile. The grimly ironic note sounded by the final couplet implies a recognition of the price exacted by this transaction. In this poem's darkened arena of time and space and consciousness, the practice of poetry might be likened to a form of atonement; a verbal votive offering, to ward off the malign.

At the same time, by eliding specific references to place and time, while certain images in this poem mark it as being set in Greece, not Australia, it can also assume a universal dimension. This is in accord with Tsaloumas's assertion that 'Since the so-called human condition knows neither place nor time, almost imperceptibly and in the most natural of ways, I began to move with an exhilarating sense of freedom from the present to the past without experiencing the slightest discomfort, the merest hiatus' ('Distant Present' 26). The imagery of 'The Inheritance' could evoke a scene of violent trauma at any of the critical junctures in twentieth-century Greek history (and before), as well as the local impact of virtually any conflict in the contemporary world.

There is presumably a reciprocal relationship between vision and values: between what is perceived and what is received—from family, upbringing, culture—both consciously and, perhaps more tellingly, unconsciously. Those formative influences are the primary sources and reserves Tsaloumas draws on when he writes about his native island, as he did in absentia, in Australia, and mostly without mentioning specific place-names. Although, as Tsaloumas points out, 'I refer to no particular place in my poetry, nor do I refer to any particular time,' he goes on to say:

But the fact that I live here [in Australia] has really had a tremendous effect. For one thing distance lends clarity to perspective: it sharpens one's perceptions, and also heightens one's sense of irony . . . It encourages economy in the handling of material which dates from a world unspoilt by twenty years of absence or by the intrusion of experiences from an alien culture . . . I try to . . . distance myself from myself . . . in order to understand my immediate environment. I create a perspective, as it were. (Morgan and Gunew 34, 37)

Be that as it may, as Castan explains, the Greek concept of the *topos* is key to understanding the role and significance of Leros in Tsaloumas's life and art:

The word *topos* . . . as I am using it, denotes one's native 'spot,' the place of one's birth and growth. As well . . . it bears the sense of continuity . . . In short, the concept 'topos' is very strongly tied up with . . . notions of tradition . . . Essentially genuine tradition is a merging of time and place, a *spatializing of time*.  
(*Dimitris Tsaloumas 2*, emphasis added)

I shall return to this notion of the 'spatialising of time' in the course of a discussion of Byzantine iconography and its allusions, verbal and notional, in Tsaloumas's poetry.

To focus first, and more closely, on the dynamics and parameters of Tsaloumas's creative process and the implications of his origins in this context, some of his own observations indicate what became in effect a kind of syzygy connecting the two hemispheres in which his life and work evolved. This process was fraught with tensions and contradictions. In his essay 'The Distant Present,' he describes 'the harrowing experience of a divided life, divided loyalties and allegiances,' with 'feelings of regret, betrayal and guilt,' simultaneously accompanied by 'the sense of exhilaration that one experiences in the process of conquest' (by which, as he explains, he means 'conquest' of a new language, and overcoming the difficulties of negotiating a place for oneself in a new culture), while at the same time longing for 'the humbler, severely economical Aegean world where the only extravagance is in the light' (23–24). This was so, even as he came to appreciate 'Australia's natural beauty.'

Rather than focusing on the experience of exile/displacement *per se*—'the sense of separation from the source of one's very being,' as he put it, Tsaloumas became aware that this inescapable condition of his existence—namely, his voluntary exile—held the key to deeper insights crucial to creativity. Writing of how remote his life on Leros seemed after many years in Melbourne, he elucidated this consciousness-altering realisation in his essay, 'The Distant Present':

It wasn't the remoteness that borders on oblivion, the mistiness that blunts perception. Rather it had something in common with the *timelessness* of myth and the pull of legend, the fascination of the riddle and the urgency of whispering voices in places where hidden treasures lie. I began to listen carefully to those voices, tried to justify or explain their messages in terms of the values that I derived from my new socio-historical environment. It didn't work. Eventually, it was to be the other way round, it was by referring my experience of current reality to the region of that legendary world that I was to come to terms, poetically at least, with this state of mental restlessness and moral conflict. (24, emphasis added)

Many poems speak, directly or obliquely, from and to this imaginative and creative space Tsaloumas discerned at the heart of his dilemma, as with 'Text and Commentary':

. . . a poet  
translating the anguish of a certain evening  
. . .  
into the idiom of a different time  
and another, perhaps more concrete  
mode of perception.

(*Observatory* [1984] 25)

The inner conflict was to prove ultimately generative, creatively liberating and productive. In the poem, 'A Summer Song,' the theme of internalised conflict and tension again surfaces (albeit as a welcome intrusion) at the end of a series of otherwise relaxed, idyllic scenes of an Aegean summer:

Steady as the cicada's song  
in the days of the Dog, this still  
felicity . . .

And let all sound stay simple:  
 the call of a wood-pigeon far off,  
 shirts flapping in the breeze,  
 a wasp in the vine . . .

. . .

Divided time drips back again  
 into its pitcher in my courtyard,  
 and neither lust of woman  
 nor pirate's secret map holds promise  
 more generous.

(*The Barge* [1993] 24)

In a variation on this theme of 'divided time,' Tsaloumas invokes in 'A Celebration in the Romantic Mode' the mythical Persephone, whose exile to the Underworld as the consort of her abductor, Hades, is made bearable by the reunion each Spring with her earthly mother, Demeter:

. . . Yet I know you. I've spied  
 the pale stalk of your throat  
 in the tall poppies of island fields,  
 seen you walk the summer meadows  
 blessing the harvest in other lands,  
 daughter of gods, long-gone Persephone.  
 I ached for you in the pomegranate groves  
 of your husband's dominions,  
 and reaping words  
 from the parched thickets of the tongue  
 and the confusion of seasons, I called  
 like those who fear death.

. . .

You are in the thirst of the bone,  
 the fever thorns in the blood . . .  
 And I rejoice against the season's command  
 because my time shall know no division,  
 nor my eye seek comfort  
 in the fitful gardens of the year.

(*Falcon Drinking* 12)

Here, the poet's longing—for the return, the homeland; a state of mind where 'time shall know no division'; the coming of Spring, with its connotations of regeneration—is embedded in the subtext of the poem. As is often the case in Tsaloumas's poetry, aspirations of various kinds are personified by a beautiful young woman, in this instance Persephone. 'The Traveller and the Maiden' is another instance of the personification of longing. This motif is also reminiscent of what is translated from the Greek *emphaniseis* as 'emanations' in some Greek publications. It is a

form of epiphany, a Greek term used in a specific sense and in a religious context, which occurs also in a secular context in English. In the poetry of Tsaloumas, it is a recurrent phenomenon whereby a person, living or not, though usually known to the speaker, appears as a visitant or revenant or apparition; or, in a religious context, appears out of the ether as a vision.

‘Appearances’ or visions or divine manifestations of this kind are known from ancient Greek culture and pre-Christian religion, and the so-called Minoan Bronze-Age culture that pre-dated that of Classical Greece, in which gods and goddesses would appear to their devotees as ‘emanations.’ There are examples of this phenomenon in Greek mythology, concerning Medea, Helen of Troy, Artemis (in one version, snatching Iphigeneia away from imminent sacrifice and substituting a deer) and other deities of the Greek pantheon. As a device in Tsaloumas’s poetry, ‘emanations’ do not necessarily have numinous connotations, but to a Greek mind such manifestations are by no means unheard-of or outlandish. The ‘emanations,’ male and female, of family members, such as his mother in ‘A Winter Journey’ (*A Winter Journey* [2014] 9), friends and foes from his youth on Leros, and mysterious, unidentified strangers who haunt the poems of Tsaloumas, are always associated with a Greek context, even when the poems are written in Australia, and in English. In a sense, this phenomenon might also be interpreted as a different understanding of time as a dimension beyond the confines of temporality: a manifestation of the eternal, the timeless, which enters space and visibility through mysterious means. Such epiphanies, to use the commonly accepted generic term, were sometimes engendered, in association with pre-Christian religious practices, by ritual or trance, psychotropic botanical substances, fasting or reverie (Platt). The prevalence of epiphany in the poetry of Tsaloumas is mentioned here because of its relevance to the themes of timelessness and the manipulation of space in his poetry.

The Leros of Tsaloumas’s imagination, as recreated in poetry, is frequently, though not invariably (as can be seen in ‘The Inheritance’), associated with light in varying degrees of intensity. The awareness of, and sensitivity to light—in both a physical and metaphysical sense—permeates his poetry and differentiates the Australian topos from the Leros topos. In ‘A Celebration in the Romantic Mode,’ for instance, ‘the genius of alien night’ may refer to the Indigenous cultures of Australia as well as to those of immigrants from old cultures, which seem alien to contemporary Anglo-Australians:

This is an innocent land.  
Cruelty stalks the wilderness  
in a splendour of flesh.  
Neither path of achievement  
nor sinuous line of blood  
travels beyond the bounds  
of searing light.  
History here sits in bright halls  
mocking the genius of alien night.

(*Falcon Drinking* 12)

A site of context and erasure is again evoked in the poem ‘Palimpsest,’ which is unmistakably set on Leros as the reference to ‘the haze of Anatolia’ indicates:

This is the northern window, modest and true,  
its sill below the crest of a far wall of stone.

An olive tree dips silver in the breeze,  
the cypress nods. Further by the blinding cottage

carob-trees shine against a harshness of rocks  
where the sun burns and honey gathers all day.

I frame you there and find you timeless. To west  
and south roads pass and gardens glimmer

of rich men's houses amid the sombre green  
of orange groves, and to the right an ancient sea

far as the haze of Anatolia. These I spurn,  
the shifting aim of reckless years. I stripped

the gilt off my recorded glory but find no loss,  
because the palimpsest records another chronicle

where time begins as you put down the pitcher  
up from the well, barefoot upon your summer path

to pause and stare, green-eyed, dark-tressed  
and like a child shiny, your face ikon-spare.  
(*Falcon Drinking* 81)

Timelessness, light in various senses, icons, iconic emanations, divided time: these are recurrent themes in Tsaloumas's poetry. Chiaroscuro; night; the murk that harbours nightmare, monsters and betrayal are also present, sometimes in effect as a reality check, a counterbalance. Darkness is associated in previous quotations with the eclipse of normal social functions in the wake of violent conflict ('The Inheritance'); Hades and the Underworld, and the 'bright halls' of a colonising new social order 'mocking the genius of alien night' (in the sequence 'A Celebration in the Romantic Mode'). Elsewhere, darkness is alluded to as characterising Tsaloumas's early experience of a culture quite unlike his own, the benighted state of being a stranger in a strange land, even though his exile was self-imposed: 'Moving in the dark, I found my bearings by intuition,' he writes in his essay 'The Distant Present' (25). There are frequent references to darkness (as well as its antithesis, light) in his work, particularly in numerous 'nocturnes'—another example being the poem 'Three Night Pieces,' the first of which bears the title 'Lying in folds of darkness.' This poem also alludes to a state of timelessness, the zone or level of consciousness that Tsaloumas (as in 'The Distant Present') associates with poetry—almost as a precondition for its composition:

Lying in folds of darkness  
I heard the sougning of winds  
in ancestral forests,



soft leopards prowl in the ruins  
of ancient fields.  
The wolf was fed, the lion chained  
before this vigil.

...

This was in time beyond redemption  
yet time present: brass  
and drums imperial from distant hills  
alert the forest still to bursts  
of resurrectional bird-song,  
and memory's reefs  
to deeper flooding.

(*Falcon Drinking* 6–7)

Imaginative access to 'the region of that legendary world,' which has its cultural roots in Aegean Greece, is facilitated by memory and is mediated by language. 'Memory, however,' as Helen Nickas notes, 'does not imply a spontaneous, or natural flow of images or facts. It has to be "constructed"' ('A Diasporic Journey'). And as I have commented elsewhere, 'It is in what is redeemed from time by memory that one of Tsaloumas's major preoccupations and strengths as a poet lies. In his poetry, memory is not something hampered by nostalgia, but an active, vital, shaping force' (Woodhouse 194). The close connection between memory and commemoration, the re-inscribing of experience (as in the poem 'Palimpsest'), are indicative of a major preoccupation in Tsaloumas's thought and art. In keeping with his conceptualisation of 'the distant present,' this formulation assumes poetic form in the verbal manipulation of time and space (through the agency of memory), and can be shown to align with the visual techniques of Byzantine iconography.

The term 'Byzantine perspective' derives from the application of a particular perspective in some Byzantine icons. The concept has recently come under scrutiny as being a blanket term for a not-always-consistent pre-Renaissance application of abstraction and stylisation in the rendering of perspective: parameters within which conventions pertaining to the depiction of the individual saint's attributes must be strictly adhered to.<sup>1</sup> Various known as reverse perspective, inverted perspective, inverse perspective, divergent perspective, the Byzantine perspective sees lines of perspective converge towards the viewer, rather than towards the horizon (Zhyogin). In other words, what is distant looms larger than what is closer. Technically, the vanishing points are placed outside the painting, creating the illusion that they are 'in front of' the painting. (Inverse perspective is often employed, too, in modern abstract painting.)

The technique of reverse perspective, which those familiar with Byzantine iconography would have encountered in some form, could conceivably be seen as a visual counterpart to the perspective adopted by Tsaloumas in his poetry. As elucidated in 'The Distant Present,' time, memory, and the forms and imagery they generate in the space afforded by separation from the homeland, can in effect exchange position with the present, approaching the reader as the sacred figures from the past—as represented in some degree in Byzantine iconography—are said to appear to approach the viewer. Examples of what might be termed inverse perspective permeate

Tsaloumas's poetry, as do direct and indirect allusions to icons. It is likely that Castan may also be alluding to this phenomenon that occurs in the configuration of space and time, visually and verbally in the poetry of Tsaloumas, when he refers to its 'spatialisation of time.' Without offering precise examples or elaboration, and in the context of a passage on Tsaloumas's rejection of Renaissance and contemporary notions of progress being aligned with a linear concept of time, Castan writes of Tsaloumas's 'need to negate the present by distancing it as a condition of his being able to comprehend it. Equally it is the case with his constant use of anachronism, a principle that flourishes more in his work than in any other writer I know' (*Dimitris Tsaloumas* 142). Transposing this effect into modern technological terms, we can visualise the poet training the zoom lens of visual and other kinds of memory on Leros. It also leads to a consideration of the role of Greek Orthodoxy and its attributes, material and incorporeal, in the perception of the world that emanates or emerges from Tsaloumas's poetry.

References to the imagery of Orthodoxy abound in his poems, and are treated as a given element in his cosmology. These include prayer, psalm, and vespers; angels, icons, saints and sinners, martyrs; fast and feast; saints' days; Easter rituals and the Resurrection; miracles, candles, incense, myrrh; icon lamps and wicks; bells, shrines, stigmata; the Apocalypse, death rituals; Biblical names and allusions. All these references and more coalesce to permeate the corpus of Tsaloumas's poetry with a tracery that forms part of a subtext of cultural markers—visual, aural, olfactory—symbolic and actual signifiers in an island life and culture that nourish the poems. Sometimes a single, stark image can serve as enigmatic metonym, as in 'The Chill-room,' here quoted in full:

Anaemic in the vaults of the chill-room hang  
 the carcasses. Suddenly and adroitly  
 in striped apron where the light erupts  
 he appears among the meathooks  
 selects a most naked Lamb and makes his exit  
 sealing in the darkness once again.

(*Book of Epigrams* [1985] 17)

Icons appear in titles as well as text and lend some of their qualities to the writing (for example, 'Return of an Ikon' (*Falcon Drinking* 36); 'Praying to an Old Ikon' (*The Harbour* 80–81)). Indeed, some poems have the attributes of verbal icons, albeit secular ones.

In the ecclesiastical context, icons are windows on eternity, a view compatible with Tsaloumas's sense of time (Greek Orthodox). As theological 'symbols,' icons not only point towards future or transcendent realities, but also directly participate in these as well. Furthermore, by the use of inverse perspective, the viewer's gaze is drawn into the icon, establishing, in this way, a direct encounter and a bond of communion with these eternal verities. The ecclesiastical council of 787 AD attested that persons and events depicted in icons were mysteriously present and active in the icons. The icon was also seen as 'theological language in colour, highlighting the sacredness of created matter' (Greek Orthodox). In addition to spiritual salvation, no material element was to be excluded from redemption. In this way, all material elements—such as colour, pigment, wood—could act as windows giving the faithful glimpses of eternity.

Tsaloumas's poem 'Iconographer' reflects an awareness and acknowledgement of some of these precepts. In its concentrated compass, the synergy of time, space, image and creative identity, this poem also offers a key insight into Tsaloumas's poetics, encapsulating those elements of his inspiration and practice that are the focus of this paper:

I kept my vigil-fast, and invoking the rhythm  
of waters at the gully's roots,  
I made my dawn ablutions with the green oleanders.  
I observe the wind in the harbour.  
With the compass needle to the left of the sun  
I unroll the immaculate parchment  
and write your name in brick-red colour.  
The background stark, a surface  
of blue: the shudder of my mind has no  
dimension. Here I will spill  
the hair, and I will bring your gaze from far  
beyond the mountains and seas: my exile  
has no horizon. I will mould again the flesh  
the ochres vibrating like bowstrings  
and I will rest your hands on the folds of light.  
My awe has no darkness.

(*Book of Epigrams* 201)

The poet's note to this poem adds: 'It is customary for painters of icons and religious works to purify themselves through prayer and fasting before starting to paint.' Given the evidence of this and numerous other poems, an extension of iconographic principles as poetic method and theme is explicit or implicit in a substantial body of work by this poet. (Admittedly, this is not the complete picture. There are other dimensions to his work not discussed in the present paper, such as the satirical poems, which are more reminiscent of caricatures than of icons.)

What one might term the secular icon is one of many categories located within the compass—the taxonomy and *topos*—of Tsaloumas's poetry. Some small poems resemble icons in the spareness of their imagery and language, akin to glimpses of the anchorite or ascetic. This stringency and austerity was certainly an element in Tsaloumas's own character, as well as being an aspect of Orthodoxy (notwithstanding the paradox and contradictions that abound in his work). Frugality, economy, spareness are qualities he values, in art as in life, along with the richness he discerns in simplicity (Castan, Interview 58, as well as internal evidence in poems such as 'Autumn Supper'). In a late poem, 'Washing-up' (*Helen of Troy* [2007] 15), Tsaloumas speaks of 'the rich glow of an older tongue,' again evoking connotations of light, illumination, echoes of ethnographic memory embedded in the Greek language, whose cadences inflect his English and give it a distinctive timbre – the linguistic counterpart, in effect, of a patina, an aura. This is a discernible linguistic quality which Castan terms 'the Bakhtin effect,' whereby in bilingualism languages mutually inflect one another in ways so subtle as to elude precise definition, imbuing the poetic voice with a unique timbre and intonation (*Dimitris Tsaloumas* 24–42; Karalis 'Translingualism'; Karalis 'Dimitris Tsaloumas'). Whether employing images of the richly pigmented, burnished effects of some Byzantine iconography (as in 'Sixth Poem'), or images of frugality and asceticism, as in 'Autumn Supper' (quoted below), Tsaloumas's linguistic palette

and palate are characterised by the subtly original qualities of tone, pitch and intonation inherent in his poetry:

Only this table by the draughty window  
bare since the beginning of time:

a knife, black olives, a hunk of bread.  
The bottle glows dark in the late

autumn light, and in the glass,  
against the wind and the raging seas,

the one rose of the difficult year.  
All my life long I've hankered

after simplicity. When night falls  
don't come to light the candles and pour

the wine. There's not enough for two;  
I cannot share my hunger.

*(Falcon Drinking 68)*

Ecclesiastical images and signifiers are particularly concentrated in the text titled 'Sixth Poem'—an iconic portrait of a lost love—in the sequence 'A Rhapsody of Old Men' (*The Observatory* 204–05), but also in 'Seventh Poem' (*New and Selected Poems* 58), which recalls a martyrdom in time of war or civil strife, and the speaker's shame ('stigma') at his inability to avert it. In 'Sixth Poem,' physical and metaphysical images, both secular and ecclesiastical, cohere in a way that the poet felt constrained to explicate in detail as an example of a poem whose words can be translated into English, though to the detriment of their cultural resonance and symbolism, which have no precise counterpart or equivalent in Anglophone culture:

The oil-lamp wick charred on the water;  
the corner icon-shelf beyond reach.

A handful of starlight, I beg of you  
before you squander the heavens,  
a little old silver and filigree of cricket song  
from Our Lady's throat at Assumptiontide;  
be it but the remnant of a blue sunbeam,  
transient faintest glimmer  
over the brass panoplies of the hills;  
a sheaf of fringes from an unripened dawn  
out of the splendid dowry of youth—  
a nothing  
and she would toss her hair like the rain  
set the wind to sing  
in her heart

and come and sit at my table  
that my neighbours might call and bid her welcome.

(*Observatory* 205)

Tsaloumas's reservations concerning the adequacy of English to embody or transubstantiate the cultural and spiritual content of this poem are discussed at length in his interview with Castan, where he expatiates on this difficulty encountered in translating not just the language of the original, but also its cultural echoes and accretions. As the poet's illuminating commentary runs to more than two pages of text, I shall quote only the first two examples he includes:

The opening line [in the Greek original] describes the iconostasis (where the icons, these effigies that haunt the memory, stand) as being 'difficult' in its remote corner, as the wick, charred now, floats spent on water with all the oil in the icon lamp burnt up. To anyone brought up in the Greek Orthodox tradition the symbolism of these two lines would be clear and richly suggestive: the images speak of helplessness, utter sadness, neglect. In a Christian household in Greece, charred wicks floating on water in icon lamps would be unthinkable, nothing short of blasphemous . . . The mere sound of the words 'wick,' 'icon lamp' is so evocative that its range of associations would instantly take you back through childhood and festivals, death and vigils and suffering throughout the centuries under the Turks and other barbarians before and after them, Byzantium and the Paleologues, the rituals associated with birth and marriage and death, the Resurrection, goats sheltering in remote chapels on precipitous mountains or stormy headlands, and so on. (Castan, Interview 54–55)

The Orthodox spiritual dimension of Tsaloumas's life and art may also relate to the 'enlargement' of the frame or terms of reference he mentions a number of times in discussing his work (in interviews and in his essay 'The Distant Present'); akin to, or an instance of, the 'leap over the bounds of self' ('Temptation,' from the sequence 'A Winter Journey,' 9. *Helen of Troy* 36) that he aspired to in life and, ultimately, in death.

Irrespective of whether or not Dimitris Tsaloumas aspired to become a bicultural poet (a limiting and even demeaning descriptor, given the scope and trajectory of his thought and art), there is ample evidence in the poems to indicate that his experience of immersion in two cultures intensified his appreciation and awareness of both. The evidence leaves no doubt that he developed into a fully bilingual poet, as his mastery of his chosen form in both Greek and English attest. If additional proof were needed, there is also the substantial volume of contemporary Australian poetry he selected and translated into Greek as a personal gift to his country of voluntary exile, *Contemporary Australian Poetry* (1986). Yet, while Australia becomes increasingly visible in his poetry, flooding its palette with harsh Antipodean light, Tsaloumas never forgets nor abandons 'the humbler, severely economical Aegean world where the only extravagance is in the light'; 'the rich glow of an older tongue,' and the burnished haloes of Orthodox icons that glow on dimly-lit *iconostases*. Although it is problematic to verify such a hypothesis, a tenuous analogy can be proposed between the songlines of First Nations people (not only in Australia) and the singing into being, again and again, of the distant homeland—Leros, his 'Country.'

In what has become a seminal source on this poet, Tsaloumas states, in his essay ‘The Distant Present’:

I believe the practice of poetry is an act of faith, and one of the main articles of that faith for me is that art should never become the instrument of narcissism; it should hold up a mirror to life, not to the artist. And again, it was the isolation of exile, so to speak, and a certain detachment in my habits of observation, fostered by an alien environment, that were responsible for those convictions. (25)

In the same document, Tsaloumas acknowledges his adherence to what he calls ‘traditional values’:

I have concentrated on these two aspects of my situation in Australia, distance and isolation, because their roles in giving my mind its peculiar orientation have been of the greatest importance to me as a poet. They have been the main factors in the psychological processes that, among other things strengthened that faith in traditional values, which brought me into bitter conflict with a society governed by principles that were alien to what I perceived as the truth. (27)

Acknowledging that these are not uncommon circumstances, and not exclusive to his own status, he adds ‘there was a past geographically and linguistically severed from my life yet concrete and perennially present, making strong claims on this other, equally urgent day-to-day reality’ (27).

Wishing to know more of what that past entailed, particularly in terms of the ‘traditional values’ of the Leros society in which Tsaloumas was born and raised, I contacted his daughter (and recently published translator), Matina Tsaloumas, who lives in Athens and on Leros, in relation to the role played by the Greek Orthodox Church in forming the vision and values of the future poet. I received the following reply:

My father was not a church-going man by any means. However his parents were devout Christians so he and his brothers and sisters would have been brought up in that kind of atmosphere. Religion in Leros, and all over Greece, once you leave the big cities, is overwhelmingly present in everyday life even now, and would have been more so in the past. Certainly Dad’s Greek poetry, and to a certain extent his English poetry, overflows with religious imagery. There are many references to New Testament figures and parables. Icons, candles, saints, angels, mountain chapels, religious festivals, priests, ascetes and pious old women abound! It was his element as a boy, just as much as the natural environment. Later he often satirized the priests, but never the kindness of those who practiced Christianity in their lives. Also there is the presence of the miraculous icon of Panayia [‘Holiest of the holy ones’] in the Castle, just a small distance from where Dad grew up. He still remembered her festival in one of the last poems he wrote [in *Dipsa* (2010)].

I would imagine Orthodoxy is inseparable from all the other influences in any child’s life of that era, in any part of Greece, not just in Leros. Fasting was mandatory for adults & children alike, and church attendance was enforced by the schools, as well as families. The schoolmasters took their students to Church every

Sunday, as well as on Feast Days. As a young man I am sure that there was a drifting away from the Church, and later a complete break away, in physical terms at least. However I am sure that Christian values, the aesthetics of Orthodoxy and the example of the ascetic saints, made a profound and lasting impact on my father. (Matina Tsaloumas, Personal Correspondence)

As a conclusion to this essay, it is clear from the evidence of Tsaloumas's poems and from his own comments and reflections that, by virtue of his formative years on Leros, the island and its way of life were at the centre of his understanding of how to be in the world; how to live one's life: his source of first principles, a moral and spiritual compass. In both a sacred and a secular sense, Leros was Dimitris Tsaloumas's holy of holies: his touchstone for evaluating subsequent experience, the repository of sacred and profane memories. Leros was the book of life in which were inscribed 'the fascination of the riddle and the urgency of whispering voices in places where hidden treasures lie' ('The Distant Present' 24), to which he returned again and again, poring over its 'inscriptions,' deciphering and rededicating meanings, almost as a form of divination; interpreting the present through the prism of his own past, which was inextricable from that of Leros.

Moreover, it is apparent from Tsaloumas's writings that the qualities and precepts inherent in the Greek Orthodox tradition ('the aesthetics of Orthodoxy,' to quote his daughter Matina)—as embedded in the topos of Leros—are as intrinsic an element in his poetry as they were in the life he knew on his island of origin. The array of Orthodox imagery reflected in his poetry comprises the external signifiers of this faith, which include the richness of ornamentation in the form of frescoes, the iconostasis and icons; church and processional candles; sonorous, mellifluous Byzantine chant; incense and other fragrances: the visual, aural and sensory accompaniments to liturgical ritual. As is equally apparent in numerous poems, Tsaloumas also references and embraces the asceticism of the Orthodox tradition, such as the rigorous practices of fasting, icon-painting and prayer; as well as the veneration of sacred images which is fundamental to the expression of Orthodox spirituality, and a core element in his oeuvre. Hence the allusions to the veneration of icons in the home, where the wick of the household icon-lamp must be kept alight: 'My awe has no darkness.'

Orthodoxy adheres to elaborate and strictly observed rites of passage, which include the rituals for the dead, faithfully followed in the exequies for the poet in 2016. The signifiers of a sustaining and coherent spiritual tradition imbue Tsaloumas's poetry with an intrinsic sense of cohesion, as they did the life he knew on Leros. At a subliminal level as well as in a cognitive sense, Orthodoxy is a shaping force. An integral and integrating agent in the poet's perception of the world and his value system, the entire panoply and essence of that faith contribute physically and metaphysically to the substance and spirit of Tsaloumas's poetry: which is to say, to the poet's sense of identity.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> While I am aware that some art historians are currently engaged in debates that question the conventional ecclesiastical understanding and interpretation of the properties of these images and their function, I have followed

the conventional Orthodox teaching on the nature and purpose of icons, as this is the view that would presumably have been familiar to Tsaloumas (Greek Orthodox).

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