IT IS PERHAPS ironic that, at a time when the Church and government of Greece are locked in battle over retention of the statement of religious affiliation on identity cards, the Greek Orthodox Primate of Australia, S.S. Charkianakis, should publish a collection of poems with distinctive religious undertones under the title *Australian Passport*. The cover of the book makes little attempt to reinforce this title by visual approximation of an Australian passport — an arrangement of dry gumleaves stands in the place of the official insignia — but the datelines appended to both the Greek poems and their facing English translations might conceivably suggest passport stamps. More immediately, though, these coordinates of time and place recall the poetic ‘logbooks’ of another career-exile, the diplomat George Seferis, except that, curiously, the dates given here are in English even under the Greek poems.

The first dateline is also the most recent, 29 May 2001 — ominously an anniversary of the fall of Constantinople in 1453 — and then the dated poems proceed in reverse order of years (but not always of months and days) back to 9 December 1966, nine years before the archbishop’s arrival in Australia. Reverse chronology causes the reader to strike ‘Visual Australia (B)’ before ‘Visual Australia’ and the collection to end poignantly with a poem titled ‘Exile’, one of three ‘pre-Australian’ texts in the collection, where the first-person narrator declares himself to have been ‘a Greek unrepented and incurable’, now intent on conquering ‘the inner Motherland’.

*Australian Passport* primarily records domestic travel across the length and breadth of Australia, radiating from the archdiocesan headquarters in Sydney. It minutes an unfailingly reverential response to the landscape of the poet’s adopted country, its flora, fauna and population, indigenous and immigrant. Tasmania and the ACT escape explicit commemoration, whereas some less obvious parts of the archiepiscopate are revisited, such as Great Keppel Island.

Overseas trips as far afield as Opole record homage to men of the stature of Father Popielusko (‘The Defense [sic] of Infants’). But even refuelling stops suffice to inspire respect for anonymous heroes, such as the slum-dwellers who clean the aeroplane (‘From Bombay with Affliction’). Similarly, at home, the poetic embrace encompasses the lower
reaches of society, recording the tragic end of a young delinquent (‘A Murderer in Uniform’) and the profound distress of a street musician (‘Everyday Anonymities’).

In the Introduction, Vrasidas Karalis stresses the inseparability of poetry and prayer in Charkianakis’s twenty-five volumes of verse. The tone of the poems in Australian Passport is indeed typically confessional, intimate, reflective and only occasionally pontifical, as in ‘Aphorisms’, dated 1969. One of the more explicit prayer-poems, ‘Unheard Request’, contains a rather unorthodox petition for repeated reincarnation, so as to attain complete humanity through comprehensive multilingualism.

For the Greek reader, at least, it is in the frequent linguistic resonances of the scriptures and liturgy that the poet-prelate most obviously wears his stove-pipe hat. These severely test the translator, and adoption of the diction of the King James Version cannot capture them all. Thus the archaic Greek phrase behind the rather mundane title ‘Again and Again’ is a well-known formula of Orthodox litany. Here the poet-narrator states: ‘I shall never get tired, my brother, [of] saying / how sacred this world is.’ Nor does he tire of rehearsing the responsibilities of poets and the power of language.

The world under poetic consecration in the collection includes the everyday ‘barbarity of the marketplace’, to quote ‘Posthumous Fame’, a title recalling a supremely worldly Greek poet of the 1920s, Kostas Karyotakis. Such subtle intertextual references are another problem for the alert English translator to add to a very considerable array. Others occurring frequently in Australian Passport include verbless syntax, puns (notably in ‘Ergo’ and ‘Nomen est omen’) and mixed colloquial metaphors, not all of which are successfully negotiated (e.g. ‘to defend birds in the hands / which always thought as wasted milk’ [sic]).

The Introduction suggests that Dr Karalis not only relishes such challenges but has boldly sought to raise the bar by aspiring to render the rhythms of the original and to infuse resonances of selected English poets ‘with similar vision’ into the translations. The advisability of the translation strategy outlined in the Introduction is debatable, and the results suggest it was overambitious.

For me, greater concern for accuracy and normal English prepositional syntax, use of articles, tenses and usage of words would have served the reader and the poems better than an attempt to have ‘some new aural tonalities [...] acclimatised in English’. The original Greek poems simply do not share the unidiomatic features of the translations such as ‘the resurrection of a [sic] dead’ or ‘and shouts to his son: Stamati we get drowned ....’. Nor is the word order of the Greek as tortured by unnatural inversion as is the translation; nor does the Greek contain precious forms such as ‘orphanity’ — I assume that ‘upsized down’ and several other oddities are merely typographical errors. The firm hand of a rigorous English copy-editor would have improved the volume significantly.

As it stands, it will give nit-pickers of translation a field day comparing the facing pages. Ordinary bilingual readers are advised to conceal one of the pages as they proceed through the volume. Overall, for me, the translation strategy is too intrusive, needlessly violating form, requiring significant punctuation, and at one point rendering night as day.

All this does not prevent Australian Passport from forming a noble addition to the canon of Greek–Australian poetry, not least for the insight it gives into the responses to Australia of a poet of such conspicuous office. And, after all, the disarming statement of ‘In Brief’ ‘that poetry / is the noblest form of failure’ applies a fortiori to translated poetry and absolves it in advance.