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 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. 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.

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 calls "an act of self-conscious mourning," that address the loved one in the voice or words of another. The combination of his personal experience of it expressed in language with those of others" who share his trauma, "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 but his explanation of that poem too: "Is it 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 calls "an act of self-conscious mourning," that address the loved one in the voice or words of another. The combination of his personal experience of it expressed in language with those of others who share his trauma, "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 but his explanation of that poem too: "Is it 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?"

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...
all of whom he has translated into Greek, but also Byzantine chronicles, 16th-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 the covers of book covers and posters. He founded and edited the legendary literary magazines *Team* and *Harts* 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 19th-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 translationally) in order to be able to hold the world as we know it. 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 peaking 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?2

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? 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 century, 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.

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. 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 *Team* and *Harts* 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, Mediterranean*, 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 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.

> 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.

> 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* ("Letters"), he shows us how to read memory, alive with the 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.

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.

> 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.

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) key-producing properties. Of 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 Ithaca “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.” 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 _metatikis_, 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 poetical 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?” 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.

### Notes

2. Fredric Jameson, one of the first to define postmodernity, 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.
4. Ibid., 419.
6. _Atrktos_, 132-133.
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.
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.