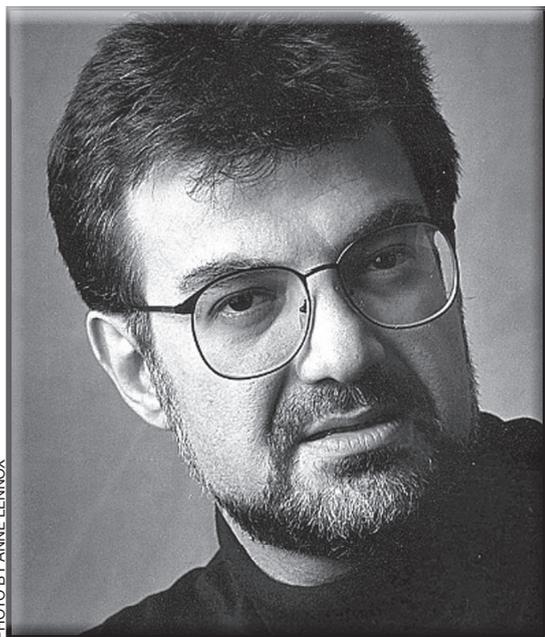
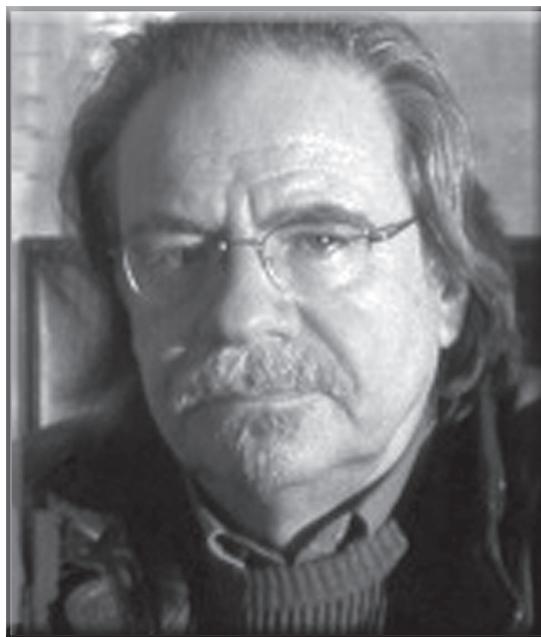


# “We are all Greek:” The Case of Three Contemporary Greek Poets

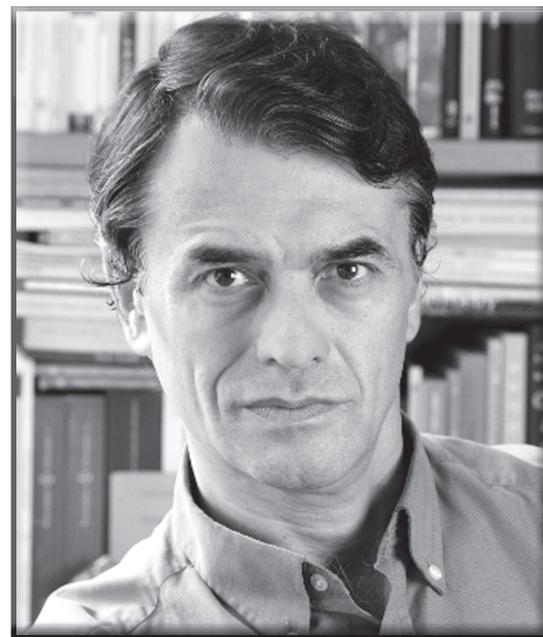
by Maria Koundoura



**Yiorgos Chouliaras**



**Dimitris Kalokyris**



**Haris Vlavianos**

If diagnoses of our culture are correct, and nostalgia and imitation reign supreme, is a new poetics possible in our moment of modernity? Are we doomed to imitate the aesthetic languages of ours and others' pasts? Is there the possibility of new visions for the present? These are questions that have preoccupied writers and critics since the beginning of modernism. Its solution of making it new morphed into the cultural relativism of the poetics of postmodernism and became the cause of celebration and despair.

Amidst all this critical anxiety, or anxiety at the critical condition of culture, writers have continued to write, evaluating the world both archaically and with newness, offering us visions for the present. This has always been the function of writing: it

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opens new worlds for us, worlds of the possible, as Aristotle says in his definition of *mimesis*, that we then strive to make real. Rooted in this long tradition, Yiorgos Chouliaras, Dimitris Kalokyris, and Haris Vlavianos are three contemporary Greek poets whose writing offers us a vision for the present that partakes of neither nostalgia nor imitation. In it, instead, we find a map of what I see as the transnational poetics of our moment. I am using poetics in its Platonic sense here, to mean the art of making, forming, deforming, and transforming since, not being Christian, Plato did not believe in the act of creation out of the absolute. Chouliaras, Kalokyris, and Vlavianos's poetry engages the full range of our modernity's aesthetic expression. In its lines one finds modernism's belief in language's immortality, postmodernism's belief in its creative power, and our current moment's ear for its many voices. Their poetics reflect the multiple expressions of modernity, and not the singular mother tongue of a Europe-centered modernism or the ventriloquism of a triumphant postmodernism that hides the monolingualism of the global culture market that supports it.

Vlavianos speaks directly to the multiplicity of our modernity's expression in a poem mourning the death of one of the women he considers his mother. Written in his two mother tongues, Greek and Italian, in its epigraph, the poem also indirectly references English, his third language. Vlavianos was born in Rome, educated in England, and by heritage and current choice of home is Greek. He is the author of eight books of poetry, among them *O Angelos tis Istorias* (The Angel of History) and *Meta to Telos tis Omorfias* (After the End of Beauty) both nominated for the Greek State Prize. He has also written two books of essays, is the editor of the acclaimed literary journal *Poitiki* (Poetics), and has published numerous translations (most notably of the work of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and John Ashbery). This poem is from his book *Adieu*:

November 16: so you also died  
far away from me, as she will also die  
—the *dulcissima mater*—  
as you are all dying.  
And now I must

alone, mourn you  
in the language of the small child  
you once loved as your own:<sup>1</sup>

The second stanza of Vlavianos's poem is in Italian and it is an adaptation of a poem by Salvatore Quasimodo. He remarks in a footnote that it occurred to him, after the fact, that this is a borrowed address. The ownership of a "foreign" (and these are his quotation marks) but loved speech, was necessary he explains: "It was my way to reconcile myself, at that moment, with her death, but also with the strange circumstance that has me share myself between three countries and three languages." He proceeds, in the same footnote, to give a Greek translation of Quasimodo's poem, itself functioning as a third stanza in what he

to give birth to a world in which "to be at home," as he tells us in the poem "Hellenica," "is to feel an accomplice in a geographical point's beauty."<sup>3</sup> The particular geographical points are not a "birthright," he explains, diffusing nostalgic attachments to national aesthetics. Nor does feeling an accomplice to beauty "make impartiality a given," he quickly



Maria Koundoura

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has formally constructed as a two-stanza poem:

With eyes on the rain and on the spirits of the night,  
there is found, at the *Prima Porta*,  
the Greek woman whom I loved  
in the melancholy days of my youth.  
Oh you who passes by, urged on by the other dead,  
stop for a moment to greet  
her who has never mourned the man  
who stays here with his verse, hated,  
one of many, a laborer of dreams.

Using poetry to reconcile oneself with difficult emotions is a long-standing therapeutic practice. Here, however, it is also a trope, a poetic device. *Tropos*, the word Vlavianos uses, that I have translated as "way," given the context of what he is saying in his footnote, is also the root word for trope. Vlavianos seems to bracket off his mourning for the woman he calls mother and, with the inclusion of Quasimodo's poem of mourning for another woman, turn that mourning into a trope of mourning. His explanation of the Italian poem's inclusion, which one might see as external to the poem proper, given that it is in a footnote, is in fact integral to it. Not only does it contain the translation of Quasimodo's poem for the reader, Greek or other, who is not literate in Italian, but it also holds what is in-between the lines, in the affective gaps, of the poem proper. It contains the emotion of his loss, that is, his *particular* experience of it expressed in language that is specific to him, even though it is another's. To write of his emotion only in the general confessional mode, something he does only in the first stanza, and only in Greek would be to betray both the mother he mourns and the mother tongue she taught him.

In what initially appears as a simple poem of mourning written in two languages with the added quirk of having a long footnote that includes the translation of the unknown Italian, Vlavianos exhibits the cosmopolitanism typical of modernists. His mixing of genres, languages, and styles, at the same time, is also typical of what we have come to recognize as the pastiche of postmodernism. Here, however, it is not performed as an act of self-conscious virtuosity but organically emerges out of his experience's necessity. His poem is also linked to Greek, the other tradition that he is writing from, and its long history of songs of mourning known as *moirologia*, translated as "words of fate," that address the loved one in the voice or words of another. The combination of all of these aesthetic traditions makes his poetics exemplary of our modernity. Firmly rooted in the multiple experiences and histories that characterize our present, this modernity's roots are not watered in nostalgia nor dried up as a fetish, the way we are told they survive in postmodernism.<sup>2</sup> Instead, they are alive and fusing.

A riotous fusion characterizes Dimitris Kalokyris's poetry. He uses multiple aesthetic traditions in a poetics that takes writing to its apogee and ends only

adds, checking his own writer's impulses and cosmopolitanism's transformation of the aesthetic imagination into a fetish. The poem proceeds:

Yet since we don't choose the mode of our birth  
we can at least choose the place of our death:  
*Before you is yet another description of Freedom*

That's why we know it intimately from its edge  
in these parts.  
We imagine it thinking Greek  
like that of a Xenophon<sup>4</sup>

A reader versed in Greek will immediately recognize in these lines the echo of the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century poet Dionysius Solomos's "Hymn to Freedom," a poem whose first two verses became the Greek national anthem. "I recognize you from the cut of the sword so terrible" is the first verse's second line, naming freedom and the southernmost tip of Europe as Greece. In Kalokyris's "Hellenica," *his* Greek, for that is what the poem's title means, unlike in Solomos's, freedom is the ability to choose the place of one's death, not die for one's birthplace. The "we" who know this freedom "intimately from its edge" are not only the Greeks, as a strictly national reading would have it, but also all who occupy parts on the edge. These parts can be geographical (the peripheries, not the center of empires) and aesthetic (the home of accomplices to beauty exiled there by a culture that seems bent on its destruction). "We," the people from the edge "imagine it," freedom, "thinking Greek / like that of a Xenophon," the stanza concludes.

This declaration of the imagination's independence is neither a nostalgic Romanticism (à la Shelley for whom we were all Greeks) nor a modernist fetishistic return to western culture's ideal origin now in ruins. (Eliot's "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" comes to mind here). The declaration is not a modern Greek claim to a culture of the past (like Solomos's anthem). Unlike Shelley, Eliot, or Solomos, Kalokyris does not *tell* us that freedom thinks in Greek but that those of us from geographical and aesthetic edges, including the southernmost tip of Europe, "imagine it thinking Greek / like that of a Xenophon." The word *xenophon*, as a proper noun, refers to the well-known historian and former student of Socrates and also to the ancient writer of that name who also wrote a poem called "Hellenica," and generally means foreign speaker of a native language. It also means a native who speaks foreign languages. No one and everyone can be a native speaker of the language of the imagination, Kalokyris seems to be telling us here, reminding us that it has always been inhabited by foreignness, even at the origin: that is the imagination's freedom.

His poetry illustrates this freedom. His images are not only Greek, or ancient, but Hellenistic, Arabic, Zoroastrian, and all kinds of modern. His line of vision includes poets like C.P. Cavafy and George Seferis. It includes not only the surrealists or Jacques Prevert, Garcia Lorca, Cortazar, Borges, and Bioy Casares,

all of whom he has translated into Greek, but also Byzantine chronicles, 16<sup>th</sup>-century travelers' tales and almanacs, and French and Spanish literature of all ages. He is the author of twenty-five books of poetry and prose, two of which have won the national book prize in Greece, fifteen books of translation, and he has held three exhibitions of collages and also illustrated numerous children's books. He works in the field of graphic arts, and has designed thousands of book covers and posters. He founded and edited the legendary literary magazines *Tram* and *Hartis* and was the editorial director and artistic director of the monthly cultural magazine *To Tetarto*.

The multilingual, mixed media, high and low cultural poetics of Kalokyris cannot be contained within a national literary tradition, not even a cosmopolitan one. Though cosmopolitan, he is not the cosmopolitan man of letters imagined by Goethe. If in his 19<sup>th</sup>-century eyes the different European literatures (for they were the world to Goethe) were made particular by being exposed to a wider gaze through translation, Kalokyris's poetry shows us that our vision today needs to be transnational (not just translational) in order to be able to hold the world as we know it.<sup>5</sup> In "The Dark Places of the Eyes," he gives us a glimpse how:

The world now of course is different  
and its language undresses  
traversed through  
everyone's teeth;  
yet if even, as they  
say, thought  
designs in it the  
textiles of infinity  
ever so swiftly  
so that it can't even  
discern the moment  
between the thread  
and the knots that  
bind it  
in the end what do  
you think a poet is:  
someone who stays  
awake at night  
peeking at visions  
or a merchant  
who leaning his  
chair back  
counts flies waiting  
for the gold-tinged one to come to him  
in the dress of a client?<sup>6</sup>

In a world in which Goethe's ideal of "free intellectual trade relations" among nations that address "needs that were previously unknown" has become a reality, Kalokyris asks: what is a poet?<sup>7</sup> The options he lists are familiar in poetry's history: a patient, though bleary eyed, visionary, and a merchant who waits for his muse. The one is subject to others' visions (we are not told they are his own), the other merchandizes his craft on demand. In the first half of the stanza, however, another image of the poet unfolds. He is the weaver *and* the one who unravels the fabric of language: *logos* is the word Kalokyris uses (which is translated as word and also as thought). It is a difficult task since the world today "can't even discern the moment / between the thread and the knots that bind it." This is why the poet is a necessary figure. Like Walter Benjamin's translator who gives us access to the ensemble of language and not only to the particulars of an original, the poet is someone who reads between the lines, the threads of language, and opens a world to us in which our tongues can get untied from the familiar knots that bind them.<sup>8</sup>

Yiorgos Chouliaras is a poet particularly adept at untying Gordian knots in multiple languages. A Greek poet now living in Dublin, and before that in Washington, DC, in Boston, in Ottawa, and in Portland (while at Reed), he has also lived in New York for so long that he has been called a New Yorker from Thessaloniki. His poems most recently have appeared in Graywolf's *New European Poets* and in *Pomegranate Seeds*, an anthology on Greek-American poetry.<sup>9</sup> Chouliaras has six books of poetry published in Greece and more than three hundred essays in English and in Greek. He was a founding editor of *Tram* and *Hartis* in Greece, and an editor of the *Journal of Hellenic Diaspora* in the U.S. He is among the most translated in English contemporary Greek poets, his poems appearing in more than twenty-seven literary journals, among them *Poetry*, *Ploughshares*, *Harvard Review*, *Grand Street*, *World Literature Today*, *Translation*, *Mediterraneans*, and *International Poetry Review*. He also has a number of translators. The poet David Mason has been his principal one.

Chouliaras's strong presence in the American literary marketplace makes him a contemporary American poet, even though his work is in translation. His relation to America, however, is as intimate and distant as the one he has with Greece. He tenderly speaks of it in his poem "I AM WORKING ON MY GREEK" (this is its actual title, not my translation):

For those of us who have suffered amnesiac blows,  
at our own hand or the general culture's, and seem  
to be doomed to imitate imagined pasts,  
Chouliaras, Kalokyris, and Vlavianos teach  
us how to keep their making alive.

When I hear Greek, I think of vacation  
an American woman from the tenth floor would tell us  
as we all rode down the elevator.

That's why we've learned it too.<sup>10</sup>

The primary language of the "we" in the last line is not clear, even though the American woman presumes that it is Greek because she hears them speaking it. Like Kalokyris, Chouliaras does not assume that to speak a language, of aesthetics or of a nation, is a sign of one's place in it. Nor does he believe that understanding it is a sign of its life, as we see in "Dead Language":

I am dying, she said  
though in a language foreign  
to the living  
as we surmised we certainly are  
because we did not understand  
what she said.<sup>11</sup>

This wonderfully economic poem richly situates us at the heart of what I have been calling transnational poetics, the poetics of our moment. The unnamed woman in the poem is the figure of the muse, the meaning of whose not-so-dead language the contemporary poet can only surmise. In the process,

that is, in writing, he discovers that not only he but also she is alive: he quotes her words in the language of the living without understanding them. With this move, Chouliaras cunningly debunks postmodernism's matricide of Mnemosyne, memory, the mother of all the muses, while using its claim that there is no authenticity to authenticate her voice in the now. In "Letter Phi," the twenty-first letter of the Greek alphabet and the twenty-first poem of his collection, *Gramma* ("Letter,"), he shows us how to keep memory alive without nostalgia or fetish. Time is of the essence in this poem. It *is* the essence of the poem, I have found, in my attempt to translate its dizzying use of tenses in Greek into English. The space Chouliaras creates in the curvature of time in the last lines of the poem is that of writing. A story emerges from it. It is that of writing's Janus-like backward looking forward glance that opens the gate to multiple visions of the present.

I imagine the voices of philologists  
filing through their ancient epistles  
having already been delivered to the future  
though they address the past  
which no one now thinks is possible  
to change to future tense  
thus always we will write  
forgetting that what has been written  
is being read forwards  
changing backwards all that comes to pass<sup>12</sup>

In "Jerusalem/Ithaka," one of the most recent poems of *Roads of Ink*, his retrospective collection that starts with his present poems, we get a view of the multiple trajectories of our now and a way to inhabit them in the future. This twelve-stanza poem is about returns, to Jerusalem and Ithaka, real and metaphorical. Its locations are Los Angeles and Ithaka, but it is really set in transit.

Its subtitle is "*lysiponon*," a word that means pain resolving, as the poet's note tells us and, in a nod to tradition but also a wink to the reader regarding such piety, he also tells us that it appears at least once in Pindar. The poem begins with a promise: "Next year in Ithaka." This is a future rendezvous that echoes another promise with a history: "next year in Jerusalem." While possible, given their desire to make it happen and their cultural history of desiring it happens, their present has the speaker and his friends all understand this promise as a verbal ritual.

Next year in Ithaka, my friends would tell me  
tenderly parodying their words because  
this would be our final gathering if I believed  
their wishes to find themselves in Jerusalem  
abandoning the blond angels to Los Angeles<sup>13</sup>

The ironic tone of this stanza creates a distance between memory and desire, bridged only by the power of language's (or writing's, for Aristotle) reality-producing properties. With the ritualistic, some would say fetishist or nostalgic, invocations "next year in Jerusalem," "next year in Ithaka," Chouliaras reassures us that language/writing can indeed return us home. This home's space can be as real, and as imaginary, as the city of Jerusalem or the new Jerusalem that is Los Angeles. As real also as

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the assumed autobiographical, or confessional, time and space of the "here" in the middle of the poem: "Come see, you told me, and I did not stop talking / Here in Ithaca where in fact I am with you / Here on the island where I returned having just arrived."

The city, the *polis*, as we know from the Greeks, is not its buildings and public spaces but the people and their desires that are the lines that map it. Chouliaras, who bears the cultural memory of this knowledge, writes it into the present, or as the present, further down in the poem. He tells us of a beach in Ithaka "called Polis although no city exists / unless it is that Jerusalem that Anna Comnena / refers to in her book with its houses / entirely immersed by the quake in the waters of the bay." Polis, Jerusalem, Ithaka, Los Angeles, articulating the name of the city, mapping its coordinates in our writing, as our imagination and our desire, makes it real. That is the city that we carry with us wherever we go, Chouliaras is telling us here, giving new life to C.P. Cavafy's "The City."<sup>14</sup> Because, as he explains in the last stanza of the poem:

It is difficult to tell when you find yourself elsewhere  
whether you will feel the lack more of all that you left  
or that which you will once again leave  
because as much as you are returning by leaving  
when you finally do return you will have left

This is the price and the reward of living in metaphors, in poetry, and in transit, the other meaning of the word metaphor in Greek, a language that makes it possible for Athenians to catch metaphors to work. In "Jerusalem/Ithaka" Chouliaras uses the metaphor of transit to paint a picture of the constant movement of people and ideas that characterizes our moment and of Plato's concept of *metaksi*, of being in-between. He translates it as the situation of being human, as being incurably *en route* between transcendence and the everyday, or, to use the terms of the poem, between Jerusalem and Ithaka. Chouliaras's portrayal of this humanity does not fall prey to pieties like blind reverence to a tradition (intact or in ruins) or irreverence to its memory (now also a tradition). His poetics' place is where we are, always in-between, helping us understand that it is our choice to turn tradition into a fetish or long for it as if it were gone from our present.

For those of us who have suffered amnesiac blows, at our own hand or the general culture's, and seem to be doomed to imitate imagined pasts, Chouliaras, Kalokyris, and Vlavianos teach us how to keep their making alive. Their writing not only exemplifies what T.S. Eliot has defined as individual talent in the wake of tradition but also answers the contemporary philosopher's question: "in what language does one

write memoirs when there has been no authorized mother tongue?"<sup>15</sup> In the language of multiple mothers, their poetry replies. This multiplicity is necessary because to limit it in the name of a vision of the world given to us through the global culture industry and its aesthetic that, despite its claims to universality, is particular, is to limit the function of writing and its ability to offer us visions for our present. AWP

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#### Notes

1. Haris Vlavianos, *Adieu* (Athens: Nefeli, 1996), 33-34. All translations from the Greek are my own.
2. Fredric Jameson, one of the first to define postmodernism, argues that in globalization there are no cultures but only the nostalgic images of national cultures, and in postmodernity we cannot appeal back to the fetish of cultural authenticity. For his latest thoughts on both, see his "New Literary History After the End of the New," *New Literary History* (2008) 39: 379.
3. Dimitris Kalokyris, "Hellenica" in *Atraktos: Poems 1966-2001* (Athens: Nefeli, 2004), 419. All translations from the Greek are my own.
4. *Ibid.*, 419.
5. *Correspondence Between Goethe and Carlyle*, ed. Charles Eliot Norton (London: Macmillan, 1887), 24-25.
6. *Atraktos*, 132-133.
7. Goethe, "Some Passages Pertaining to the Concept of World Literature," in *Comparative Literature: The Early Years. An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Hans-Joachim Schulz and Phillip H. Rhein (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 8-9.
8. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Fontana/Collins, 1973), 74-75. Benjamin draws a kinship between the task of the poet and that of the translator when he suggests that translation's task is not about reconstituting the original but the larger ensemble of language. Its ideal is the promise of meaning, not literalness or a particular meaning. Found in-between the lines of the original's language, this promise is story, pure language, waiting to be passed on.
9. *New European Poets*, ed. Wayne Miller and James Pruffer (Graywolf, 2008), Pomegranate Seeds, ed. Dean Kostos (Boston: Somerset Hill Press, 2008). *New European Poets* also includes the work of Haris Vlavianos.
10. Yiorgos Chouliaras, *Roads of Ink* (Athens: Nefeli, 2005), 69. All translations from the Greek are my own.
11. *Ibid.*, 63.
12. *Ibid.*, 57.

13. *Ibid.*, 15.

14. C. P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems* (revised edition), trans. by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, ed. by George Savidis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

15. Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other or The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1998), 31.