Interview with George Economou, February, 2008 -- draft

Tom Kalaris, interviewer

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TK: Let me start before you were born. Your father was born in Greece. How did he come to this country?

GE: My father was from a small village in the northern Peloponnese. Like many other people of that time, he grew up there with little economic opportunity -- herding goats, tending olive groves. He decided to try America and he came to this country in 1907. He sailed to New York and then traveled directly to St. Louis.

When he arrived, all he had was an address on a slip of paper. A policeman helped him find his way. He had a job at a mattress factory waiting for him but soon got a job on the railroad. He worked his way across the western U.S. for various railroads laying track and eventually ended up in Great Falls while working for the Great Northern, where he decided to stay. He enjoyed the mountainous terrain, for it reminded him, he said, of where he grew up in Greece. At that time there were about 1,000 Greeks in Great Falls, out of a total population of around 10,000. It was the largest Greek population in the state. There was even a neighborhood known as "Greek Town." Most men worked for the railroad but other Greeks began to go into business as well -- restaurants, small stores, etc.

TK: How about your mother?

GE: Back then most Greek men came to America as single men. Once they were established and they decided they wanted to marry and have a family, they would travel back to Greece, often to their home village, and find a wife to bring back to the states. That was not the case with my parents. In Great Falls at that time there was a Greek family who had had five children in five years. The mother, my future aunt, and her husband wanted help with the children, so

they wrote to her family in Greece to bring over one of her sisters. There were three daughters, one was too young, being about 8, another, the oldest, was "too mature" to travel alone, but the middle daughter, my mother to be, was 14, and her parents lied about her age so she would be old enough to be allowed to travel to the U.S.

I have written about much of this in my long poem AMERIKI, BOOK ONE & TWO. Later, I wrote a poem about the general immigrant experience for a Greek American issue of THE CHARIOTEER, #43 (2005) – "Day of Disembarkation."

TK: As you were growing up, did your parents ever talk about returning to Greece?

GE: No. Not at all. This was their home and their new country. They returned to Greece to visit, but this was only after many years. They emigrated and committed to becoming Americans.

TK: What was it like for you growing up in Great Falls? Were you bilingual? Were most of your friends Greek, or were they the normal cross-section of kids?

GE: I did grow up bilingual, with both English and Greek spoken in the home. My mother's English was very good because soon after she came to this country she studied English at a Catholic convent school in Great Falls. After I left home for college, she usually wrote to me in English, although sometimes she would write in Greek as well.

As for my friends, I knew many Greeks from the Greek church and the Greek community and I had a couple of close friends, but most of my buddies in school were American kids from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

I remember when I was in high school I wanted to play football. The coaches regularly recruited me because at that time I was 6'2" and 175 lbs. Now days that might be average, but back then it good sized. And each fall I would bring a permission slip home from school, but my parents refused to sign and let me play. I had played in junior high school and liked the game, but my parents were concerned about the possibility of injuries. I had better luck with baseball and took great pleasure in one summer of semi-pro ball as an outfielder.

I did pursue student activities in school, though, and served on the debate team for four years. When I was a senior I was elected student body president.

TK: What subjects interested you?

GE: English, speech, and art were my major interests then. Great Falls, most of Montana in fact, had a very strong school system back then. I remember one of my English teachers telling us how lucky we were, that Montana was third in the nation in per-capita spending on education. I was lucky to have had some excellent teachers.

But debate and public speaking was the major focus back then. My two speech and debate coaches were first-rate educators and had a profound influence on me. I did start writing some of my first poems when I was in high school. But my major artistic interest back then was painting. I was taken at the age of 8 for painting lessons from a nun at the same convent school my mother had attended, and went religiously once or twice a week to my nun—teacher's studio.

I know she taught me a lot about technique, but being her student was frustrating in many ways because everything I did was derivative -- a copy of this or that, from other paintings to picture post cards. She hated modern art and discouraged creative experiments. When I left Montana to go to college in the East, I abandoned painting, throwing my brushes and supplies into my parents' basement and didn't return to painting again until 1988. My wife and I spend summers on Cape Cod and in 1988, after a trip to Paris where I was inspired by some pictures by Pierre Bonnard, I went out and bought some paint and brushes. At times I can't help wondering what would have happened if I had been born in a major city where I might have received training at an art institute.

TK: How did you decide where to go to college?

My parents, Greek parents in general I'd have to say, were supportive of their children getting good educations and preparing themselves to go out into the world. For myself, both my debate coaches wanted me to attend Northwestern University's renowned School of Speech. This was the only school I applied to and I was accepted. I hadn't thought about any other college, but then, the summer after I graduated, I was getting a little nervous about my choice. A first cousin who was at Harvard Law came home for the summer and asked me where I was going to go to college. When I told him Northwestern he said I should apply to an Ivy League school. I told him it was way too late, since it was almost August by then. He encouraged me to apply to some of the smaller colleges back east which might have some room at the last minute. I decided to

give it a try so I picked out two, Colgate and Amherst, and wrote to them. Both wrote back saying they were full for the coming year, but if I wanted to attend another school and apply for the next year, they would consider my application. Which was what I had expected. But when Colgate wrote back to me, they included some literature on the school and an application and said I could apply for this fall but that they couldn't promise anything. I liked what I saw in the Colgate pamphlets, so I decided to apply. In my mind I decided to let fate determine what would happen. If Colgate accepted me, I would go there. Otherwise I would go to Northwestern.

Colgate wrote back and said they'd accepted me that fall. The school at that time was about 1,300 students. Looking back, I think that someone in the admissions office had a map of the U.S. with pins in it representing where their students were from. For the entire expanse of Montana there was only one pin, and that student was a senior. So perhaps they felt they had an obligation to have some representative from Montana.

TK: What were your interests in college? Did you end up majoring in English?

GE: Back then they gave freshmen an aptitude test twice -- at the beginning of the freshman year and again at the end. When I first took the test I scored a 98% in science, so my advisor, who was a professor in the music department, said I should major in pre-med and become a doctor. Well, that didn't really interest me so I was able to argue that I should be allowed to take the general classes that freshmen take and he agreed. So at the end of my freshman year I took the test again and this time I scored a 99% in science. And again my advisor said I should major in pre-med and become a doctor. I still had no interest in this. I argued that the test I was scoring so high on was really measuring how well I could read and understand a complex article, and that it had very little to do with science, and what I was really good at was absorbing ideas through reading, so I should major in English. So I majored in English.

For a while I considered a dual major in English and Classical Languages. I had had many years of Latin in high school, and my Latin teacher, Mrs. Churchill, was terrific. I took several classes at Colgate in Latin poetry, but I only took one class in Ancient Greek. I graduated from Colgate in 1956 with a degree in English and went to graduate school at Columbia the next fall.

TK: From our previous talks, one part of your background I find very interesting is the summers you spent on track crew hammering railroad spikes for the Great Northern RR.

GE: I did that for four summers. I wrote a memoir about that experience for a magazine, MONDO GRECO, (Fall 2001-Spring 2002). For two summers I worked on a small crew that took care of the track between Great Falls and Vaughn. That crew was mostly Greek. The foreman was my godfather. For another two summers I worked on the Truck Gang, a larger crew, 20-25 men. We traveled around the area where larger crews were needed for bigger jobs, like stabilizing sink holes. That crew had a variety of people -- Greeks, Mexicans, an American Indian, an Italian, army veterans looking for a new start, some men who were borderline winos, barely able to hang on. It was a good crew and a good experience.

The summers I worked for the Great Northern were the last years track work was done by manual laborers, a time when men drove spikes by hand. Back then we would use a mechanical jack to lift up the rails, and the crew would use shovels to tamp gravel under the ties. Then we would lower the rails back on the ties and drive the spikes. Two good men could drive a spike in three to four alternating blows. One would set and start it, then the other man would take the first swing. It took some skill. The heads on the hammers weren't much larger than the head of the spike. If you missed and hit the rail, it felt as if your whole body would split in half. And the rest of the crew would look at you and laugh.

The year after I quit working there, the railroad brought in machines that did all the work. Everything was mechanized and very different.

TK: Did you hunt and fish growing up?

GE: I was never moved to hunt. I did fish occasionally, especially for the pleasure of taking beautiful hikes up to remote mountain streams and creeks with my father and watching him do it like a champion. (See AMERIKI, BK ONE, Part V, Recreation 2).

V (from Ameriki)

Recreation: 2

the act
        recalled/the act
of its recollection
                the act

of recording that recollection
become all one mosaic
                                        one song worth singing:
  to remember the walk down
  into Pine Coulee
                                is to remember
  walking on air not rocks--
  what joy in the mountains
  man, what joy is there
                                          an Achaian daimon
  sings out
                  (in Cascade County now)
  what joy there is in the mountains
  hear the birdies tell it every day

  and how they bear witness
  these meadowlarks
                                    their gut song in the trees
                                    and gut sings out of your hand
  you fish for trout
  crouch, sneak in the cool of the morning
  word and shadowless
  all gesture
  beside the brilliant stream

that is the moment cast in the light
of what?
                the day
                 the memory
rolled off the tongue for today & tomorrow
sung in the mind's ear
                                        & heard anywhere
that moment yields the flower in the seed
light as air
                    & hard as rock

--ingenium--
the wonderful
engine by which we ever shape ourselves & world
anew/
rocks. birds. sorrows. fish.
light. flowers. joys/
to a self-surpassing music

VII (from *Ameriki*)

It was midnight & raining
in St. Louis when he arrived
address slip in hand--

a cab & a cop got him there
waking up the Italian grocer
the young Greeks lived over.

After a week they got the foreman
to put him on the line
clamping bedsprings to their frame.

Paid by the piece for dead work
in his hands & depressed
by roommates sick with the clap,

in the spring of '08 IK signed
on a workgang a cousin recruited
& was off for the Hi-Line in Montana,

where he learned housekeeping
in a box car & the gandy dance
which he danced in the tracks across Nebraska,

Arkansas,

& Texas before he was through,
then back to Montana to finish
with the railroad in the round-house.

Once in a cloudburst outside Fort Worth
he ran for cover to a farm complete
with farmer & daughter--

his first "American" friends
eventually asked him to stay
& make a life with them,

but he moved on with the gang
not so restless as more restful
in that society.

Through hunger
there had been: 2 loaves/a can
of sardines for almost 2 weeks
& no help from a country man,

terrible solitude of disease:
dream-sweats through typhoid
as friends signed on gangs for new lines,

(Onderdonk lying there chilled & cramped
as his outfit moved against rebel lines)

& fear: on the C B & Q outside Kearney
jobless natives threw rocks at their box car all night
--in the morning they all escaped together.

After so many ties tamped & hot
boxes cleaned out, to put down
his roots in Great Falls, to go

into business for himself,
(what did Adam Smith say
about personal interests?)

to marry, to dance, dance
the dance of Isaiah round
the marriage altar thrice

as witness to the prophet's
joy in the first of miracles:
w a t e r i n t o w i n e .

TK: I can recall two famous people associated with Great Falls -- A.B. Guthrie and Charlie Russell. Growing up, were you aware of A.B. Guthrie?

GE: I was a big fan of his. I may have seen him around town—I believe he had an office in the Rainbow Hotel—but I was just a high school kid in those days and too shy to approach him. My favorite Guthrie novel was the The Big Sky, which I taught years later in a course at Long Island University as an example of what is called the "coming of age novel." My students, who were mostly from Brooklyn and the New York metro area, liked it a lot and I was very pleased. I recall the novel was made into a so-so black and white movie starring Kirk Douglas. There was a big hullabaloo about the world premiere of *The Way West* in Great Falls but I couldn't go -- I think that I had the chicken pox, or something like that during my freshman year in high school, and was very disappointed.

GE: With respect to Charlie Russell, we lived on 4th Avenue North, and 20th Street, a few blocks east of Russell's famous cabin studio on 4th Avenue around 13th, 14th Street. There's a fine small museum there now across the street from the cabin. But when I was growing up, it was just his cabin and studio, a fixture in the neighborhood and I used to pass it all the time when I was a school kid. I remember being taken there on a class visit when I was in grade school. We went into the studio and saw his pallets and paints and all kinds of western paraphernalia. It was all very exciting, the first time in my life that I experienced a sense of a place where art was made. There was a famous bar on Central Avenue called The Mint, where he used to hang out. When I

was in high school I asked my father if he ever met him, and he said, "Oh, yeah, sure, everybody knew Charlie Russell. He'd sit at a table talking to people and having a beer … he'd doodle and draw pictures right on the napkins and coasters." I said, "Gee, Dad, you wouldn't happen to have any of those, would you? Do you have any down in the basement someplace?" He didn't. People just left them there, he told me.

I have a vivid memory of being very possessive of Russell for Montana and Montanans as I was growing up. Looking in art books I kept noticing reproductions of his paintings courtesy of places like the Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and the Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City and feeling resentful. It was, of course, a foolish and naïve sentiment, which I eventually got over. And then, after we moved to the University of Oklahoma in 1983, I got to see those same paintings in Tulsa and Oklahoma City and Fort Worth and other places and took pride in our artist's great reputation. I was especially pleased when OU named a professorship in the art department after him.

TK: Did you know many Montana writers?

GE: Growing up in Great Falls, I recall one of our neighbors was Dr. Schemm, a prominent physician and father of Ripley Schemm. Years later, when I was in Montana visiting my parents, Ripley's husband, the poet Richard Hugo, dropped by to visit. Because he was so fond of the Greek coffee and baklava, and whatever else my mother served him, she made a small package of Greek pastries for him to take home to Ripley.

TK: Were there any other Montana writers at the time that you were aware of?

GE: There's a wonderful book -- I think it had been published before I was in high school -- called *Montana: High, Wide, and Handsome*.

TK: Was the author [Joseph Kinsey] Howard?

GE: Howard, yes, a Great Falls journalist. That was and is a book with a terrific reputation. It was published in 1943 by Yale University Press, but I must confess I never read it until the 1980s, when it was reprinted by the University of Oklahoma Press, on whose Board of Directors I served for about 10 years. It was one of the first books I asked for upon joining the board, and I finally had the experience of reading it.

One more comment on Montana writers. During one of my early trips back to Montana in the late 1950s I met Leslie Fiedler, who was teaching then at the University of Montana. I was one of the founding editors of a magazine called the *Chelsea Review*. I remember I had brought a couple of copies of the magazine with me on this visit to my parents in Great Falls. I had a cousin in Missoula and we drove there to visit her and her family. The day after we got there, I went over to the university, which I wasn't very familiar with, but I found the English Department and I found Leslie Fiedler there. So I knocked on his door, and I introduced myself, and he was very open and friendly. I gave him a copy of the magazine. After thanking me, he was going on about New York– he was originally from New Jersey— and he looked up and asked me, "What are you doing way out here?" So I couldn't resist, and I replied, " I was born and raised here, couldn't you tell from my face?" Well, Fiedler had published a ground-breaking book of essays entitled *An End to Innocence*, best known for its famous piece "Come Back to Raft Again Huck Honey." But there was another essay in the collection entitled "Montana: Or the End of Jean Jacques Rousseau" that had caught my attention; it is a fairly complex and subtle exercise in cultural and historical criticism in which he included his first impressions when he moved to Montana of what he called the "Montana Face." His description of that face was highlighted by words and phrases like dumb, stupid, inarticulate, and an innocence impossible to distinguish from ignorance. When he heard my response, he laughed, and said, "Oh, that's not fair."

TK: After you had finished school at Colgate, then you went on to graduate school at Columbia.

GE: I went on to Columbia in the fall of 1956, completed my Master's degree in 1957, and then after a trip of several months to Europe, mostly spent in Greece, I returned to New York and Columbia to start work on my Ph.D. in Medieval English and Comparative Literature, which I completed in 1967, having taken on full-time teaching at the Brooklyn Center of Long Island University in 1961.

TK: When you are talking about Medieval Literature, are you talking about in Latin, Old English, Middle English?

GE: All of those and then some. My dissertation was entitled "*The Goddess Natura in Medieval Literature*," and after some revisions it was published by the Harvard University Press in 1972. Harvard kept it in print for almost thirty years. And then it was reprinted in 2002 by the

University of Notre Dame Press. I never dreamed it would make the website called "A Century's Retrospective," which lists the most important books in intellectual history published during the 20th century. I didn't even know about it until a friend came across it and sent it to me. A pleasant and humbling surprise.

GE: When I started my graduate studies at Columbia, one of my goals was a career in teaching, but I also wanted to pursue my interest in writing poetry. There was no better place to be for that, as far as I was concerned, than New York. It wasn't long before I met a number of young poets who became close and life-long friends: David Antin, Paul Blackburn, Jerome Rothenberg, and Armand Schwerner. I also met the poet Robert Kelly at Columbia, who was briefly a graduate student there. We became close friends and started a literary magazine, the *Chelsea Review*, with Robert's wife Joan and Ursule Molinaro and Venable Herndon. After five issues, the Kellys and I left the magazine to start a magazine devoted exclusively to poetry. It was an amicable separation, as those things go, and Venable and Ursule kept the journal with the proviso it be called *Chelsea* thereafter, as indeed it has to this day, though after a number of editor changes.

The Kellys and I immediately began the magazine *Trobar* and the Trobar Press, which produced five issues and four books, respectively. I dwell on this here, for it was at this point in time and place that I met my wife, poet and playwright Rochelle Owens, at a publication party at Seven Arts Club in Grammercy Park for the sixth issue of the new Chelsea. I noticed Rochelle early in the party, and after the celebration moved to a nearby apartment we were introduced. When I heard her name I remembered I had just read a poem of hers, "Groshl Monkeys," one of her earliest publications, in then LeRoi Jones's magazine Yugen, and I told her so. That made a strong impression—and here we are not quite fifty years later.

Nights of the Half-Eaten Moon (from *Ameriki*)
for Rochelle

Nights of the half-eaten moon
I waited for you in the darkness
when you didn't come
I became a bird that forgot to fly south for the winter

Nights of the half-eaten moon
strange sounds lulled me to sleep
and I dreamed of hurricanes in empty rooms

I found you waiting for me in the darkness
awoke in you're [your?] arms
and never let go.

TK: You always thought about a career as a poet?

GE: Yes, after I arrived in New York in 1956 I definitely heard the siren song of poetry, but I also understood it's an impossible way to make a living. So teaching English and medieval literature, which has a very strong connection with Modernism through the influence of Ezra Pound and others, who made medieval writing relevant to 20th century writing. I suppose the climax of my double calling as poet and medievalist came when I decided to translate the C-Text of William Langland's great 14th century poem, *Piers Plowman,* in the mid 1990s. But to get back to the 60s, when I'd show up at readings in East Village on my way home on the upper West Side from Long Island University in Brooklyn, some of my fellow poets would look at my briefcase, full of freshman English compositions waiting to be graded, they'd say in a mocking tone, "Oh, well, here's the professor," but the truth was, the mockery was envy in disguise. Many of them wanted college teaching appointments themselves. And indeed, after some years and some success as writers, some did get such jobs. But for me it was a deliberate choice, motivated in good part by my passion for scholarship and what I thought was a unique approach to writing about poets like Chaucer and Dante.

TK: You taught in the East for many years, and then you went to the University of Oklahoma.

GE: My first teaching appointment was at Wagner College on Staten Island, where I taught as a part-time lecturer with a full-time teaching load from 1958-60. In 1961, I was appointed to the English Department of the Brooklyn Center of Long Island University in downtown Brooklyn. I taught there for 22 years, moving up the academic ladder from Instructor to Assistant Professor, all the way up to Professor, and even Department Chair there before I moved in 1983 to the University of Oklahoma as Professor and Department Chair of English. But

during the years in New York, I also taught several times as Visiting Professor at Columbia and Hunter, often teaching the Chaucer course, though I also gave courses on other medieval writers. In fact, a doctoral seminar on the three versions of *Piers Plowman* which I was invited to teach at Columbia, was a definitive influence on my decision some years later when I was at OU to translate the third and last version of Langland's poem into verse. I retired from OU in 2000 after 17 years on the faculty, having chaired the department for 8 years and then directing and developing the creative writing program.

TK: I am curious, coming from the East Coast and going to Oklahoma, did you feel like when you first got there that you were in the middle of nowhere?

GE: No, I didn't feel as if I had moved to "nowhere." Though I had spent about 27 years in New York City, I had grown up in Montana, which is much more sparsely populated than Oklahoma, and was well prepared for the change. I guess the closest thing to culture shock might have been getting used to interacting daily with Oklahomans instead of New Yorkers. Now, Rochelle was born in Brooklyn, and as a young woman moved to Manhattan and started her writing career. So the move to Oklahoma was quite a change for her. But there were good things. She learned to drive, which she never would have done if we had just stayed in New York. She did some teaching, and she did a lot of writing. She wrote some of her best work while she was there. America, among other things, is an archipelago of colleges and universities that provides connections in a common culture to many people. It was a very good time, but after I retired we chose to move back east, and picked Philadelphia, which we had visited often, a city that we liked a lot, and it was also much more affordable than New York or Boston. We had some extraordinary experiences in Oklahoma. I remember going to a couple of exciting pow-wows and seeing cars with Montana plates that belonged to Northern Cheyenne who had come all the way down from Montana to participate.

TK: Did you ever go to pow-wows up in Montana?

GE: I never did. But while we're on the subject, I'd like to say that one of the goals of my chairmanship of the OU English Department was to build up the Native American literary studies, and I did. I hired a number of people who strengthened and distinguished that program, and that was a great satisfaction.

TK: Let me ask you some questions about your translations. I've known people that have

translated before, and some people are experts in the language they're translating from but others are not. I would consider you an expert in many of the languages that you translate. Are you better at some, or are there some that you enjoy translating from more, or is it more a matter of who the poet was?

GE: Well, you've just raised several questions. In the best of possible worlds of literary translation, a working to thorough knowledge of the source language is a desirable and great asset, but it isn't and hasn't always been essential for certain kinds of translation efforts. Good translations have been done by people from languages at which they are not very adept because they are exceptionally competent writers in what we call the receiver language. In such cases, the translator has to have a reliable and some kind of authoritative version or interpretation of the source text to work with, which often comes from a collaborator, at times the original poet or at others a native speaker of the language, or from a scholarly work. For me, one of the most important aspects of a translation match is a powerful attraction on the part of the translator to the source author. In my own work as a translator I've had to be very interested in a poet and feel a strong affinity with that poet's work. For example, for years I studied Cavafy's poems and numerous translations of them before I attempted translations of any of them. At a certain point I decided my own sense of connection with him demanded I begin to translate some of his poems. At the risk of sounding immodest but speaking honestly, I felt an unusual confidence in my work, and was not surprised when readers called them the best Cavafy translations into English they had seen. A well-known professor at the University of Athens who reviewed my book of Cavafy translations called *I've Gazed So Much* for the journal *World Literature Today* remarked that the world would benefit if I would decide to do a complete Cavafy. Well, I don't think that I'm going to go that far at this juncture, but there is going to be another little book from that same publisher in London with another 22 Cavafy poems called *Half an Hour and Other Poems*.

Getting back to your question, I've sort of run the gamut of translator situations. I have even translated a few poems—and had a ball doing them— from languages that I did not know at all. For example, when Jerome Rothenberg was gathering work for his important anthology *Technicians of the Sacred*, he asked me to contribute translations of poems from Africa, and I decided to try my hand at some Bantu poems. I recall going into the stacks of the Columbia library in search of anthropological journals and found some remarkable sources. Anthropologists working out in the field would record a tribal poet reciting some poems. Then they'd transcribe it in its original language and provide a literal word for word interlinear

translation. Consulting with the poets, they added any notes they thought would illuminate a reading of the poem. Working from such a rich source, I said to myself, "Wow, now I'm going to make this into a poem in contemporary American." I have also translated a number of poems from Spanish and when I do so I work with a co-translator friend of mine who is both fluent in the language and an expert in Hispanic literature. Whatever your base as a translator, from well-versed in the source language to dependent on various kinds of help, you have to be deeply responsible to the original and committed to achieving a comparable level of its performance in the receiver language.

The Train (from *Ameriki*)

From the Hurutshe

Iron thing coming from Pompi, from the round-house
where Englishmen smashed their hands on it,
It has no front it has no back.
Rhino Tshukudu going that way.
Rhino Tshukudu no, coming this way.
I'm no greenhorn, I'm a strong, skillful man.
Animal coming from Pompi, from Moretele.
It comes spinning out a spider's web under a cloud from
   Kgobola-diatla
Comes out of a big hole in the mountain, mother of the
   great woman,
Coming on iron cords.
I met this woman of the tracks curving her way along the
   river bank and over the river.
I thought I'd snatch her
So I said
"Out of the way, son of Mokwatsi, who stands there at the
   teat."
The stream of little red and white birds gathered up all of
   its track
Clean as a whistle.
Tshutshu over the dry plains

Rhino Tshukudu out of the high country
Animal from the south, steaming along
It comes from Pompi, the round-house, from Kgobola-
diatla.

One of my more, perhaps most, unusual positions as a translator came with my decision to translate the great Middle English poem by William Langland called *Piers Plowman*. The poem has survived in three main versions and I took on the third and last one, usually identified as the C-Text or Version and dated around 1380. Langland was a contemporary of Chaucer, but his Middle English dialect, known as Southwest Midlands, is considerably more difficult for readers today than Chaucer's London English, the immediate ancestor of modern English. As a medievalist I knew Langland's language very well, and only in rare moments did it seem as if I were translating out of a completely foreign language because I was actually translating from one kind of English to another. Doing that translation was almost at times a sort of "coaxing" my modern English version out of the original Middle English, rendering it out of poetry that is already in English into English poetry of a later time. It was an enormous job—the poem is some 7,300 lines long—that took ten years from the time I started work on it to its publication by the University of Pennsylvania Press in 1996.

When it comes to translating out of modern Greek and ancient Greek, my modern Greek is better than my ancient Greek, obviously. But I love translating out of the ancient Greek and particularly doing Acts of Love—I just loved doing that. I almost grieved when I was done with it, as if for a love affair that had ended too soon. As I keep writing my poems and other things I always try to keep an eye open for the next translation opportunity—especially from Greek.

Half an Hour   C.P. Cavafy (1917)
(From *Century Dead Center*)

Never made it with you and don't expect
I will. Some talk, a slight move closer,
as in the bar yesterday, nothing more.
A pity, I won't deny. But we artists
sometimes by pushing our minds

can -- but only for a moment -- create
a pleasure that seems almost physical.
That's why in the bar yesterday -- with the help
of alcohol's merciful power -- I had
a half hour that was completely erotic.
I think you knew it and
stayed on purpose a little longer.
That was really necessary. Because
with all my imagination and the spell of the drinks,
I just had to see your lips
had to have your body near.

TK: When you begin a translation, do you think about rhythm and rhyme, do you start with a tone or movement or metaphor?

GE: Well, to address the first part of your question, one conventional way of translating poetry into English recommends avoiding rhyme because English is not a rhyme-rich language. One reason why this point of view morphed into a rule (and we know that rules are made to be broken and tested) is that in some academic translations, more effort was put into reproducing the complex rhyme schemes than into conveying the sense and tone of the original poem. Such translations often turn out to be distorted and stiff. There are glorious exceptions to this, but it takes a highly qualified and practiced poet to pull it off. As the late Paul Blackburn said, "Much depends upon the translator."

I hasten to add here that there are numerous translation theorists who strongly advocate an approach to translating that is more committed to representing the world view of the original poet than to achieving a simple transparency of meaning. Such an approach tries to represent the style and craft of the original. For example, some translators insist that reproducing word play must be absolutely eschewed. Now it is very hard to translate a pun or double entrendre from one language into another, but sometimes it is worth trying, and I can say the few times in my own translations that I have hit the jackpot, that is to say, approximated, or even almost duplicated, a play on words it has been a small triumph. And when you can't successfully reproduce such instances of word play, there is always a chance to come up with one at some other point in your translation and thereby preserve a semblance of the original's character.

Now, as a translator, just as I have as a poet, I've looked for many different ways to go about my work. I've translated a lot of rhymed poetry without rhyme, or I've simply given some attention to rhyme in a more relaxed way, a little here and there, but not force it, and in some cases I have just decided, after studying the poem, that I could really do this. I can actually preserve the rhyme scheme without distorting the poem.

There's an early little Cavafy poem called *Prayer*. Now Cavafy used rhyme in some, but by no means all, of his poems, though he rhymed a lot more than some people think. From most other translations, you'd never know it was written in couplets. After thinking about it, I decided that I could take my translation closer into the original by using several kinds of imperfect rhyme.

Prayer (from *I've Gazed So Much*, London: Stop Press, 2001)

The sea took a sailor down to her depths.
His mother, unaware, goes and lights

a tall candle before the Virgin Mother
for his quick return and for good weather—

and ever towards the wind she cocks her ear.
But while she pleads and says her prayer,

the icon listens, sad and solemn,
knows the son she awaits will never come.

TK: In translation how do you deal with something that is important to a culture or time, but is not something you can easily convey in English?

GE: Every text has its cultural dimensions. Usually, the older the poetry, the higher the degree of cultural or religious references and allusions that require some kind of explanation, often in the form of footnotes. For example, *Piers Plowman* is not only full of medieval Catholic symbolism but it also reflects the customs and practices of life in fourteenth- century England. Such things are not readily translatable, so for the most part I concentrate on translating the words and the

sense of the poem and leave the rest to annotations.

TK: In many of poems from Ancient Greek, you have to attempt to deal with the gods. What do you do there?

GE: In *Acts of Love* and other ancient Greek poems and plays, I just mention them in the translation in a way that compares to their appearance in the original. Many of them are very well-known—Aphrodite, Eros, or Zeus— but the gods have to be left in because they are much too important and essential to what is going on in the poem.

TK: Many of your translations from Ancient Greek have some very erotic and sexually graphic passages. With your translations, is that something you thought was missing from earlier translations?

GE: Yes. In my translator's introduction to *Acts of Love* I discuss how some past translations fail or distort the language of the original. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries some scholars, who were masters of classical languages, did their translations of ancient Greek poetry into English following the practice of putting explicitly erotic passages into Latin. Or some translators, even to this day, avoid translating key earthy words and replace them with euphemisms or circumlocutions. That is why I announced that I was repudiating these Latinized and sanitized approaches to translating the poems in The Greek Anthology. By the way, my point of view on this question got its start during my undergraduate days at Colgate in the Latin poetry seminars of a wonderful teacher and man. Doc Austen loved teaching his all men's classes (in those days) how to read Catullus, Ovid, Terence, and Martial accurately and then to translate them into good, idiomatic American English. I recall one day he asked us how we would translate the word "mentula," which one character called another in a comedy by Terence. We all blushed a bit and agreed tentatively on the dictionary definition "penis." Doc Austen looked at us in disbelief and asked, "Is that what you would call a guy who stole your girl, 'You penis!'? No, I think you'd say, 'You prick'!" I'll never forget the story, or the lesson it taught me.

TK: Do you have a favorite language to translate from, one that matches well with English?

GE: No, though lately I'm translating more from the Greek. But every translation I've ever done has been the result of something about a work that has affected me deeply. It's funny, but I

often experienced a sense of loss when I finished a translation. Perhaps the saddest such occasion was when I completed *Acts of Love* and sent the manuscript to the publisher. It was like a love affair that was over and done with and with no chance of it ever happening again. Some kind of intimacy happens during the translation process -- at least for me. Sharing words leads to sharing feelings, getting insights into another's intelligence.

TK: You've translated poets from Sappho to Seferis, and many people in between. If you could travel back in time, is there one time period you would like to be part of?

GE: At one time I thought it would be great to go back to the Middle Ages, but the more I learned about the Middle Ages the less I thought about it. If I had a chance for a "Back to the Future" trip -- and get out free and alive-- I think I would pick Ancient Greece. I believe that would be a powerful experience. But one should not idealize that or any past because the realities of life might well hold a lot of surprises. Think about the Olympic games – there were rowdy crowds and some of the competitions were bloody and brutal. Sort of like the NFL. And apparently there was even some cheating. But to go and come back in one piece—I'd take Ancient Greece, prior to the Peloponnesian War.

TK: Let's move on to your own writing. You said earlier that some of your earliest writing was while you were in high school. What was the inspiration back then?

GE: I can't remember any special inspiration. Actually, I was still doing a lot of painting at that time. But I did start writing poetry regularly in college. I don't have many of those poems, but every once in a while I run across something I wrote at Colgate and it makes me wince. Once I arrived in New York and Columbia it made all the difference in the world. Not only is New York a great place for young people, it's a place where they meet and affect each other.

TK: It seems that when you were in New York, it was at the peak or high point of the "beats." And you were right in the center of it.

GE: Yes, it was a dynamic period and my friends and I were part of the new Avant Garde. We wrote not so much as a reaction against what was considered standard or traditional poetry but to find our own voices, our own way. After the couple of years with *The Chelsea Review*, I started *Trobar* magazine and press with my friend Robert Kelly. We published five issues and four books. It was a deeply serious commitment but it was also a lot of fun. We did almost all

of the work ourselves, putting together the issues or books and typing them up on an electric typewriter, doing the design and layout. There were just two of us, running the magazine, the press, and I did a lot of that work. We had a designer, Bernard Necoai -- a pseudonym for me. We couldn't have the same person doing everything. The first two books we did at Trobar were a book by Paul Blackburn called *The Nets* and *Not Be Essence That Cannot Be* by Rochelle Owens. I designed the cover and carved the title out of some black cardboard.

We'd lay it out and take it down and there was a printer down in the Village -- I remember he was a Quaker and a leftist -- he gave us always a very good deal, and we would take it on there and he'd print it up. We'd get the best cover stock he could get, within the range of color we wanted. We'd bring it up to the apartment and have a collating party. Everyone would come. Then we'd saddle stitch it -- that was the way it was bound. It was fun. We'd have coffee and cake and music would be playing and we'd do a couple hundred copies each run. But that was how it got done. Except for the printing, we did everything.

TK: Looking back, who were some of the contemporary poets that influenced you?

GE: It was my circle of friends and fellow poets, all of whom are still my friends, although we don't see each other all that much. But our group was pretty much formed in the early 1960s around Rochelle Owens, Jerome Rothenberg, David Antin, Robert Kelly, who was my partner in *Trobar*, and the late Paul Blackburn and Armand Schwerner. We were friendly with many other poets like Robert Duncan and Allen Ginsberg, to name just two. And we felt drawn, first by their work, to some older poets like Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Charles Reznikoff, and Kenneth Rexroth. But the most valuable thing about those years was our common enterprise of writing poetry. We were, so to speak, our own workshop, though our individual and collective profiles did not strongly resemble those of the current MFA products today. In fact, creative writing programs barely had a toehold in academia those days. But once they caught on, they provided many a job for poorly employed poets, a good thing for poets and for their students generally speaking. At the same time that all the new and innovative magazines started coming out, there was a flowering of poetry-reading venues in the West Village and East Village and in colleges. The condition of poetry was not just to be published on the page but to be read and listened to within a newly found and growing community of poets.

TK: Was this before the folk music scene started or at the same time?

GE: That was going on at the same time. I never heard him and didn't know of him all that well, but Bob Dylan was down there. There were places in the Village that were mostly folk music. I remember meeting Richie Havens. I had dinner with him once -- I don't remember why or how, but he and another guy and I found ourselves having dinner together one night at Max's Kansas City, a well-known hang-out for artists downtown. Havens was a very sweet, very nice man -- interested in all kinds of things and knowledgeable about poetry. But our poetry scene did not have much connection with the folk music scene. When we gave readings we didn't have folk singers participating in the programs.

One of the very first readings series in the West Village that I and Kelly and David Antin and Jerome Rothenberg helped set up was at the famous Café Cino on Cornelia Street ~ 1959-1960. The Café Cino was not yet famous as a venue where poets read and plays were performed. It had just opened and we, being among its first patrons, asked the owner if he would be interested in some poetry readings and he said "sure." So we did one season in which we paired poets reading together – and closed with a last event of medieval poetry and jazz. A whole bunch of us read different poems from a variety of medieval languages -- in the original and in translations, with a trio that played with us.

TK: Your latest book of your own work is *Century Dead Center*. Can you talk a little about the section of poems you've titled "Century Dead Center?"

GE: "Century Dead Center" consists of 30 prose poems, each one eight lines long and extending from margin to margin to form a perfect verbal rectangle. It is a tight form, though not a verse form, and I had to work hard to make each one exactly shaped. The central focus of the poems is the event that was the center of the last century -- World War II and the Holocaust. I started writing the poems while I was in Italy in 1990 and wanted to explore what was the lowest point, the dead center, of the past hundred years. And that was the 'dead center.' All the individual prose poems, which explore diverse related subjects, inevitably link to that event like tentacles.

TK: Many of your earlier poems show your Montana roots.

GE: Well, a good number of them are set in Montana. Many of the poems in my first two

books of poems, *The Georgics* and *Landed Natures*, both from Black Sparrow Press, are about the Montana experience. For example, I wrote one of the first poems about Chief Joseph back before he was a powerful symbol of the Native American resistance and tragedy that he is now. My long poem *AMERIKI* deals largely with Greek Americans coming to and living in Montana and with Montana history. I'm not at all sure I would have written those poems had I stayed there. It's that old cliché that you have to leave a place to be free enough of it to write about it. I guess I did a lot of that in that earlier period. Later, when I have been moved to write, the motive has not been connected to any particular time or place in my life. Writing poetry is an activity in which you find yourself surprised -- not by yourself but by what you put down. You wonder 'where did that come from?' From time to time I do wonder about how it all connects. What I might write now to what I wrote years ago. You know, some poets consider all their work as a single poem written across a lifetime. A nice idea, though I'm not sure of it. One thing I am sure of is that I try hard not to repeat myself. I always try to write something different and to avoid doing the same thing over and over. I want to confront myself with challenges and to challenge my readers as well. Years ago, I read a poem by William Carlos Williams, "January Morning," in which I was struck by this passage, which is by now quite famous:

> I wanted to write a poem
> that you would understand.
> For what good is it to me
> If you can't understand it?
>
> But you got to try hard –

The clarity of this proffered contract between poet and reader has stayed with me through the years. I often set it before my students in literature and writing courses alike. I wanted them to understand that the responsibility of the reader is on balance as great as that of the writer. Both "got to try hard." Writing poetry well doesn't come that easy and reading it well doesn't come that easy either.

Poems from *Century Dead Center*

New York, 12:30 AM 10/25/79, from the desk:

Wanting to write a poem of Charles Bukowski
I put a frozen pizza in the oven
start on another sixpack
and wait for inspiration
by staring at the roaches
walking in and out of the pile of laundry on my floor

when the downstairs bell rings
but, expecting nobody, I don't buzz back
probably some asshole forgot their key
--there are assholes everywhere you know
by now the apartment bell ring
and I go see which of my women
it could be and open the door on
a skinny young guy about twenty
who says, "Mr. Bukonomou? I have reason
to believe I am your son." To which I,
"Or maybe just one of those assholes
this world is full of, sonny."

But I ask him in out of the hall
as he starts to explain the detective work
that led him to me as "genetic father"
and I tell him he's to runty
to be a son of mine because my seed
is a stout-hearted seed whether it grows
up to be boys or poems--and Christ
I've seen Tom Clark poems

that are more substantial than he is!

Since he looks like he could use it
I ask him to share the pizza
and have a beer with me and talk
on condition he'll stop this
"you're my daddy" crap--Hell
I've never been anywhere near
Council Bluffs, which is where he says
I\it all began for him according to his
"real mama" whom he tracked down
in Kansas City two weeks ago
recent Polaroid of whom he shows
to which I will only say, "Yeah,
real natural looking mama!"

Then with a squint-smile like a midwife
I open the oven door--
and deftly yank out the rising, bubbling sun.

* * *

George Economou is a scholar, translator, and poet, who was born in Great Falls, Montana, in 1934. He earned his B.A. from Colgate University, and his M.A. and Ph.D. from Columbia University. He has published six books of poetry and several books on medieval literature. He has also published translations from ancient and modern Greek as well as from a number of medieval languages. He has held fellowships for his writing from the New York Council for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Rockefeller Foundation. He is retired from the Chair of the English Department at the University of Oklahoma. He currently lives in Philadelphia with his wife, poet-playwright Rochelle Owens.

Tom Kalaris is a third-generation Greek-American who grew up in Billings, Montana. Before this interview he had never met George Economou, but during these talks the two discovered that, not only did they know many Greeks in common, but Tom's father, Gregory, had baptized one of George's cousins. Tom was a long-time Montana resident who now lives in Fort Collins, Colorado.