Literacy as Symbolic Strategy in Greece: Methodological Considerations of Topic and Place

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Against reification: what is a context?

This paper provides me with an opportunity to suggest why the study of orality and literacy/literality in modern Greece has some theoretical as well as purely descriptive or local significance. For social anthropology, comparison between societies and cultures is a central task. While the study of modern Greek culture displays a remarkably persistent level of methodological introversion, its singular characteristics are very germane to the comparativist perspective. In part, this is due to the peculiar political circumstances that make the ancient forebears of the Greeks so much a part of current debates about the status of the modern culture. The ancient culture, which is responsible (blamed?) for some of our current *theoretical* concerns with literate discourse, becomes in the modern Greek context an object of *ethnographic* interest, and the high authority consequently given to the written word in at least one reading of modern Greek culture allows us to see literacy, not as some transcendent standard, but as a manipulable symbol and instrument of power. This suggests that we should study orality and literacy, not as absolute phenomena, but as social values. From here, it is but a short step to the further observation that philological (and other academic) practices in turn themselves becomes objects of critical ethnographic scrutiny. While an excessive concern with what academic discourse does may indeed smack of narcissistic navel-gazing, a charge that has certainly been levelled at anthropological practitioners, it takes on a degree of justifiable urgency when academic standards themselves become a popular criterion of excellence or absurdity.

Viewed in these terms, the study of orality and literacy in Modern Greece presents some twitching ironies. Paramount

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among these, surely, is the curious circumstance — although by no means an uncommon one in the history of Romantic nationalism — whereby an emergent bourgeois intelligentsia expropriated the 'oral traditions' of an equally hypostatized 'folk' and monumentalized them in order to incorporate them into a peculiar and rigid view of history. The oral utterance did not stand a serious chance of survival in a polity defined by adherence to writing things down. By reducing it to 'monuments of the word' (Politis 1909), the intelligentsia set a model of referential purity that suited and reinforced its literalistic interpretation of everything else: law, history, the conduct of political life.

The idea of an oral alternative nevertheless died hard, and exponents of various anti-establishment ideologies tried at various times to rescue it. Demoticism often seems to take orality as an ideal and to invest in it all the moral purity that its adherents attributed to the rural 'folk' (see especially Tziovas 1989). The absorption of song into literate poetry implied by the nineteenth-century use of such terms as *asma* underwent a degree of reversal. Even now, however, literacy continues to impose its static perspective: by opposing itself to 'oral tradition', it manages to suggest that orality is no less fixed than itself. It is only in such work as that of Deborah Tannen (e.g., 1980, 1982, 1984), whose expertise includes modern Greek, that we begin to see a reversal of this trend, a search for the traces of literacy in oral discourse that goes beyond the older philological tradition of treating 'oral traditions' as though they were mere end-products of some diffusionist stemmatics of the *Urtext*.

In this highly programmatic paper, I would like to suggest an alternative approach. In this, we replace a focus on orality and literacy as essentialistically conceived *qualities* of Greek discourse with a focus on the *uses* of these concepts as symbolic strategies. Before I go on to a discussion of the technical terminology used here, let me illustrate with a very simple example. All scholars of modern Greek know the differences between demotic and *katharevousa*. They are thus inclined to view with academic superciliousness the claims of certain populations (Cypriots, Dodecanesians) to speak *katharevousa* or even 'Homeric' Greek. No doubt, at the level of historical accuracy, their objections are justified.

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But the use and above all the interpretation of certain archaic-sounding forms, while a good deal less well documented than the 'pronouns of power and solidarity' (Brown and Gilman 1960), are for that very reason an insidiously effective means of highlighting status differences between speaker and listener. Neo-classical *dhioti* carries infinitely more clout than demotic *yati* — unless, of course, the listener decides to puncture the speaker's self-importance.

It would be a mistake, I think, to suggest that the demotic-*katharevousa* contrast glosses the oral-literate with any degree of accuracy. In the first place, the conscious demoticism of much written discourse belies such a claim. So, too, does the formalism of more pretentious speakers. Such a division also overlooks the capacity of Greek diglossia to serve as a vehicle for irony. Rather, it is the *assumption of rule-governedness* that characterizes literate discourse and leads uneducated speakers to treat stilted demotic as *katharevousa*. A pompous demoticist, or even a merely careful one, may be arguably 'puristic' in pursuing ideal forms of the 'real' language of 'the people'. The demoticist revolution, in some of its forms, reproduced the misconception of nineteenth-century folklore: it suppressed the semantic lability of negotiable texts, demanding such strict adherence to canonical forms that the very ambiguity of the text-context distinction, itself an important semantic resource, disappeared from sight. Orality became a *Ding an sich,* so that Apostolakis (1929) could accuse nationalist scholars of having failed to follow the rules of oral composition.

This is not to say that rules are lacking in oral discourse. Grammatical and semantic structures remain highly identifiable. But the rules can be *negotiated* in social interaction, and the rules of syntax dissolve into principles of morality, etiquette, and aesthetics. They become strategies for a variety of social practices, among them the effective projection of power over others (see also Murray 1988: 351,370). Language loses its autonomy. Caraveli (1982) has argued, for example, that songs contain numerous verbal ornaments and implicit meanings that disappear from most professional transcriptions of purely verbal texts, and that this constitutes a semantic impoverishment of those texts. On the other hand, the occasional manipulation of grammatical

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gender might suggest that the rule-boundness of formal discourse actually lends it to parody and other forms of expressive manipulation in social life (Herzfeld 1985a: 215-218; 1985b). While it would be hubristic to suggest that only ethnographic contexts can permit semantic access to verbal artifice, these examples do point to a need to break away, not only from purely philological models of semantics and syntax, but also from the literal text-context distinction that replaced these for many folklorists and anthropologists. Reification of 'text' presupposes reification of 'context'; but, as I have argued elsewhere (1985c), the resulting dualism is not only logically unnecessary, but it does not — in Greece, at least — correspond to non-literate models of the production of meaning.

Let me illustrate. When Rhodian or Cretan villagers talk about the meaning *(simasia)* of an assonant distich *(mandinadha)* in terms of its relationship to particular events, they *seem* to be addressing a text-context distinction. But this only holds true if we insist on *assuming* that the 'context' is in some way less 'constructed' than what we call the 'text'. In practice, the singer of a *mandinadha* has to textualize the event from which the *mandinadha*-text derives meaning. *Both* become virtual texts at the moment when the singer creates a meta-text capable of articulating a relationship between them. Because the *mandinadha* tradition has a complex history of interaction with written poetry, in which literate ideology proposes a perspective of transcendent referentiality, it provides an especially illuminating field in which to examine critically the concept of context.

Poetry and the poetics of social interaction
A closely related problem revolves around the term 'poetry'. This is perhaps not the place to rehearse the detailed arguments now under way about the relationship between poetry and poetics. It is worth pointing out, however, that the conflation of these two terms is the direct consequence of a more general failure to recognize language as a form of action, a failure that has been substantially corrected within linguistic anthropology but that has so far lingered on in the study of other expressive domains. It has also persisted somewhat in more traditionally philological con-

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cerns. A poetics of social interaction does not privilege language over other semiotic channels and is not — except in terms of intellectual history — a derivative of linguistic models. Although one of the most useful models for analysis is Jakobson's (1960: 356) 'poetic function', for example, it in turn rests on a long history of similar frameworks, particularly in Russian Formalism and Prague School aesthetics, in which verbal art is only one of the many aesthetic domains addressed.

Such a restoration of the action component in poetics should occasion no surprise to neohellenists aware of the Classical Greek derivations of such terms as *poiēsis* and *drama* and their often cited but rarely investigated etymological connection with notions of *doing* or *making* — in short, with causative models. To borrow a phrase from Austin (1975[1962]), the issue is how people 'do things with words'; but it is also whether words are the only means whereby they do these things. The analytical separation of textuality from other modes of action has served the study of orality very badly, and if in some sense the consequent achievement of transcendence offered some practical advantages in technological mastery over the world,[1] it also resulted in a curious blindness to the significance of writing for those amongst whom these reifications have not yet spread their paralyzing conformity.

The failure to appreciate the *poetics of language* (as opposed to the *language of poetry*) derives from the same ideological and methodological confusions as the Cartesian split between the 'embodiments' of orality and the 'transcendence' of the written word. The models are 'ideal types'; they are realized, however, only in the course of their pragmatic negotiation in social life. To approach this dialectic in a manner that will not immediately reduce the discussion once again to arid dualities, we need concepts that will allow us to handle the *uses* of the ideal-type conceptualizations in the ebb and flow of everyday social relations, and in the complex processes of interaction in which bounded verbal texts are but a single kind of component. Two pertinent and closely

1. The enormous range of relevant literature includes: E. Gellner 1988: 71-77; Havelock 1963 and 1986; Humphreys 1978, part 3, esp. p.273; Ong 1977 and 1982.

inter-related concepts that have acquired a good deal of currency in recent anthropological writings are those of *agency* and *strategy.*

Agency is the capacity to *act on* social and cultural reality and to produce change or reinforcement in an existing pattern or structure. As such, it is the social dimension of what linguists, following Austin, have called 'performativity', or 'performative utterances'. It may be a property of social entities at any level from the individual up to the nation-state and beyond. Although agency is prefigured in earlier work in anthropology (see Karp and Maynard 1983), its theoretical elaboration is a comparatively recent development (see Karp 1986). Some discussion of these terms is in order.

Agency presupposes the existence of some form of durable structure. While it was introduced into the anthropological and sociological literature partly as a counter to the excessive reification of structure, it provides the explanatory framework for relating individual strategies to structure. Structure and strategy exist in a mutually complementary, dialectical universe in which each requires the co-operation of the other. Since much recent text analysis has been centred on the investigation of textual structures, one might here raise the question: in what ways do texts serve as vehicles of agency? This is practically tantamount to asking, again with Austin, what they *do*; but it goes beyond Austin's vision in that we now ask *how* they do what they do. Parenthetically, one might observe that philology has generally missed this opportunity to insert inert academic objects into a world where they have practical consequences. One only has to consider the ways in which *mandinadha* contests induce a social re-evaluation of the contestants, or end in fist-fights, or produce a sense of solidary traditionalism against the encroachment of modern mass media, to see that they do indeed have palpable effects in what the most hard-nosed literalists would recognize as the 'real world'. Our appreciation of this phenomenon, however, is contingent upon accepting that the words of the distichs, even when interpreted 'in context', are not, so to speak, the whole story. And it is surely significant in this regard that *istoria,* for Cretan villagers at least (Herzfeld 1985a: 174), can mean physical events as much as it does narrative. Again, we must

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beware of habits of thought that conceptually separate utterance from action.

Social agency implies decision-making, and this informs some of the earlier uses of the notion of 'strategy' in anthropology (e.g., Bailey 1971, 1983; Kapferer, ed.1976). But the attribution of intention is probably best left to the actors; indeed, it is often a strategy in its own right, as when Greeks complain that petty bureaucrats act in certain ways from *etsithelismos* (caprice), hoping thereby either to shame their tormentors into a different course of action or to justify their failure to their peers. Such claims presuppose an ideology of individual volition, which is a cultural artefact rather than a universal principle of mind. Sometimes, strategies arise out of the availability of symbolic resources, such as 'ethnicity' (Royce 1982) or 'history' (Appadurai 1981) — far too often treated as hypostatized entities, but more usefully approached in the cited works as *properties* of social interaction. This view runs counter, of course, to the literalism of the state, which translates ethnicity into nationalism, identity into *dheltia taftotitos,* and the relative (and negotiable) social distance of *kseni* into the absolute exclusion of 'others' as 'foreigners'. Such is the link between referentiality and the bureaucratic nation-state, the product of some of the most successful strategies — which it recasts as historical necessity — of all time.

Strategies are the means by which agents realize their effects. They range from the long-term operations of often quite differentiated agents enmeshed in complex power structures, as in Foucault's (1978: 307-308) analysis of discipline, to the pettiest aspects of daily interaction. In the latter sense, they are opposed to *rules,* although the adoption of a rule-like stance — often modelled on literate prototypes — may be a strategy in its own right (Bourdieu 1977: 37-40). Here, the converse strategies of invoking orality as a justification for nativist demoticism or literate, writerly speech as a mark of 'properness' (Kazazis 1966) both fit the same pattern — a warning to those who, in attempting to codify informal speech, risk surrendering to the very strategies that characterize what Bakhtin (1981) and others call 'official' or 'authoritative' discourse.

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These concepts are no less prone to reification than what they displace. But the defence that this framework nonetheless potentially offers against the reification of orality and literacy is valuable at least in as much as it distances us from both official and 'officializing' (Bourdieu 1977: 37) strategies and allows us greater freedom to make our analytical and methodological choices.

The poetics of evocation

The social life of a local community is inevitably embedded in much larger processes. Even the most conservative folklorists acknowledged this; indeed, it was a necessary precondition of their massive attempts to reconstitute unified *Urtexte* from the 'variants' they collected. For them, however, the local community was a passive consumer — and textual abuser — of literary work. Later interpretations, mostly of Marxist inspiration, reversed these assumptions (e.g., Lambrinos 1947), but suffered from a similarly unidirectional view of textual influence: the 'folk', no less highly romanticized in these readings, were the producers of a textuality so pure that the practice of writing violated its sensibilities. With the progressive discrediting of *Urtext* models, moreover, came a devaluation of all etymological and derivational models, a devaluation to which anthropologists certainly contributed with their synchronic emphasis on the 'ethnographic present'. One result was that the power of structure to *evoke* the past — a power that for some analysts (e.g., Sperber 1975) represented a failure of (literal) semantics — did not immediately become apparent.

While a few students of Greek folklore have spotted the allusive properties of textual form, (e.g., Alexiou 1974) and while the capacity of folk idioms for conveying irony and parody is now more generally acknowledged (e.g., Danforth 1976, on Karagiozis) the easy shift from the literate word to literal interpretation has generally obscured these relatively imponderable aspects. The fact that, as Sifakis (1988: 12) has recently acknowledged, it is usually too late to rescue the textual material from the learned mountings in which it has been so artificially set means that discussion of 'the' meaning of a text excludes the multiple perspectives of those audiences for which it was produced. It is clear, moreover, that the children of illiterate parents are often socialized into a

lability of semantic understanding that would constitute a veritable philological scandal for the literate (Heath 1983: 190-193): words and things can be reassociated more or less at will, provided this is done against a background of shared assumptions.

In the Greek context, the legalistic insistence upon the premise of referentiality can probably be associated, more convincingly by far than the dubious dualism of the demoticism-purism debate, with what Mouzelis (1978: 134-136) has identified as the 'formalism' of the politically dependent and bureaucratically regimented nation-state structure. Indeed, Goody (1986: 12-13) associated the collapse of segmentary social relations[2] into state-like political structures with the reification of semantics. Once again, however, it is important to batten firmly on to the elusive but necessary insight that this argument turns on an ideal-type contrast: within any state structure there may continue to exist more or less subversive perceptions of social and political relationships that are much more segmentary in character than they are bureaucratic. Goody himself emphasizes (1986: 32) that writing creates an *impression* of decontextualized meaning; he does not go so far as to suggest that such a thing exists in any ontologically absolute sense. Literary — and even (*sic*!) academic — discourse exhibits segmentary properties; and while these do not overdetermine the production of knowledge (Karp and Maynard 1983: 497) they do raise persistent questions about the reality of our conviction that, with an adequate system of writing, we can 'tie down' the meanings of utterances beyond all ambiguity.

One result of bureaucratic pervasion is a certain loss of categorical innocence. Language itself becomes an object of semantic regulation, the neo-Cratylism of countless bureaucratic Big Brothers. Literacy, the object of the transcendence that Goody calls universalism, isolates language from other domains of action. In consequence, it has become all but inconceivable to regard 'poetics' as anything other than verbocentric: either one treats it as purely focussed on verbal codes (poetry), or one is thought

2. Segmentation, on which there is now an enormous literature in social anthropology, may be defined as the principle of complementary fission and fusion in social relations. It may be realized through a descent system, as in many African societies, or it may appear simply as a relativistic understanding of group allegiance.

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to have foisted a linguistic model on the entire range of possible semiotic systems.

Because, moreover, a poetics conceived in these narrower terms inevitably seeks regularity of system rather than of action, it isolates the printed texts of 'folklore' in ways that subvert whatever the original producers intended as its *simasia*. I do not mean that exercises in the extraction of grammatical regularities such as those identified by Sifakis (1988) or Mackridge (this volume) have no value. On the contrary, their ability to generate rules of form affirms the structural aspect, for textual analysis at least, of what Giddens (1984) has called 'the duality of structure' or 'structuration' — that is, the necessary interplay and interdependence of structure and action. In this regard, formal syntactic analyses complement the search for textual strategies. The achievement of both Sifakis and Mackridge is all the more interesting in that the regularities they have identified appear to subsist quite independently of extra-textual considerations of any sort.

What syntactic analyses cannot do, however, is reconstruct *ex nihilo* the strategies that once used the very discipline of syntactic form to generate *simasia*. In other words, they succeed in isolating one component in the production of meaning, and they show how it works. They are important, not because they isolate regularities and so lead us to some putative unconscious patterning, but because they uncover one of the major *resources* that performers have at their disposal. Since such studies do not show how their performance deploys that function in cooperation with other aspects of meaning-production, however, they are not really studies of meaning as such. They investigate, as it were, semantically exploitable properties, rather than semantics *tout court*.

Because philology is — perhaps inevitably — a verbocentric discipline, it accepts with difficulty the extension of a concept of meaning that incorporates as textual those aspects of text production that are usually considered to be 'merely' contextual. But some anthropologists, too, are reluctant to accept that meaning *qua* (social) importance (as in the Greek *dhen ekhi simasia,* 'it doesn't matter') and the meaning of verbal utterances might be treated within a common framework (e.g., Just 1987: 127-128). Such a position argues a refusal to treat language as action, and

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thus to take it seriously as a component in the constitution of social relationships. It has the ironic consequence of marginalizing language in exactly the same way, although for very different professional or ideological reasons, as the most conservative forms of philology. The only justification for separating the *simasia* of *mandinadha* texts from the *simasia* of their context or of their allusive range would be the existence of just such a conceptual division of labour in the local canon. This is not borne out by the scanty evidence we still have from the actual performances of Greek folk song (Caraveli [1982] provides some of the most sensitive analysis; see also Cowan 1988 for an especially perceptive exploration of related themes). Rather, it appears to be a misunderstanding born of the continual decontextualization of those performances.

By decontextualization, I do not mean simply the stripping away of context in the traditional sense of that term. Rather, I intend the pervasive disregard that scholarship has exhibited towards the synergistic and synaesthesic properties of actual performance. It would be hard to imagine a Greek singer either so naïve or so far removed from literate models as to be incapable of separating words, music, social context, and accompanying gesture from each other. But if the same singer operates within a tradition that identifies a common *simasia* in all these identifiable domains, what possible justification could we conjure out of our literate prejudices for apportioning the *disjecta membra* of *simasia* among those domains? By doing so, we, not the singers, become guilty of nominalism and reductionism. For all we achieve thereby is a hopeless confusion between types of signifier (words, music, etc.) and classes of signifieds (things that words mean, things that music means, etc.): we simplistically — and illegitimately — assume the existence of the latter because we know that there is a clearly defined division of labour amongst the former. The very closeness of the modern Greek terminology to its Classical roots may further blind us to the important divergences between technical English-language and everyday Greek usages, as may an Anglo-Saxon cultural valuation of the literal over the metaphorical that one does not seem to find so prominently amongst Greeks (Tannen 1978, 1982; see also Chock 1987; but

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contrast Mackridge 1985: 348, on the close relationship between Greek literality and the imitation of 'European' models — an effect, relevant to my argument here, of bureaucratization and *embourgeoisement*). Such valuations of literality and figurativeness are, moreover, ideal types. They do not suggest that English-speakers actually use a more literal semantics, but that they appear to uphold a linguistic morality — possibly allied to an affectation of distrust towards punning and other verbal 'cleverness' — in which it is 'just not done,' and certainly un-scientific, to be too figurative.

These remarks are intended to suggest the enormous load of cultural specificity through which any analysis of Greek folk song and narrative must work. In order to appreciate the work done by grammarians and other formalists, it is necessary to rethink exactly what that work does. If its major task is seen as identifying unique and irreducible meanings, it certainly fails. But if what it does is to illuminate the symbolic resources on which singers, poets, and storytellers can draw, if (in other words) its contributions are viewed in a context that is not traditional to it, then the pragmatic 'deformations' of verbal discipline in performance can become much more accessible. Textual *form* and the vagaries of *performance* are mutually and inextricably co-involved. Neither, in practice, 'means' very much without the other.

A coda: what to do with the donkey's tail

This paper has been largely theoretical and programmatic so far, although I have tried to suggest some of the special insights and resonances that the study of Modern Greek culture can bring to a consideration of the main issues. It is not my intention here to attempt a full-scale analysis of 'a' text. Instead, as a sort of coda to the main argument, I shall briefly look at a genre of folk text that has rarely even been mentioned in studies of Greek folklore — a silence that has compounded our ignorance about the principles of meaning production if not about textual composition.

This genre, which is found in the rural communities of Western Crete, consists of assonant distichs strung together along a roughly narrative axis and linked by a theme of apparently parodic lamen-

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tation. The texts describe the reactions of individual villagers to the death of a pack animal (mule, donkey) or, less often, an animal raised for food but not as part of a flock (pig, ox). The villagers are represented as discussing the division of the meat — a morally whimsical notion, since the eating of carrion is forbidden (Herzfeld 1985a: 148).

These texts are primary candidates for exclusion from the official canon. They are utterly local and personal in reference; they more generously use local dialect forms (e.g., the first person plural present tense verb ending *-oumene,* for *-oume*); and they dwell lovingly on such unseemly behaviour as quarreling, farting, and heavy drinking. They have no obvious historical antecedent, since the 'honourable ass' of the Renaissance texts is not only a survivor but an intelligent one at that. There is nothing to commend them to the survivalist collectors of the nationalist tradition. They are a bleak illustration of the fate of nonliterate invention at the hands of a literacy strongly linked to criteria of etiquette. Their *simasia* is to be found so preponderantly in what the scholarly tradition calls 'context' that the literate criteria of folklore analysis effectively screen out their very existence. For the ontology of literate textuality depends entirely on the idea of a transcendent history and culture, and so aggressively 'particularistic' (Goody 1986) a tradition — one in which transcendence itself is arguably an object of fun — simply fails to register. The brief discussion that follows is based on examples from the village which I have pseudonymously called 'Glendi'.[3]

3. For reasons that relate to the nature of my fieldwork, I am continuing the practice of disguising the personal identities of both my informants and the characters whose exploits they purport to parody. This makes for a good deal of awkwardness in the reproduction of textual materials, which I shall consequently keep to the minimum needed to make some critical points, trying also, wherever possible, to use examples where this manoeuvre will not be necessary. The authors of these texts are extremely lively personalities, although there is some dispute among them as to who composed which verses. I certainly have no intention of erasing their individuality; the decision to use pseudonyms in this work was a tactical decision which I discussed with several villagers. Nonetheless, I am uncomfortably aware of the irony that it creates, and I hope later consultation may permit the removal of this 'cover'.

Texts often begin with a brief statement about the event that is supposed to have taken place:[4]

Ο [name] τον εσκότωσε το γάϊδαρο στ' αμπέλι
κ' έκατσε και τον έκλαιγε σαν το μωρό κοπέλι.
Μιά σκαλιδιά του βρόντηξε και κάτω τονε βάνει
και το ευτύς εντάκαρε λιβάνι να του πιάνει.

[Name] killed the ass in the vineyard,
and he sat and bewailed it like a baby child.
He slashed at it with a hoe and sent it tumbling down
and immediately went to get incense to wave over it.

Villagers may recite single distichs. More commonly, however, they either, metonymically, recite the first few words, or they may produce the entire sequence; in either case, they show a clear perception of the bounded existence of the text in itself.

The model is that of literary production. The speaker is a *piitis,* and he 'writes' the words — turning them over and over in his head at night, as one such individual told me, until he can produce an effective sequence in public. Thus, the non-literate production of these texts takes literate methods of composition as its model. Phrases are modelled on familiar folk-song imagery and written formulae. For example, one phrase —

Ο [name] επρόβαλε απ' [sic] το παραθύρι,
Κοντέψετέ μου ένα κιλό γιατί 'χω μουσαφίρη.

[Name] leaned out of a window:
'Bring me a kilo, as I have a guest!'

— reproduces a standard formula known from a huge variety of song sources (Herzfeld 1973: 424-428; Sifakis 1988: 104-105).

In what ways such usages might be parodic remains obscure. Contrary, perhaps, to one's armchair imaginings, an ethnographer would not be able to elicit a satisfactory response to this question simply by asking. Leading questions are not a way to generate

4. The texts were taken down with pen in hand, so I have not here specifically emphasized the phonetic characteristics of Cretan in the transcriptions.

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convincing evidence. To some extent, moreover, we must recognize the ambiguous intertextuality of these verses as an important characteristic of their production — not the kind of reading that satisfies any essentialist quest for textual meaning. In another sense, however, the verses do seem to be parodic: they caricature the proclivities, gender roles, and speech patterns of fellow-villagers. These male poets almost invariably represent women as scolding peacemakers who despise the men's quarreling. The texts thus at least suggest that a capacity for parody exists. In that their form closely follows that of well-known texts, it is likely that, in *some* situations and at *some* moments, singers do intentionally parody more formal textual conventions through these verses.

But do they parody specifically *written* conventions? That is much harder to answer, the more so in as much as the stylistic shibboleths that divide written from oral texts for traditionally minded scholars are themselves unclear and complicated by tangled processes of mutual influence. There is a hint at least that 'writing', while externally the image of power *par excellence,* is for many villagers an 'unmanly' activity to which the weak have recourse as their only possible source of authority. Indeed, one of these texts mocks a very short young man who, unable to help carry the carcass, is charged with writing down in his notebook *(tefteri)* the amounts and parts of the carcass assigned to each villager. This is also the poet's symbolically stated medium, although in practice he did not actually use one.

Beyond literacy, there is also some straightforward mockery of the proprieties:

Ἕνας μακρύς, καλά μακρύς, είπενε την αλήθεια —
Εγώ δεν έτυχα 'παδά κι αφήστε μου τ' αρχίδια.
Και ο [name] τού 'πενε, Δεν είν' αυτές κουβέντες,
τ' αρχίδια θα τα ψήσουμε να κάμουμε μεζέδες.
Μεζέδες θα τα κάμομε, ένα κρασί να πιούμε,
απίς τονε μοιράσουμε για να ξεκουραστούμε.

A tall fellow, very tall, said the truth:
'I didn't happen to be there, [so] leave me the balls!'
And [name] told him, 'That's not the way to talk —

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> we'll roast the balls so we'll have some snacks.
> We'll turn them into snacks, so's to drink a glass of wine,
> after we've divided it up, so we can relax.'

Social conventions and realities are mocked in other ways as well. The poet's activity is a sort of test of temper; he must be careful, because everyone knows that the genre is intended to tease:

> Του [name] ψόφησε το κόκκινο μουλάρι
> και δεν ευρέθηκε κανείς τραγούδια να του βγάλει.
> Ο [poet's name] εκατέβηκε, εις το ντουκιάνι πάει,
> για [sic] του εφορτωθήκανε τραγούδι να του βγάλει.
> Να του το βγάλω θέλω 'γώ μα θέλω να σκεφτείτε,
> αν είν' και του κακοφανεί να του επιτεθείτε.

> [Name]'s red mule died
> and no one could be found to sing songs about it.
> [Name] went down there, goes to the coffeehouse,
> and they all set on him to make up a song about it.
> 'I'll make up one about it, but I want you to gather your wits about you,
> and if he gets upset you're to attack him!'

Above all, the verses mock villagers' known pecularities: one immediately looks for the wine that will be needed to go with the 'food'; another wants the skin as a mattress for his enormous brood of children; yet another wants the donkey's tail as a fly-switch. These attributions may seem innocuous enough. They are always potentially dangerous, however, in a community where slight advantages in the endless contest over prestige may have real consequences for a family's economic and social condition. The poet must be careful: writing things down makes them permanent, and a man (especially) who feels unsure of himself may respond with violence. His strength will eventually be shown to best advantage, however, if he learns to bear these needling insults as a mark of pride, just as many men who begin by reacting touchily to derisive nicknames eventually boast of them and even place them — 'write' them, be it noted — on the sides of their personal vehicles (see Herzfeld 1985a: 234).

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In mocking the internal power-mongers of the village, moreover, these poets may be commenting indirectly on the community's collective sense of powerlessness before the forces of law and urbanity. The very innocuousness of the subject-matter allows this kind of indirection (see also Trawick 1988: 197 for an analogous observation in a Tamil community). It may well be the case — but how can one be sure? — that the very notion of carrion-eating is a bitter allusion to the poverty that the villagers claim has always beset them. 'Hunger' is a constant and manipulable metaphor for economic poverty and political marginalization, and memories of wartime deprivation — when a live donkey might indeed be slaughtered for meat — lend some force to this suggestion.

In Glendi, moreover, poets are not usually the most powerful of men. Indeed, the only case I encountered of a man who had enjoyed real economic and political power and who turned to the composition of verse, did so in his dotage, when he became the object of slightly pitying fun and when his displays of emotion were considered a mark of his age and enfeeblement (Herzfeld 1985a: 9-10). 'Writing' may come to some as a compensation for the lack or loss of other, more tangible forms of power. Villagers perceive a real link between the writing of verse and the more threatening 'writing' that characterizes the activity of bureaucrats. Writing brings a kind of permanence, so that a man's willingness to tolerate the existence of derisive verses about his character, even in an oral 'archive', comes with the same self-confidence that also leads him — as often happens with the swashbuckling Glendiots — to commit acts of cheeky defiance against the law and its representatives (such as inviting policemen to eat stolen meat at his table). A poet's 'writing', actually a carefully prepared oral recitation in the coffee-house, is the source of both his pride and his fear. The fact that we cannot tell if his style is imitative or parodic of any literary prototypes is immaterial here. Writing, for the Glendiots, is less importantly a matter of aesthetic style in the abstract than it is of the poetics of social interaction in the sense in which I have discussed that term above — in this case, the ambiguous play of power. It is truly ambiguous, moreover: despite the exaggerated respect for 'writing' that the

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poets display, villagers in general do not necessarily think that
books and learning are terribly useful:

Μη θαρρευτείς μαθήτριας γιατί θα σε γελάσει,
όπως την άλγεβρα ξεχνά έτσι θα σε ξεχάσει.

Don't have faith in a schoolgirl, because she'll deceive you.
Just as she forgets her algebra, so she'll forget you!

It is true that a 'carrion poet' may describe the scenes of weeping
and wailing that attend the animal's demise in language more con-
ventionally associated with lamenting *(miroloya)* for the human
dead. The description of grief more closely resembles the writ-
ten poems of Bounialis, and those of his modern successors who
bewailed the horrors (for example) of the German Occupation,
than it does the Glendiot laments (which are in an entirely dif-
ferent metrical scheme). But these poems in turn have many oral
parallels, and it is impossible to disengage the various trajectories
of influence from each other so long after the fact.

But the question of textual influence is secondary here. I have
tried to suggest that it is even something of a red herring. The
orality-literacy opposition can, of course, be reduced to a ques-
tion of formal stylistics, just as the demotic-*katharevousa* pair
can (and often is) be treated as simply a contrast between two
different lexica and two sharply differentiated morphological and
syntactic systems. But such formulations, in their insistent focus
on precise structures and literal meanings, miss the ambiguity that
is empirically an important aspect of virtually all social life (see
Fernandez 1986). It makes very little sense to talk about the im-
portance of (social and cultural) context for the analysis of texts
if (*a*) that division rides roughshod over local perceptions of how
meaning is made, and (*b*) the ambiguity of social relations is itself
screened out by the scholasticism of the analysis. I am well aware
that some readers will be uncomfortable with this argument, which
resolves nothing. There is no obvious conclusion; we leave the
scene with more questions than answers. But this is at least faithful
to the social experience of participants, who do not know whether
the targets will be angry or secretly flattered; who are not sure

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who will be mocked next; and who do not ordinarily trouble themselves with anxieties of influence although they do worry about the power of the bureaucratic pen. As Trawick observes in connection with her Tamil materials (1988: 195), what is analytically needed — and what traditional methods do not make available to us — is '[n]ot only a theoretical bridge, but a phenomenological one, a widened area of shared experience.'

This returns us, finally, to a point I made earlier about literate and oral semantics. The assumption of referentiality, which is the semantic equivalent of the essentialist arguments of nationalistic folklore, does not fit the evidence of everyday usage. Meaning is evanescent. The attempt to pin it down, like an entomological specimen, therefore violates usage. It is certainly true that much of the oral verse with which philologists have been concerned has been decontextualized in precisely this way; the fault is not usually that of present-day analysts. But that does not mean that we cannot recognize the lacuna as an extremely serious one. The syntactic regularities identified by Mackridge and Sifakis, which the 'carrion poems' almost certainly display to the full, provide us with the yardstick whereby we may assure ourselves that the poets indeed know what they are doing. But that discipline is the means of foregrounding meaning; it is not the meaning itself. If we have not previously asked why 'carrion poems' sound like the great threnodies of Bounialis and Sifakas, that is because the scholarly tradition has excluded the disrespectful oral texts and thereby circumvented the very possibility of comparison. In the social context of power and scholarly knowledge, texts that seem non-referential (or non-transcendent, or particularistic) too easily lose their *simasia* — their meaning *and* their importance. At that moment, we lose sight of the unity of *simasia* so clearly perceived by the Greek villagers whose texts we presume to discuss. The analysis must consequently lack any *simasia* of its own.

In short, the value of formal analysis is precisely that it helps us understand how meaning is produced, not that it explains meaning as such. In the absence of all the other contributing dimensions of social life, however, I find myself composing a threnody myself — one that echoes Sifakis' justly regretful acknowledge-

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ment that in many respects it it already too late to attempt the composite analysis that we need. All we are left with is the grammar and the words: the bones without the life. The self-conscious orality that still peeks through as a convention in literary texts is no less formulaic, and no less devoid of immediate social *simasia,* than the dessicated lines of 'folk verse', divorced from melody and society, that we find in the pages of books. The impossibility of a fully-fledged poetics in the extended sense I have suggested here leaves us only with the fragments of a verbal complex we recognize as, merely, poetry. In any investigation that is sensitive to the shades of a past audience, that precious remnant should instil a grievous sense of both intellectual and aesthetic loss. All we can now do, and it is not trivial, is to analyze extant styles of oral composition in a manner that is more responsive to the overall production of meaning.

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