

# A Portrait in Inter-Views

## Selected Writings 9

Spanning a period of fifteen years, these five 'inter-views' explore the writings of a poet of our time, his methods, motives, and patterns of thought. This book adds to the previous eight volumes in Richard Berengarten's *Selected Writings* already published by Shearsman, as well as to the *Companion* to his oeuvre, edited by Norman Jope, Paul Scott Derrick and Catherine E. Byfield.

RICHARD BERENGARTEN was born in London in 1943, into a family of musicians. He has lived in Italy, Greece, the USA and former Yugoslavia. His writing integrates multiple strands, including English, French, Mediterranean, Jewish, Slavic, American and Asian influences. Under the name RICHARD BURNS, he has published more than 25 books. In the 1970s, he founded and ran the international Cambridge Poetry Festival. In the UK he has received the Eric Gregory Award, the Wingate-Jewish Quarterly Award for Poetry, the Keats Poetry Prize, and the Yeats Club Prize. In Serbia, he has received the international Morava Charter Poetry Prize and the Great Lesson Award, and in Macedonia (FYR), the Manada Prize. He has been Writer-in-Residence at the international Eliot-Dante Colloquium in Florence, Arts Council Writer-in-Residence at the Victoria Centre in Gravesend, Royal Literary Fund Fellow at Newnham College, Cambridge, and a Royal Literary Fund Project Fellow. He has been Visiting Associate Professor at the University of Notre Dame and British Council Lecturer in Belgrade. He is currently a Fellow of the English Association, a Bye-Fellow at Downing College, Cambridge, an Academic Associate at Pembroke College, Cambridge, and poetry editor of *Jewish Quarterly*. His poems have been translated into more than 90 languages.

PASCHALIS NIKOLAOU and Richard Berengarten have collaborated in editing *The Perfect Order: Selected Poems 1974-2010* by Nasos Vayenas (Anvil Press Poetry, 2010) and in translating *12 Greek Poems after Cavafy* (Shearsman Books, 2015).

ALSO BY RICHARD BERENGARTEN

SELECTED WRITINGS, SHEARSMAN EDITION

- Vol. 1 *For the Living : Selected Longer Poems, 1965–2000*
- Vol. 2 *The Manager*
- Vol. 3 *The Blue Butterfly* (The Balkan Trilogy, Part 1)
- Vol. 4 *In a Time of Drought* (The Balkan Trilogy, Part 2)
- Vol. 5 *Under Balkan Light* (The Balkan Trilogy, Part 3)
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- The Perfect Order : Selected Poems, Nasos Vayenas, 1974–2010*

RICHARD BERENGARTEN

A PORTRAIT IN  
INTER-VIEWS

SAMPLER  
edited by

PASCHALIS NIKOLAOU AND JOHN Z. DILLON

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# The Interviewers

JOHN Z. DILLON has recently completed his PhD in English at the University of Notre Dame. His dissertation, 'The Servants of Modernism: Aesthetics and Tradition in Yeats, Lorca, and Woolf', considers the key role domestic servants played in the burgeoning of European Modernism. He is currently the Postdoctoral Fellow in Learning Analytics and Text Mining at Notre Dame, and Assistant Director at the Writing Center. His areas of research and teaching are European Modernism, Digital Humanities, and Writing and Rhetoric. He is the co-founder and director of *Breac: A Digital Journal of Irish Studies*. In addition to literary research, he works with IBM Research on data mining and text analysis for learning assessment and development.

RUTH HALKON is a journalist. Born in Hull in 1989, she read English at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, where she began writing theatre and book reviews and edited the Arts and Culture section of *The Cambridge Student*. Since then she has worked as a reporter for *The North London Times* and *Independent Series*, covering local news from five London boroughs, and for National News, a press agency dealing mainly with London's courts and crime scenes. She has also freelanced for *The Metro* and the Press Association and published in *The Independent on Sunday* and *The Telegraph*. She currently lives on a quiet street between a graveyard and a wood in one of London's leafy suburbs.

JOANNE LIMBURG writes both poetry and prose. She read philosophy at King's College, Cambridge, and published her first poetry collection, *Femenismo*, with Bloodaxe Books in 2000. *Paraphernalia*, her second collection, appeared in 2007 and was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation. Five Leaves Press brought out a pamphlet, *The Oxygen Man*, in 2012; and her collection for children, *Bookside Down*, was published by Salt Publishing in 2013. *The Woman Who Thought Too Much* (Atlantic Books, 2010), a prose memoir, was shortlisted for the Mind Book of Year. Atlantic Books published her first novel, *A Want of Kindness*, in 2015. She is currently working towards a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of Kingston.

PASCHALIS NIKOLAOU completed an MA and a PhD in literary translation at the University of East Anglia. His writings on translation studies have appeared in such publications as *Translating and Interpreting Conflict* (Rodopi, 2007), and his reviews and translations have been widely published

in both English and Greek journals. With Maria-Venetia Kyritsi he co-edited *Translating Selves: Experience and Identity between Languages and Literatures* (Continuum, 2008); and with Richard Berengarten, he co-edited *The Perfect Order: Selected Poems 1974-2010* by Nasos Vayenas (Anvil Press Poetry, 2010; shortlisted for the Criticos Prize), and co-translated *12 Greek Poems after Cavafy* (Shearsman Books, 2015). He is currently Lecturer in Literary Translation at the Ionian University, Corfu and reviews editor of the academic journal *mTm*.

SEAN RYS was born in Santa Barbara, California, in 1986. He studied Literature at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and later received his MFA in Creative Writing (Poetry) from the University of Arizona. He is a former editor for *Sonora Review* and a recipient of the Academy of American Poets Prize for 'The Waning Years'. His poems have appeared in literary journals such as *Elimae*, *DIAGRAM*, *Indiana Review*, *Cutbank*, *Devil's Lake*, *Hobart Press*, *Salt Hill Journal*, *Verse Daily* and the *Seattle Review*. With Paul Scott Derrick, he is currently co-editing a book of critical essays on Richard Berengarten's *The Manager*. His own work includes a manuscript-in-progress with American poet Chris Nelson and a chapbook entitled *Parallax*. He lives in Tucson, Arizona, where he works as a Lecturer with the Writing Program at the University of Arizona.

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# Editors' Introduction

PASCHALIS NIKOLAOU AND JOHN Z. DILLON

A book of interviews is, in some respects, an assisted autobiography of the creative mind. When it comes to the writings of Richard Berengarten, the following pages offer rich and varied perspectives of both artefact and process, especially into such key works as *The Blue Butterfly*, *Black Light: Poems in Memory of George Seferis* and *The Manager*. Yet conversations of any kind always have an unpredictable element. In the environment of the interview, participants move towards realisations that might have remained inaccessible via, say, review or memoir. When elaborated conscientiously, such dialogues cannot help but remind us of the intensity of human attempts at meaning-making. Through the active co-operation of interlocutors who might otherwise have remained passive and silent, they become an integral part of the oeuvre itself, rather than mere chattering echoes on or around its fuzzy margins. Interviews are rightly embedded in the fabric of culture and literary tradition.

The interviews included in this book, which span a period of fifteen years, take their time, hospitably and expansively, to describe their settings and modes as they acquire shape, and not just in the sense of imparting atmosphere or 'setting a scene'. In the final interview, Berengarten reflects on their different modes of communication and transmission:

Two of the interviews began as recorded conversations: Ruth Halkon's, at my house in Cambridge, and Sean Rys's, in front of a live audience in Santa Barbara. The others, including this one, have been conducted entirely via email, and in some cases with many interruptions, over a period lasting months. Whether the interviews began as spoken or email exchanges, their development has been a fascinating process. Each interviewer and I have together extensively expanded, developed and co-edited the transcripts via ensuing emails. In each case, we've found ourselves working on the texts not only by progressive extension, but also by recursive and iterative procedures, that is, deletions and accretions. We've found these reworkings occurring at any point, just as in the making of any text. So these procedures treat the text spatially, as a 'field'.

And by saying that, I don't intend only the basic spatial metaphor.  
I mean as if we were digging it, and cultivating it.

This statement offers considerably more than an outline of the ways in which this book has been compiled and its parts have been shaped, since one of the articulate aims underlying the entire project has been to explore and examine the scope of the literary interview itself. Both Richard Berengarten and his five interlocutors – who include us, as co-editors – have aimed to reflect on the interview's possible formats and practices and, by encountering and re-encountering the ways in which the interview may be considered a genre in its own right, they suggest ways in which its boundaries can be tested. The resulting process – of combing, combining and recombining the angles and corners of a poet's work, in-turning and re-turning its views, perspectives and resonances, and reflecting and refracting its surfaces – is encapsulated in this book's title: *Inter-Views*. Interpretatively, in its suggestion of a multifaceted complexity, and of the interdependence of parts both to one another and to a cohering overall vision, this title tallies particularly well with the introductory text to the *Companion to Richard Berengarten* (2011, 2016). There, Norman Jope suggests that the *Companion* – a book containing thirty-three essays by writers from more than a dozen nationalities – is “a testimony to the recognition of his work by fellow writers and critics across cultural, linguistic and geographical boundaries and frontiers.” And he continues: “The sheer range of poetic canons to which Berengarten's oeuvre responds ... has enabled him to put down ‘multiple roots’ in a number of literary traditions.”

Through the literary interview, the exploration of ‘why and how I write’ means sharing one's experience with other readers and creators. Here, discussions of literary craft and technique, together with recollections and reconstructions of creative climate, context and work methods, variously meet mechanisms and patterns of influence. Poets are readers first. And just as interesting and valuable as coming into contact with their poetry, perhaps, is the act of listening to them as they query and explore the makings of poems, and as they reflect on their own agonising, for hours and years, with pen or pencil in hand or in front of a computer screen.

This kind of writing and self-reading inspires both writing and further reading in us too.



The five interviews comprising this volume re-collect a voice and a mind over several decades, geographies and cultural habitations. The book starts in Greece in the late nineteen-sixties. The memory of these years, along with that of later returns to this country, confirms lasting bonds of poetry and place. Berengarten transmits and recombines linguistic and socio-political events through the 'slight angle' that often unmistakably belongs to foreign, fresh eyes. Greek rhythms, gestures and wordings enter poetic space and metabolise, as the young poet searches for and develops a voice. Pieces like 'The Easter Rising 1967' arise out of a matrix of everyday observations set down in radical, violent times. The transliterated Greek words and phrases that punctuate this interview echo embeddings in poems of this period, and a little later, in major works like *Black Light*. Their use intensifies both literal and metaphorical meanings as they come into contact with English. This is no surface effect: the study of Greek literature and music, past and present, goes deep, enabling Berengarten to re-position himself vis-à-vis the Anglophone tradition.

A wealth of lasting relationships with modern Greek poets has consistently led to explorations of poetic form. *The Manager*, the subject of the second interview, was published at the dawn of the millennium. But we learn that its starting point was in translating Nasos Vayenas's 1974 sequence *Biography*. In 'Managing the Art' Joanne Limburg probes the proximities between writer and narrator, the autobiographical demarcations of a long poem with often unclear lines between protagonist and persona. A quote from Northrop Frye ("To dissolve art back into the artist's experience is like scraping the past off a canvas in order to see what the 'real' canvas looked like before it assumed its painted disguise") is part of Berengarten's response; but there were times, too

when Bruno seemed to me an alter-ego, even a doppelgänger. He haunted me for many years. In general, I find it quite hard to say where autobiography as *fact* ends and fantasy, imagination, and fictional construction or reconstruction begins. Maybe this is a common experience for fiction writers. And querying whether stories, histories, and life-stories and life-histories – and roles, masks, and personae – are fictive, factive or factitious is a component in the poem itself.

The element of time, so strongly influencing the manner of composition – "a long poem needs sustained periods of concentrated work. It has to be worked on, then left, then worked on, then left." – inevitably and necessarily

reflects back onto the work itself. “Constant interruptions,” the poet tells Limburg, “themselves constitute ... a kind of patterning, even a patterning principle”; so that “lack or absence of continuity is both what patterns [*The Manager*] and what it’s about.” This helps to explain why the protagonist, Jordan Charles Bruno, is seen only in episodic ‘frames’. The overall effect is of “a serial configuration designated by disjunctions, alternatives, lapses, hiatuses, hints – and contradictions. Above all, contradictions”.

The interview with Ruth Halkon took place after the publication of the *Companion* and parallels its concern to evaluate an entire poetic career. Taking its cue from the poet’s involvement in and response to the pieces featured in that book, ‘Aspects of the Work’ naturally surveys the contact points of poet and critic(s), examining the literary as well as psychological connotations and subtleties of this relationship. The discussion returns to matters of tradition, canon, influence and recognition, and to factors that intensify, validate or readjust the poet’s voice, such as Berengarten’s lifelong interest in numerological patterning in poems. Through stops at key works like *Avebury*, *Tree* and *Against Perfection*, poet and interviewer think carefully about primacies and roles of identity – particularly with regard to the often tricky negotiations of working with and within English, while the poet not only identifies himself as “European” but systematically pursues a stance of universalism when it comes to themes chosen and the deployments and mingling of poetic forms. Halkon’s question about the poet being an “active creator, a maker, consciously and skilfully shaping the material rather than following it” elicits a response that is particularly telling. Berengarten replies that

the artistic process *does* consist in ‘following’: I’ve used the title ‘Following’ for a group of poems in [*Book With No Back Cover*] with precisely that idea in mind, and it’s one that’s central to my poetics. One is not imposing one’s self *on* the material; one is actually working *with* the material, through it, in fellowship and harmony with it, coaxing it, blending with it, asking it what it wants to do and how and where it wants to go.

The penultimate interview extends a conversation held before an audience at the University of California at Santa Barbara in 2012. Here focus on *The Balkan Trilogy* opens discussion on the poet’s responsibility: in this case, when the souls of the dead “call” the poet in the form of a butterfly that silently lands on his hand. This event outside the memorial museum in Kragujevac, site of a Nazi atrocity, eventually led to Berengarten’s three-year residence in Serbia from 1987 to 1990. Once again, living in another

culture prompts linguistic and mythological research, intensifications of imagery and symbol in the poet's mind. Agreeing with Sean Rys's mention of Paul Celan on the poem as a "making-toward", or a conversation encountered along the way, Berengarten describes his process of writing *The Blue Butterfly* as one that again involved

convergences and divergences. It meant layerings at intuitive and visceral levels – simultaneously intuitive and visceral – when the poetry was pouring out of me. So the conscious mind had to try to catch up later on. I also think the welling up of deep material could be construed as a continuation or a working-through of the patterns of synchronicity. ... The *materia* appeared both inside me and outside, around me. I had many experiences involving those kinds of recognitions and connections during this period, gestated by the writing of the poem and by the research I was putting into it.

Concluding a book in which questions and self-analysis arrive at realisations like those above, 'The Interview as Text and Performance' departs into a new zone. Here the poet discusses with John Dillon the history of the interview as a form – or genre – that began in the twentieth century. This leads to exploration of the manifold ways in which the literary interview indeed turns out to be "part of the work". Early on, Berengarten announces that

by encouraging, challenging, querying and testing the writer, a sensitive and attuned interviewer may elicit the expression of new ideas from the writer, not to mention buried or dormant memories. This kind of probing and extension of edges, this articulation of unexpected depths and heights, itself constitutes discovery, however small or subtle. The process is necessarily heuristic. It involves the interviewee in recursive or iterative mental processes, which themselves are key components of all original composition. I remember experiencing being pleasantly and unexpectedly drawn into reflection, in the very first interview I ever gave, for a Belgian student magazine, in 1981. The theme was translation.

The ensuing exchanges are fascinating in their detailed exploration of the interview's roles in cultural transmission, the shapes it may adopt, and its evolutions within and through different media.

Moving back from this ending, these introductory notes must now give way to the dialogues themselves.

SAMPLER

# Under Greek Light

RICHARD BERENGARTEN  
AND PASCHALIS NIKOLAOU

Most of this interview was conducted over a period of two months, through emails exchanged between Cambridge, UK, and Alexandroupolis, Greece, between November 2012 and January 2013. Some final reshaping, cutting, and polishing carried on into the following months.

PN

## 1

**Paschalis Nikolaou:** Some of your first poetic sequences drew on events unfolding in Greece in the late 1960s, notably ‘The Easter Rising 1967’, written soon after the *coup d’état*.<sup>1</sup> Could you talk about the genesis of that poem? And could you reflect on the formal decisions you made in it, and whether you had any specific models in mind when composing it?

**Richard Berengarten:** ‘The Easter Rising 1967’ was triggered by the *coup d’état* on April 21<sup>st</sup> of that year. The poem’s first inklings came hurtling at me in the days immediately following the *coup*, and the sequence was composed, or rather, composed itself, very rapidly. Much of the poem was an immediate response to what was going on all around, like the repeated official radio announcements about what was suddenly, arbitrarily and absurdly being ‘forbidden’ by the self-appointed military authorities. That Greek word, *apagorevete*, which kept reappearing in these radio announcements, pronounced in a heavily nasalised *Katharevousa*,<sup>2</sup> turned in my mind into the fantasy-image of a besuited minor bureaucrat spouting repressive Kafkaesque nonsense, and out of this emerged the parody in section VIII.<sup>3</sup> Incidentally, this response wasn’t just my own: it was based on the often hilarious send-ups my Greek friends were doing, in the jokey, punning spirit of *kalambouri*,<sup>4</sup> as we sprawled around our portable radio, listening to the official announcements on the day of the *coup*, and those following it.

**PN:** It seems to me that in an extraordinary situation such as this, the violence done and the trauma inflicted immediately find their way into the twists and turns of language. The response seems paradoxical: it involves an immediate turning to, towards, and into language – and, simultaneously, away from it – perhaps because everything said and heard appears to take on an additional or dual meaning.

**RB:** That's right. Whatever was previously construed as 'normal' is immediately turned upside down and inside out. Nothing is any longer what it seems. The trivial becomes significant and suddenly banal again. The literal is ironised and what would previously have seemed absurd becomes standard. Meaningfulness and absurdity oscillate and blur into each other.

More broadly, however, 'The Easter Rising' arose out of the life I was leading in early 1967 and the place I was living in: Thebes. In those days, this was a working town with a dusty main street, shops for basic provisions, a small vegetable, fruit and meat market, and a few salubrious restaurants. I was twenty-four years old. My first wife, Kim, and I had met as students at Cambridge, and we had lived together in Venice before marrying in London in November 1966, after which we came straight out to Greece. Thanks to introductions given to us by our Cambridge friend Peter Mansfield, who had lived and worked firstly in Crete and then Athens from 1963 to 1965, Kim and I had a joint contract to teach at the local *frontistirio*,<sup>5</sup> a branch outfit with headquarters in Athens, called the 'British Institute for English Language and Literature' which was misleading, because *all* the teaching was language, mostly at beginner and intermediate level.

**PN:** What was life like in Thebes at that time?

**RB:** Everything about Thebes involved novelty, and much of it, culture shock. Even the smallest details of life were different, puzzling, exciting. To me at least, in this setting the Greek myths seemed somehow alive, close to life's surface. Whenever I tried to hold up a mirror to myself, I found myself chortling: an Anglo-Jewish London boy walking along Oedipus Street each day, to work in Antigone Street.

We lived on a sloping track called Daglaridou Street. Higher up, there was a cave which in springtime was suddenly full of huge butterflies with long antennae. They flittered out elegantly and looked as if they were flying backwards, swallow-tailed. I was convinced that Antigone had been buried in that hill-cave. From our veranda we had a panoramic view across the plain of Plataea, site of the ancient battle between the Greeks and the Persians, to Mount Kithaeron, oval-backed in the distance and blue-grey,

purplish or mauvish, depending on the light. I also worked in the village of Erythrai, tucked under the mountain. Several days a week, while Kim taught in the Thebes school, I took the rattly little blue bus across the plain. The Erythrai school was a single-roomed building with a flat roof. Once, standing on that roof, I saw a stork flying off into the distance. I had already seen nesting storks in Romania and would see more, later in Serbia, near Novi Sad. But that particular picture of a flying stork stayed in my mind and gave rise to a poem more than thirty-five years later.<sup>6</sup> On one Sunday at the turn of spring, Kim and I took the bus to Erythrai and walked across the plain, picking little shards of ancient pottery out of the ploughed soil. We climbed Kithaeron past clumps of anemones as far as the snow line, where crocuses peeped out. But the peak turned out to be fenced off with barbed wire. We were shocked to discover that it was a military base. The fact that the site of Zeus' and Hera's nuptial rites was now occupied by NATO became a subliminal trigger for 'The Easter Rising'.

Erythrai was then mainly an *Arvanitika*-speaking village, whose name in this Albanian dialect was *Kriekouki*, meaning 'Redheads'. The stop where I had to wait for my bus from Athens back to Thebes in the late afternoons on schooldays was directly outside the village *kafeneion*,<sup>7</sup> and I received cheerful challenges to chess games from the men sitting there, several of whom became friends. The games were quick, not only because they would get interrupted by the bus arriving but because, much to their delight, I always lost. I wasn't much of a backgammon player either, but did learn to twirl *komboloi* ('worry beads') as confidently as any native born.

PN: What was your house like?

RB: We occupied part of the ground floor of a small house with outside steps and two separate entrances. Upstairs lived our landlord, Yorgos Liadis, with his wife, Eleftheria, and their children Anna and Antonis. Our small kitchen had a hob with two rings fed by a calor gas cylinder, and our loo was a crouch-and-squat affair in a cubby at the back of the yard. The family owned olive trees and beehives on a local hillside. They supplied us with the richest, smoothest olive oil I had ever tasted, even in Italy, as well as jars of thick honey. Once Yorgos drove us out with the family to gather olives and collect full honeycomb trays from his hives. On that day, under one of his olive trees, we ate bread, salt and hard cheese – and of course olives. On the same small plot along Daglaridou Street lived Eleftheria's sister, Fro-Fro (*aka* Euphrosyne) and her husband, and, in a smaller house between Fro-Fro's and ours, the two sisters' ageing mother and father. To us they were simply *Yiayia* and *Papous* ('Granny' and 'Grandad').

My most vivid memory of Yiayia was soon after our arrival in Thebes. When we first moved from the local hotel to Yorgos's and Eleftheria's place, there was no mattress on our wire-mesh bed. So several men designated themselves to accompany me to buy one on the main street. I wasn't allowed to do this alone, because 'bad people might cheat you.' We often found ourselves being taken care of in this way, and by many different individuals, each one of them hospitable and solicitous towards us. We carried the mattress back, tied in string, a huge blue-and-white-striped, fibre-packed Swiss roll. When the strings were untied and it was spread out on the bed, suddenly all the women in the family appeared at once, and proceeded to take over the job of rummaging through our trunk to find our new sheets and pillowcases – the dowry, our trousseau. So the bed was made before our eyes in a jiffy. Yiayia's contribution was to disappear into her house next door and return with a handful of sugar-coated almonds, egg-shaped, which she threw gleefully onto the counterpane. She winked and cackled, nudging Kim and me in cheery blessings for fertility.<sup>8</sup>

PN: I can imagine all this – sounds like typically Greek behaviour ...

RB: ... And we used to sit out on the veranda chatting with the family, Kim more often than me; she reported back to me the frankness of the women's talk, especially about contraceptive methods, which astonished me – young and naïve as I was. I often heard the teasing complaint "Richard, what d'you think you're doing in there, all the time reading reading reading, studying studying studying. Come outside a bit, eh, sit around a bit and spend some time with us. Come on out, have a chat and a glass of wine."<sup>9</sup>

One good neighbour was Themistocles Valtinos, who lived on a large plot of land below, inside a sweeping, elongated curve of the main road from Athens. We marvelled to have a neighbour with such a distinguished name. He often popped in for a visit, bringing wine and attempting to engage us in philosophical discussion, despite our rudimentary Greek. When Christie Trist, an American friend of ours, arrived earlier that spring, he brought us a live duck for her. He led it up Daglaridou on a length of string like a pet. I don't remember who beheaded or cleaned it for us. We took it to the local *fournos* (bakery) to get it roasted. When we collected it, it was frazzled and inedible.

Our friends were all working people. The first person we met, on our first evening in one of the *estiatoria* (restaurants) on the main street, was Antonio, a Sardinian peasant who had been an unwilling conscript in the Italian occupation army during World War II. Now, more than twenty years

later, he had returned to Greece after experiencing family difficulties and losing land at home. His job was to sweep restaurant floors and mop and wash up. Our Greek friends treated him sardonically, but kindly. His local nickname was *Makaronas* – ‘Macaroni-man’. In England this might have been something like *Spaggy* or *Spaggers*. We got on well with him because we spoke Italian. His stories about the war’s end and his misadventures getting back home across Italy from Greece were hair-raising. Antonio was the only other local foreigner we knew, except for the poet Dick Davis and his wife. Dick had also studied at Cambridge. They were living in Chalkida (ancient Chalcis), a small city around seventy kilometres north of Athens, working at another branch of the same *frontistirio*.

Some of our friends had an air of being faintly risqué and disreputable, like the brothers Kostas and Angelos, who ran a garage. Perhaps the reason they decided to take us under their wing was that, being foreign, we were a bit of a diversion for them. Kostas was enormously strong, with a torso shaped like an isosceles triangle, perched on powerful arms and legs. When he shook your hand in his huge paw, he would squeeze so hard till it hurt, and then mutter *sotto voce* in his minimal English, “Dead Fish,” an expression that seemed to give him huge satisfaction. His muscles brimmed through whatever snazzy suit he donned after voiding his mechanic’s overalls. He boasted that he could lift a car that had fallen on its side and hoist it back upright with his bare hands. Mimos, their friend, who attested Kostas’s claim, had a real (Captain Hook-style) metal hook instead of a hand. I forget if he had lost his left or right hand, and it was taboo to ask him how this unfortunate accident had happened. This trio of friends used to take us to various village feast days for patron saints, or *panygiria*,<sup>10</sup> so at weekends we did a good deal of retsina drinking and dancing. We imbibed all kinds of music too, mainly *laika*, but with a good dose of *dimotika* too.<sup>11</sup> With much encouragement from our friends, Kim and I began, stumblingly, to pick up the steps of some of the simpler round dances, as well as the *zeibekiko* and *hasapiko*.<sup>12</sup>

**PN:** Did you miss England at all?

**RB:** Social life aside, I had a solid teaching timetable, so time was full. The pattern of life was totally absorbing, and unlike anything I’d ever experienced, a middle-class London boy who had studied at Cambridge and then lived in Venice. Life in Thebes couldn’t have been more different from whatever was happening in England at that time – the era of Harold Wilson, Swinging London, Carnaby Street. I never felt I was missing anything at all.

We had no phone or TV, only a portable wireless. The *coup* arrived the day after two good friends of ours from Cambridge had turned up on our doorstep, unannounced and drunk. They were the unlikeliest of harbingers. One was Peter Mansfield, whom I've already mentioned. Peter was a classicist, linguist, polymath, *bon viveur*, and fluent speaker of Modern Greek. It was largely his influence that had first taken Kim and me to Greece in the first place. Most of his contemporaries, myself included, regarded him as a genius, both intellectually and for the huge and infectious gusto he brought to everything he did.<sup>13</sup> The other was the poet Mike Duffett,<sup>14</sup> who now lives in Valley Springs, California. After arriving back in England loaded with money from a teaching stint in Saudi Arabia, Mike had gone to visit Peter, who was living in Cambridge. They had decided on the spur of a sozzled moment to splash Mike's funds, fly out to Thebes, and surprise us. So they took a taxi from Cambridge to Heathrow, jumped on the first available Olympic Airways to Athens, and then transferred to a taxi to Thebes, pausing only to collect two of Peter's old (or, rather, young) *mangas* friends from his Monastiraki days<sup>15</sup> – Dimitrios Printzos (another Mitsos), and Babis, who was a Vlach. Later that year, when we moved to Athens, Babis taught Kim some *Vlachika*.<sup>16</sup>

That evening, we were all out drinking at a Theban taverna, together with Kostas, Angelos and Mitso-the Hook. Peter had fallen asleep on – though luckily not *quite in* – the hole-in-the-ground loo, and seemed reluctant to wake up. He was a very large man, tall and overweight, and it took several of us to pull him out. Over the next couple of days, we sat drinking and cracking jokes as we fiddled with the knobs of our portable radio to get the BBC news reports. When we did manage to tune in, the bulletins bore no relation to what we were experiencing on the ground. I've entertained a healthy mistrust of the BBC ever since. A dapper army officer, who spoke quite good English, came round to check on us, icily polite. As foreigners, we weren't at risk provided we kept our heads low. Each evening we just about managed to obey the curfew. Meanwhile, as if by some automatic signal, all our Greek friends suddenly remembered – and revamped – chains of jokes, veering between the gently ironic to the bitterly sardonic, from the previous dictatorship of Metaxas in 1939, to fit what was currently going on ...

**PN:** ... showing exactly the same immediate transmission into the sort of verbal responses that we noticed earlier ...

**RB:** Exactly. And by this point, our sense of 'normal reality' was beginning – subtly and surreptitiously – to dislocate in many small ways. A kind