

# By His Own Hand

A short story by MICHAÏL MITSAKIS (1895)

Translated by DAVID RICKS

*Michail Mitsakis (?1868–1916) is one of the intriguing nineteenth-century Greek writers whose work has in recent years been emerging from neglect; though only one of his unsettling short stories has, to my knowledge, hitherto appeared in English.<sup>1</sup> Active in the lively world of the Athenian periodical press in the 1880s and the first half of the 1890s, he succumbed to acute mania in 1896 and was placed in the Dromokaïteio asylum, where he died two decades later. (Tradition, perhaps as unreliable in this case as in others, ascribes the onset of madness to syphilis.) Mitsakis' best-known work falls into the thematic categories of 'Athenian Pages' and 'Travel Impressions': such texts, often barely if at all fictionalized, tend to depict unsavoury or even horrific aspects of everyday life. The scene depicted in 'The Cart', for example, in which a horse is ill-treated, vividly recalls the famous episode that marked the onset of Nietzsche's madness; and other incidents narrated elsewhere dwell on graphic cruelty or barely suppressed quotidian hatreds and lusts. In 'By His Own Hand' (Αὐτόχειρ) we can see that the story, while based on one by Poe,<sup>2</sup> develops its own obsessive spatial, temporal, and narrative logic; and the banked paragraphs of repetition which are the story's backbone reveal a mind at the very limits of sanity. For help in rendering this text, which from its opening sentence is a challenge to exact, let alone evocative, translation, the translator is grateful to Roderick Beaton, Alexandra Georgakopoulou, Georgia Gotsi, and Michael Silk.*

That day, I found myself, just as I do now, why or wherefore I no longer know, in Patras. I had arrived that morning, left my bag as usual in a room in the Grande Bretagne, up on the third floor, right at the top, with a view of Mount Varasova and of all the harbour below, and set off into town. In town, my first errand was to look in at the Prefecture and see Christakis Palamas, a friend of mine and in those days Secretary there – for it seemed ordained from on high that the man would spend his life in the Prefecture of Patras as Secretary, as Secretary-General, as Prefect – and then shortly leave him to his papers and documents and make my way to the Castle district and set to wandering in its old streets and thoroughfares, its picturesque alleys and curious quarters. As I stood there at some point of vantage gazing at the extraordinary panorama which the emerald Gulf of Corinth extends before the eye, as likewise the mountains on the other side with their rosy, sunned heights, and, beyond, the open sea, the heat of the day caught up with me and forced me to make my way down to the Market and take refuge in a grocer's, and there – with the distinctive sight of the square before me: narrow and rectangular, with the little fountain in the middle from which a grocer's boy was getting water, tin in hand; filled with the cries of the stall-holders, with the to-ing and fro-ing of customers, with villagers' capes and shoes – sit down and eat. I then rambled at my leisure to King George's Square and went up to the club, there to sink into a prolonged perusal of the *Débats* and the *Revue*, the favourite cultural indulgences of the good merchants of Patras. It seems that this intellectual feast was of no short duration, for when I re-emerged it was already almost dusk, and so, on meeting shortly thereafter my friend Leonidas Kanellopoulos, counsellor of the Turkish consulate in the city and writer of articles in his spare time, I took him by the arm and set off in his company for the mole, the favoured Patras promenade. At the mole, four or five groups of people were strolling up and down; bound by their thick cables to the cannons planted on their ends to either side, a dozen or a score of ships shifted slowly, their masts' lances pointed at the clear skies above; a steamship, hugely tall, broad, long, towered, a dark black mass, at one end; a cool breeze blew from land, the sea stretched peacefully into the distance, and the only sound to be heard was the sweet dying away at the rocks' edge of the waves' unending song. And when we too had gone up and down a few times, now that the pointed beacon that like a minaret guards the end of the esplanade had come to cast there its beam of white light, we parted and went our separate ways, one to home sweet

home, and one, that is myself, to his hotel. The large room which functions as the restaurant of that huge hotel the Bretagne was empty when I went in; no-one had come along to eat yet, and there all alone were – on his feet and leaning against the counter under the dim glimmer of the gas-light, round of figure and contemplative – that good fellow Kosmas, and, seated at one of the nearer tables, finishing their supper, it seemed, my friend Mr Panayotis Chrysanthakis, the proprietor, his tall, stout Hungarian wife Mme Jovana, and a younger man, of thirty or so, with a narrow black beard. I bade them good evening, then, and at my friend Panayotis' invitation joined them at their table, in the empty fourth place, and, when he came bustling along for my order, sent the good Kosmas to get me a chop.

'Well then, where have you been? Have you had a walk?', Mme Jovana asked me once I had taken my seat.

'Yes, quite a bit of a walk', I replied.

'Did you go as far as the Retreat?'

'No, just to the mole', I replied, unable to suppress a little smile, knowing as I did the harmless weakness of the estimable people of Patras for inquiring, as their very first and indeed indispensable question to anyone from out of town who sets foot in their city, whether he has been to that indeed pleasant rural location, the Retreat.

'And what do you think of our city, Mr Mitsakis?' The cue was taken by the third person seated, the younger man with the black beard.

'The gentleman is a policeman and a friend of ours', Mme Jovana interrupted by way of introduction.

'Well, I knew the town, I've been here before, it's not my first visit, I rather like it', I said.

'Oh well ... commercial town ... outsiders don't usually think much of it ... there's nothing to see...'

'Oh, I don't know ... I invariably find plenty to interest me ...'

'And will we have the pleasure for a few days yet? ...'

'Oh, a few yet ...'

'We had a suicide today ... you must have heard about it of course ...'

'No ... good heavens! Who?'

'Why ... someone from out of town ... it was yesterday he arrived ... and he stayed in one of those hotels down by the front ... he said he'd come from Athens ... but he wasn't from those parts ... I think he must have been from

Smyrna ... but, as a matter of fact, at the hotel they didn't even know his name ...'

'And did nothing come to light about his reasons?'

'Well ... they say he was suffering from a chronic illness ... how should I know ... he arrived last night, left his bag and went out, came back late, slept, ordered his coffee in the morning, a quiet sort, nothing in his outward appearance to give anything away, went out again, took a walk to the Willows, ate luncheon at another hotel, came back about two, greeted the chap at the door, went up to his room, locked the door, and then shortly afterwards they heard the pistol-shot ... They got a message to me, I beat down the door, found him fully dressed on the bed ... with a wound here ...' – and the policeman pointed to his heart – '... instantly ... he can't have lived for a second ... He also left a piece of paper, as a matter of fact ...'

And the young policeman took out his wallet, opened it, pulled out a small piece of paper folded in two, reached across the dishes, and gave it me to read. It was a half sheet of that paper you get at the post office, which they customarily use in the provinces, lined paper with green horizontal lines; pretty wrinkled, crumpled even, with finger marks clearly visible, as if it had passed through various hands; quite blank, except that indeed on one line, the top line, there could be made out, written out ever so carefully, in the tiniest letters, these words: *'I'm killing myself. Don't let it bother anyone.'* And below, the name of the city, the date and year, and the suicide's signature. That was it. And all this in the neatest writing, written with a steady hand, easy to read, free of misspellings, not an accent or comma out of place, the work of a man of some education evidently, without a trace of fear, emotion, unease even, perfectly simple, perfectly natural, perfectly ordinary. I perused for a while the hideous bit of paper, that wrinkled, crumpled thing which contained the last manifestation of a life, then re-folded it and gave it back to the policeman. And after some further desultory conversation, and on finishing my meal, I summoned my good friend Kosmas once again, paid, said my good nights, and directed my steps to my room. The hotel staircase, high and partly in darkness, wound its way to its summit step by step; the deserted corridors extended into the distance; the lights were not yet properly lit; peace reigned. It was only that, from the top floor, a bell was echoing away, protracted and insistent, shrill and violent in its tinkling, as if someone had been ringing for some time and was finally waxing impatient; and from the murky depths of the

stairwell, down at the entrance, a voice could be heard rising in a shout of rage, evidently the doorman calling to some other servant:

‘O-i-i, Di-imi-itra-akis, can’t you hear, then, are you deaf as a post, that one on the third floor’s been ringing for three hours, bloody well get up there, you sod!’

And shortly after, as I was on my way up from the second floor, a shadow flitted by me, jostling me as it sped on and disappeared up ahead of me. The boards creaked under its feet, its tread thudded, a puff of wind in the deserted corridor slammed a window shut, the ringing died away to a distant, enfeebled ‘ding ding’. And when I reached the next floor I saw the servant’s shadow standing outside the door of the room next to mine, and through the half-open door some woman in just her stockings and slip, leaning forward with her uncovered bosom and bare arms, passed him a basin. I put the key in my door, opened it, fumbled for my matches, lit my candle, and went to the window, which looked straight out on the darkness. In the night now descending, the broad sea’s waveless surface stretched out in its dark smoothness; motionless, the mountains on the far side reared their shadowy outlines; the roofs of the surrounding houses were starting to fuse into a single dark plane; the sky had now been sown with its first stars; and in the street below trembled the first gas burners. And as I leant out, breathing in with my five senses the sea’s deep exhalation, and the gentle breeze conveyed downward from the mountains opposite, and the vague rustle of life emanating from the houses round about, and the distant star’s ray, and the diverse bustle rising from the street below, the phrase on the bit of paper I had just been looking at came as a sudden blow to my spirits, returning with its full gravity, like a hammer on an anvil, making its sudden and unexpected return by an irresistible incursion violent in its laconic paradox and harshness.

Don’t let it bother anyone! As if anyone on earth ever was bothered about those on whom death’s hand has set its black seal! As if anyone on earth ever was bothered about those whom the grip of Passion, Disease or Want scatters to the ends of the earth, a herd of wretched victims! As if anyone on earth ever was bothered about the unhappy or the unwise, who, oppressed by their Fate and ridden by their Hag, had never while there was yet time reflected that they would die! Who then was going to be bothered on his account, that unknown man from out of town, who had come for one night, only to sleep his final sleep in a hotel? Who then was going to be bothered on his account, that odd

traveller who was on his way from Athens, but was probably from Smyrna, perhaps even from Çeşme, but who might quite possibly have been from Bucharest? Who then was going to be bothered on his account, that man whose very name was unknown to the waiters that served him? Was it really going to be bothered, that boundless sea which, tired from its incessant struggle to undermine the dry land and devour the shipping, was now asleep down below, breathing dully and deeply, like a sated beast? Were they really going to be bothered, those peaceful mountains which looked out on the open sea, standing comfortably on their sturdy feet, and resting in the full enjoyment of existence, motionless and tranquil? Were they really going to be bothered, those distant stars which sent one to another, by some secret understanding, in what you might think looks of love, their frolic twinkling? Were they really going to be bothered, those gloomy houses from which vaguely wafted the diverse rustle of life? Were they really going to be bothered, Mme Jovana and Mr Panayotis, who, worn out by the day's work, exhausted by their honest toil, were now eating with relish at that table with the policeman? Was he really going to be bothered, that doorman cursing his colleague, or that servant running upstairs to see who was ringing? Was she really going to be bothered, that woman who had passed the basin through her doorway, in just her stockings and slip, leaning forward with her uncovered bosom and bare arms, and who was now at her toilet? Or, for that matter, was I really going to be bothered myself, I who had been staring out in the full enjoyment of the cool morning up on the heights of the Castle? And with a chuckle, half-exasperated by the intense stupidity of a doomed man's last thought, I shut the window, took my hat, and went down into the street. St Andrew's Street was thronging with the bustle of people, noisily heading for the part with the grocer's shops in particular, near the little club. The shops shone under the flickering line of gas lamps in front of them, the row of barrels laid out in a line in front of their doors or windows; buzzing with the ceaseless din of scales rattling or coins being counted or glasses clinking, with the sound of footsteps or the hum of talk; while a strong smell of sardines and cheese rose from every quarter, and the grocer's boys standing there as the upstanding guardians of the barrels, in their sopping aprons, let out shrill cries in advertisement of their wares. A varied throng of passers-by, men young and old, civilians and soldiers, middle and working class, sailors and locals, in village or town dress, would stop in large groups in front of the shops or in the middle of the street, conversing,

strolling, going in to buy something, looking, shoving, buying one another drinks. Throughout this whole block the crowd was extremely lively, forming here and there a compact mass, dispersing in the surrounding streets, and then renewed once again. And in this continually and multifariously crowding throng there would come and go other tradesmen crying their wares, each carrying his portable shop and announcing, this man his fish, another his eggs, and a third his greens. By the gutter, there on a corner, one of them would sit and, with a crate before him which had a dark look to its inside, would screech hoarsely: 'Fivepence for two sea urchins! Fivepence for two sea urchins!'; while two others, each holding to one side a huge basket, lit up from inside by a small oil lamp placed in the bottom, would pass by shouting: 'Shri-i-imps! Fre-e-esh shri-i-imps!'

Further along, the little club was now open, brightly lit, its tall windows allowing free passage to the pandemonium of the gathered throng within, and the hiss of chatter, and the clatter of backgammon, and the scraping of chairs, and the sputtering sound of dominoes being shuffled, and the bubbling gurgle of the hubble-bubble, and the dry crack as the billiard balls hit into each other and went into the pocket. And in front, the little square lay empty, dotted only with a few empty tables and chairs. And down below, at the mole, towards which I headed, the pointed beacon cast its white beam as before, the dozen or score of ships tied up on either side shifted slowly, the dark steamship reared its mass at one end, and the groups of people had once again, after eating, it seemed, resumed their strolling. Pointing straight ahead, the thin strip of land, starting from the little square in front of the club, went on into the sea, went on further still, and ended at the lighthouse, which marked the final point with its two little lights pointing inland, a little above ground level, next to its retaining wall, and with its great round light high above. The land was at that point free, overlaid by nothing but a few logs, rounded and thick, laid to one side. The cannons, stuck on end in the earth and projecting half the length of their upright trunks in a dark, paradoxical and massive configuration, once proud engines of war, now humble attendants of peace, stood in long lines on both sides, face to face in the mute discharge of their passive duties. And beyond them, the gas lamps too stood tall, themselves in lines and face to face, thin, perpendicular, with the delicate diadem of glass atop them. Two tugs, to one side, close in, stretched towards the land their derricks, pointed, thick, stiff and threatening. Beyond, the green-painted wooden shack by the sea's edge to

the side of the lighthouse clung to the larger building's sides, taking on in the darkness the odd shape of a colossal natural outgrowth like an oyster covered in weed. And among the ships by the jetties a few small boats, also at their moorings, shifted like the larger vessels, while one of them continued to wander over the waters, bearing at its prow a large light that cast on them a deep red flame, whose light the boatman fished by. And on this narrow strip of dry land, setting out from the nearer end, and then reaching the turning-point at the lighthouse wall, the promenaders walked up and down in the regular and prescribed fashion, lengthways, turning back when necessary. Among them this time were two or three ladies, and a short, plump one could be heard tittering in amusement. A fat man with a double chin, who walked with tiny quick steps and panted like an asthmatic, was saying to his companion: 'A man of capital, sir, cannot entrust his capital like that. He has to have guarantees.'

The gangplanks which led to the moored vessels would creak from time to time; a ship's dog, its front legs over the bow, would start barking wildly at those who walked by. Further in, the Port Authority to the one side, and the Customs House to the other, stood silent at the edge of the mainland. And beyond, dimly lit by its few lamps, the front stretched into the distance. The steelyards from which hang the currant-weighting scales cast over the front their skittish shadows, and at intervals, the crates, laden with the currant, dark queen of Patras, and gathered into broad stacks, stood ready for loading, their sides showing white as they spent the night in the open. The warehouses were shut, mute, the other buildings sunk in torpor. Barrels, buckets, sacks, handcarts left casually ready for the work of the coming dawn, covered the pavements in places. Two or three carts, unyoked, were also there to one side, leaning their shafts face down on the earth. One or two small cafés drowsily let out from dirty windows a little light which could no more disperse the darkness than could the street-lights' anaemic gleam. No bustle, no noise of life down at the front. Busy all day long, it appeared impatient to get a bit of extra sleep. Only rarely did some straggler make his way along the front, and in the water, from one end to the other, along the front's entire length, at their moorings and at peace, the little boats were sunk in dreams. The only sign of life, in a tavern at the far end, was a group of Italians singing as they tumbled, and the harsh roll of their 'r's was audible in the still air. And a lone pair of urchins, with a taste, it seemed, for a solitary vein of *flânerie*, their bare feet dragging doggedly in the dust, yelled into the void:



Why on earth does your mother need  
Why on earth does your mother need  
Why on earth does your mother need  
A lamp at night, oh,  
A lamp at night, oh?

When she has in her own home  
When she has in her own home  
When she has in her own home  
A star and moon, oh,  
A star and moon, oh!

I stopped two or three who came my way and asked where the suicide had taken place; for I was curious to see even the outward appearance of the hotel in question; but no-one could say. In the end, someone sitting outside a little café showed me the building, one of the end ones over there, behind and just this side of the Customs House. And I went up and looked it over carefully, taking a close view of the whole. Tall, unlit, silent, it reared as if empty of life in the shadows. No-one stood in front of it, no-one inside appeared to be up and about. Still and mute and dark, it stood to attention in its place, casting a dispassionate gaze on the street. Only the lights at the entrance burned with a weak light, and only at one window high up on the third floor did a pane reveal a candle's trembling light. It was in there, of course, that the corpse must have been lying, an unlovely mass, motionless on its mournful bed, the bed embracing the outsider for whom none would weep tomorrow. And this time saddened, I knew not why, my heart in the grip of a vague anxiety at the sight of the utter stillness of that building, I turned my steps away from that corner and set off once again away from the front. And after a dozen or so paces I came out through a side street into St Andrew's Street. The throng of shoppers had noticeably dwindled, most of the townsfolk had gone home some while before with their purchases, and only a few dawdlers now wound their way through the surrounding streets. But, just as before, groups of people would stop or pass on, the hurly burly in the shops was still intense, the grocer's boys continued to cry their wares without respite, the gas lamps to shine, the shrimp sellers to make their rounds, and the sea-urchin-master to yell at the top of his voice. A carriage slowly made its way, barely audible in the thick dust,

displacing those in its path. And behind it a little chap was trundling a hand-cart, clapping his hands and bellowing in a stentorian voice: 'Mi-ind o-out!', as if his vehicle were ten times the size of the carriage in front. Two soldiers emerged from a wine-shop, jostling one another, after a quick drink evidently, and wiping their wet lips with the back of the hand. And where the road makes a turning, by the club, four or five men were standing in a group talking vehemently; and one of them, tall and broad of back, was saying with violent gestures to the rest: 'So, my friend, it's the other fellow's respect and affection you want? Then you should do him all the harm you can! ...'

In King George's Square, which I soon reached, most of the shops round about were shut, a few cabs waited for fares, and in the silence the two fountains endowed by the late George Roufos, with their weird gryphons, poured their streams into the basins with a pleasant splashing. Silent too, the arcades of the city streets blocked the view here and there with their massive columns and semi-circular arches, under which the mass of varied shops which nestle there had now settled down to roost. Making my way through these streets, I headed for the upper part of town, and ascended the three high ramps of marble stairway which lead there, while a man in villager's dress, of middle age, pretty drunk, made his own way up, holding on to the balustrade with some difficulty and murmuring some slurred soliloquy, and I set about wandering in its old lanes. The same peace reigned here too, the same deserted air, and only from some wine-shop whose little red awning fluttered in the night breeze could one hear talk carrying, the clink of glasses, or the mournful sound of some Turkish love song. Overhung by the heavy shadow of the venerable castle, like sparrows, you might say, seeking protection under an eagle's broad wings, the neighbourhood's little houses went with their ups and downs, jostling, spreading over the slopes, and between them wound the little lanes, stairs, paths of every variety and charm. Their little doors bolted, their little windows barred, the poor had laid their heads to rest under the benign roof of a humble home. By this route, I reached the High Threshing-Floors, emerging from a narrow alley into that open space. The lovely plain was wrapped in its usual tranquillity; the moon hung above it dimly; the herbage rustled faintly in the light breeze that came from afar and ever so gently and tenderly caressed your legs, as if with the loving touch of a tender hand; the trees stirred, dim and full of mystery. And approaching the square's far edge, where its stone balustrade lends it the aspect of some vast natural balcony

overhanging the low-lying terrain below, I leant over and looked down. And faced with the formless mass of the city now half-asleep, with the dead calm of the sea, with the utter motionlessness and unbroken silence of the mountains opposite, my mind flitted once again to the wretch down below who lay alone on the lifeless bed in that dark hotel. Well, yes indeed, even if life had played him false, he had at least determined to carry out to the letter his last wish! Not that she was bothered by him, that short, plump lady now in fits of laughter down at the mole. Not that he was bothered by him, that fat, pot-bellied man walking with tiny, quick steps and panting like an asthmatic and speaking to his companion of capital and guarantees. Not that they were bothered by him, those grocer's boys standing to attention in their sopping aprons, like upstanding guardians of the barrels, beneath the flickering line of gas lamps, and crying their wares. Not that they were bothered by him, the men in conversation in the little club, the men rattling the backgammon dice, the men shuffling the dominoes, the men playing a short-tempered game of billiards on the far side of the room. Not that they were bothered by him, those steelyards waiting, as they cast on the front their skittish shadow, for work to begin again the following day, or those crates spending the night in the open, gathered in broad stacks, as they waited patiently, their sides showing white, for the hour to come when they would embark for unknown lands. Not that they were bothered by him, those small ships which, moored peacefully from one end of the front to the other, along its entire length, were dreaming, still a-tremble, of sea winds and the wave's force. Not that they were bothered by him, those Italian fishermen tipping in the tavern and rolling their harsh 'r's in the still air. Not that they were bothered about him, those soldiers emerging from the wine-shop merry and wiping down their lips with the back of the hand. Not that he was bothered by him, that philosopher on the street corner, the man tall and broad of back, gesticulating and instructing his associates that, for someone to have respect and affection for you, you should do him all the harm you can! And meanwhile the city was sinking ever deeper into sleep, night was coming on in all her grandeur, the stars were twinkling brightly, the dew was falling, sharp, penetrating to the marrow. In no hurry, I ambled down the road on the far side, which leads by a short country lane to the road for the Willows, and emerged into the countryside. The fields, freshly tilled, gave off a strong scent of earth and grass; the hedges were green; the sleepless little world of the insects was astir, full of life and seemingly full of joy; a nightingale,

intoxicated with night's beauty, conveyed to her its sweet salutations from a poplar's top; a company of frogs croaked in their jolly way. Beneath the unclouded stillness of the heavens, beside the unruffled lethargy of the sea, the earth too, now feeling a sense of security, was beginning to relax. The gardens, with their sturdy trees, their perpendicular cypresses, their rich plots of flowers, were swimming in dew and scent. And the vineyards outlined on the earth's surface their straight, regular furrows, extending here and there in all directions. And in the midst of vines and furrows could be seen cottages and wine-presses, in white or shady masses, dumb, as if themselves the progeny of mother earth. Here and there a glow-worm fluttered as it flew low and in its swift passage traced a thin bright line, let a brief but dazzling little flash of lightning escape its tiny posterior. Leaves stirred in secret discourse, reeds whispered in hushed tones. Somewhere, a stream was flowing, but so softly that you thought it was out of a wish not to disturb the tranquillity. Mount Panachaïkos, wide and high, presided over the plain imposingly. Further down, and coming in the other direction from me, a group of people were making their way on foot, a young couple at their head and, a little way behind, two ladies and two gentlemen, all of them employees of the Retreat. The young man was playing with his little cane, inclining towards the young woman, and saying, as I went by:

'Why, how can you say that to me, mademoiselle'

'I can say it to you, sir, because you have been making a nuisance of yourself', replied the young woman with the cooing of a dove, tossing her head back with a teasing air.

The couple went by smelling of violets. The girl had a bunch of them in her bosom. I went on to the coast road which goes towards the Willows and then turned off for town. Soon I was back in St Andrew's Street, passing the church which stands at its head and from which it takes its name. And I stood and looked at it, at its white walls, at its arched door, at the cross on its roof, at the huge bell-tower next to it, the splendid work of Gravaris. The church too, shut and still and calm, was asleep, impassive. I went on. The same quiet, the same silence, deeper, denser. Now, sure enough, the houses, all things, were overcome by sleep, the city now snoring. But from a large, tall building over there somewhere, to one side, a roar was coming nonetheless. A steam mill, livid of aspect, groaned through the night. People were at work preparing the bread which feeds the world. And a little further on, from another building, the

din of musical instruments could be heard: violin notes, the wail of a clarinet, a song tearing a passage through the darkness. A *café-chantant* was staying open through the night, an establishment of good cheer, and here a rather different set of people were paying the debt to pleasure. I went up the narrow staircase, ordered a beer, and sat down. On that humble stage, under the smoky gloom of the gas burners stood a woman in motley garb extending only to the knee and revealing thick legs stuffed into black stockings, *décolletée*, her white arms roughly powdered, her bosom half-exposed, ruddy of cheek, singing. Mouth agape, she stuck out her leg, put her hand to her left eye, pulled down the lower lid and opened it wide, and shrieked hoarsely:

‘Regardez-moi dans l’œil, dans l’œil, dans l’œil.

Regardez-moi dans l’œil, dans l’œil, dans l’œil...’

On closer inspection, I recognized the woman who had passed the basin to the servant, in just her stockings and slip, in the doorway of the room next to mine. She was succeeded by a second woman, and she by another, as the violins and clarinets went on with their moan. And as each finished her song she would take a little tray or bag and descend the two or three steps from the stage and start to make the rounds of the men at the rows of tables. And the dead man’s stupidity once again presented itself before me, colossal in its laconic brevity. Who then was going to be bothered by him: the sot in villager’s dress clambering up the stairway to the upper town and reeling and grasping hold of the balustrade to steady himself? Who then was going to be bothered by him: that nightingale intoxicated with the beauty of the night and the sweetness of its own voice, happily aswim in the cool of the breeze and the light of the moon? Who then was going to be bothered by him: that young man flirting with the girl, that girl who had set the violets in her bosom and, with the cooing of a dove, tossed her head back with a teasing laugh? Were they really going to be bothered, the church’s shut doors, white walls and sleeping Cross? Were they really going to be bothered, the workers in the steam mill as it groaned through the night and they prepared in the sweat of their brow the bread that feeds the world? Were they really going to be bothered, those merry-makers in the *café-chantant*, agape at those females’ sturdy calves and swooning eyes? Gradually the room emptied out, the lights went down, the violins fell silent; the *café-chantant* was closing. I was the last to go back down the stairs, and I took a little turn at the mole. Over it, the pointed beacon in its perpetual revolution continued to cast its white beam, the moored ships

shifted as one, the sea spread out peacefully, a cool breeze blew from land, and the only sound that could be heard was the sweet dying away at the rocks' edge of the waves' unending song. Not a soul was to be seen, not a whisper heard. Dark of visage, the cannons stood to attention, protruding the half of their length that was above ground, on this side and that, facing one another in the discharge of their peaceable duties; the gas lamps, thin and perpendicular, watched over them. The tug boats to one side stretched out their thick arms towards the land, stiff and threatening. The pile of buckets blocked the way on one side, their bellies idiotically swollen under the intermittent beam from the lamp. The boat with the fishing lamp had been eclipsed; it was evidently lying quiet, at its mooring somewhere. The silence was intense, and even the gangplanks to the ships had ceased to creak. The ship's dog too must have fallen asleep at his prow, bored with barking. The moon was moving in its course, the darkness thickening. A light shone far away at sea. A steamboat was on its way from the open seas, approaching at some speed; its breathing audible, its horn now heard, protracted and abrupt. I set off back to get some sleep and once again went by the hotel where the corpse lay. The lights at the entrance now extinguished, pitch dark and shut up, it rose tall in the shadows. Only up there on the third floor, as if in fear, the candle trembled, pale and exhausted. I reached my place of lodging, banged on the door; the doorman woke, with a snort, in his underwear, and opened up for me. The entire hotel, void of light and sound alike, was sunk in sleep. Only up on the second floor, seeming louder for the surrounding deep silence, some sleeper's snoring could be heard, audible through doors and windows and all but shaking the walls.

And from the room next to mine, where I had had a passing sight of the half-naked *chanteuse*, came improper sounds, strange noises carrying, the rustle of bedclothes and a hiss of sheets; the bed started to move back and forth, banging again and again into the wall, tempest-tossed like a ship in a storm. Oh, in very truth, that man had, when all was said and done, been an utter fool! Was he really going to be bothered, that boy who this evening, his bare feet dragging in the dust, had been singing the song of the lamp? Were they really going to be bothered, those nocturnal sailors on their way from the deep seas, eyes fixed on the compass, with no concern but for the journey's destination, and seeking its furrow in the salty plain? Was he really going to be bothered, that snorer, glutting himself on sleep, absorbing it in his every pore and shaking the walls, or would they, the debauchees on their bed of lust?

And I tossed and turned in bed, uneasy. It was that thick undersheet making me itch and not letting me sleep. Two or three hours went by, and I had slept not a wink. Night was galloping on; dawn had made giant strides. And despairing of sleep I got up, drew the curtains and opened the window. The sea stretched out below, calm and waveless, ever waveless, and ever calm; motionless, the outlines of the mountains on the far side rose tall; and from the direction of Mount Panachaïkos the sun was rising, wonderfully unvarying and matchlessly unchanged ...

#### NOTES

1 'The Kiss', tr. T. Sampson, rev. D. Trollope, in *Modern Greek Short Stories*, vol. 1 (ed. K. Delopoulos, Athens 1980).

2 See G. Gotsi, 'Narratives in perambulation: Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" and Metsakes' *Αύτόχρειρ, Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 20 (1996) 35-55.