

# The New Criterion

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## Three poems of Angelos Sikelianos, translated by A. E. Stallings

by A. E. Stallings

Coming between Cavafy's spontaneous modernity and the studied modernism of Seferis, and admired by both the senior and junior poet, Angelos Sikelianos (1884–1951) is an anomaly. He wrote exclusively in received and nonce forms using a rich vernacular and vatic voice. His is not the stance of irony or modern detachment and exile, but of a mystic oneness with Greece's landscape and mythology. He is often compared with Yeats. In conversation with Seferis, the translator Edmund Keeley suggested that, though Sikelianos was a great poet, Yeats was greater. Seferis replied, "What does that mean? For me, Sikelianos is the greater poet and Yeats is second in comparison. Because I am Greek and Sikelianos is the great poet in my tradition."

Sikelianos is famously difficult to translate—without the structure of his forms and the verve of his demotic, the vatic can turn vapid. I am intrigued by the formal challenge, though English's relative paucity of full rhyme compared to Greek's superabundance has meant I have allowed myself looser rhyme schemes and slant rhymes to carry it off.

"The Horses of Achilles" depicts the immortal horses of Achilles, Xanthus and Balius, in Elysium (the fields of asphodel). In the *Iliad*, Xanthus had the power of speech and prophesied the death of Achilles, for which he was silenced by the Furies. The poem is both a response to Homer and to Cavafy's poem of (almost) the same title. In Sikelianos's poem, Achilles and his horses share a golden immortality and youth beyond the blood and dust of battle. (Prize animals are particularly subject in Greece to attracting the "evil eye" and are often protected with blue beads or other talismans.) One wonders who is speaking: Sikelianos, Odysseus, Patroclus?

It was on Acrocorinth, overlooking the Corinthian gulf, that Pegasus, drinking at the Pirenian spring, was captured by Bellerophon. Depicted on the coins of ancient Corinth, Pegasus is also the symbol of poetic inspiration: in Greek, the name means "spring" or "source." Compare this sonnet about a real colt who almost turns into Pegasus with a poem about Pegasus turned into a real colt, Yeats's "The Fascination of What's Difficult."

“Frieze” describes the Parthenon frieze, with its splendid parade of horses and horsemen for the Panathenaic procession, a summer festival in which the statue of Athena was presented with a new robe. The title is “Zophoros,” the modern Greek for freize, but the word also suggests its ancient sense of “life-giving” and “bearer of animals,” as the sonnet itself animates the tableau. Sikelianos is clearly intimately familiar with the figures, down to the bulging veins of the horses and the headwear of the riders. As Keats is a totemic poet for Sikelianos, this poem is arguably in conversation with Keats’s “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles.”

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**A. E. Stallings** has lived in Athens since 1999. Her new translation of Hesiod’s *Works and Days* is just out from Penguin Classics.

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