

Poetry in the Cypriot Dialect and Pavlos Liasides

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RÉSUMÉ

Après Vassilis Michaelidis et Dimitris Lipertis, un autre poète, Pavlos Liasidis, a écrit de la poésie en dialecte chypriote. Son éducation scolaire limitée ne lui a pas permis d'utiliser la langue néohellénique commune. Ayant grandi dans un environnement rural et ayant été élevé avec la poésie populaire laïque, il chante les joies et les douleurs des gens de la campagne et en même temps il se préoccupe des problèmes sociaux et politiques de son pays.

ABSTRACT

After Vassilis Michaelides and Dimitris Lipertis, another poet, Pavlos Liasidis, used the Cypriot dialect, his poor education having prevented him from mastering the common Greek language. Raised in a rural milieu and nurtured by folk songs, he sings the joys and pains of rural life, and is deeply concerned about the social and political issues of his country

These days in Cyprus the dialect changes on a fast pace, more and more approaching the Panhellenic demotic language. This is produced by development, education as well as the Mass Media that keep diminishing distances, allowing a more direct communication between people living in different areas. In addition, diverse TV programs suggest common linguistic standards on a daily basis to all Greeks, wherever it is that they live. This is a historical evolution, which will continue even more rapidly in the future and we cannot but accept it. Therefore, the Cypriot dialect is diversified, yet it vividly maintains several particularities; to a different extent and in different ways it is expressed through the works of Cypriot litterateurs. Not only those who write in the dialect but almost all Cypriot litterateurs who employ the Panhellenic *demotiki*, receive the influence of Cypriot dialect both in their language and their style.

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In every era, throughout the sum total of their historical adventures and struggles, our people expressed their thoughts, feelings and emotions through poetry. In times when poetic tradition was predominantly verbal, a poem created by a talented poet could easily be transferred from one to the other and across different regions, undergoing additions, abstractions and differentiations, gradually acquiring dense form and meaning, expressing collective emotions and the feelings of many.

This is the path followed by our folksongs that through a diachronic process of recreation and reformation arrived on the verge of perfection in terms of their form, the wealth of their images and emotions. Throughout the centuries, these songs would be transferred from one region of Hellenism to the other, vaccinated with local elements, historic events, stories and myths and above all, carrying the linguistic types and distinct features of each region.

Therefore, a wealth of dialects rises from the Greek people's folksongs, all different variations of the great and diachronic Greek language. Within this framework, the Cypriot dialect and Cypriot versions of folksongs occupy a special place, like for example, the cluster of songs on Dhigenis Akritas. However, other songs too, i.e. "Tou Nekrou Adelfou" [Of the Dead Brother], "To Yefyri tis Artas" [The bridge of Arta], "O Gyrismos tou Xenitemenou" [The Immigrant's Return], transferred here from other Hellenic regions have been delivered in especially rich variations in their Cypriot version. The Cypriot dialect endowed them with its own poetic grace and singularity, its own means of expression. For instance, in "The Immigrant's Return" the particularities of the Cypriot variation are indeed obvious. Verses are rebuilt, condensed, the first person of the Greek variation is turned to a second person. Most importantly, this masterpiece of Greek folk poetry has come to us in a different but equally masterful form, in a dialect of the Greek language, namely the Cypriot dialect.

A plethora of anonymous poets crafted their work in the context of this tradition which they kept alive, expressing the emotions and feelings of the people. For instance, the beautiful "Tragoudi tis Arodafnousas" [Arodafnousa's song] details the tragic historic events that took place in the palace of the French king of Cyprus, Peter I in the 15th century, described by Leontios Machairas in his *Chronicle*. The recounting of these events stirred the people that set out to express their feelings through the song:

*Three sisters live in the upper neighborhood,
Chrystallou, Lenousa
whilst the third and best of them, is called Arodafnousa.*

*It is with her that the king is enamored, it is her that the rex loves,
the rex of the East and king of the West.
The Regina found out and was greatly discontented,
four messages she sent for Rodafnou to go to her.*

This is how the song begins, moving on to recount in a vivid and dramatic manner the passions of Arodafnousa, who suffered in the hands of the cruel Regina.

The Cypriot dialect has evolved through the centuries, receiving and assimilating influences by foreign peoples who passed through the island, i.e. the French, the Venetians, the Turks, always however maintaining a solid basis that dates back to the ancient Greek language. Even today, many philologists are surprised to discover ancient Greek elements within the Cypriot dialect - not only words but also phrases and syntactic structures, obsolete elsewhere but still alive here.

The transition from the verbal to the written poetic tradition in the Cypriot dialect took place in the end of the preceding century with Vassilis Michaelides. Following the example of the Hellene poets who abandoned the *katharevousa* [the “purified” Greek] in order to write in the demotic, a more animated and direct language, V. Michaelides tried his hand at several endeavors to use both the *katharevousa* and the *demotiki*. Eventually, though, he turned to the Cypriot dialect and the folk poetic tradition. This is how he wrote his poetic masterpieces that made him Cyprus’ greatest and indeed national poet: the synthetic works “I Ennati Iouliou tou 1821” [The 9th July 1821], “I Chiotissa” [Woman of Chios] and the lyrical “I Anerada” [The Nereid].

Michaelides’ verses and language possess power and evocativeness; they are overflowing with ideas, feelings and emotions. The work Vassilis Michaelides bequeathed to us is of immense importance for both his time and ours, on account of its innovativeness and poetic vigor. It is aesthetically complete and historically vindicated albeit rather small in terms of volume (at least his published work). V. Michaelides is Cyprus’ Solomos. At the linguistic level, his work utilizes the potential of the Cypriot dialect contributing to this day to its growth into the language our popular poets employ in order to craft their poetry and sign it with their own name.

Demetris Lipertis followed the example of V. Michaelides, employing the Cypriot dialect in order to write his beautiful idyllic songs, as he too abandoned the *katharevousa*. However, Michaelides and not Lipertis is the

starting point for subsequent poets that use the Cypriot dialect, the so called “popular poets”: Pavlos Liasides, Kyriakos Karneras, Elias Yeorgiou, Demetris Ttakkas, the Katsantonides etc. V. Michaelides is the predecessor of our country’s contemporary popular poets. His frugal but natural language, his knowledge of history, satire etc. lay the foundations for the poetics of our later popular poetry. The most significant element, highlighted from the perspective of this study, is the way language is used. The Cypriot dialect is applied as a self-sufficient and self-dependent language, freed from all taboos, suitable for all topics and spheres of life. The poet makes use of this language in order to express his philosophical reflections, his lyrical poetic dispositions, to mold his own lyrical hero and express his poetic ego.

The poets that follow V. Michaelides use the Cypriot dialect as a living, evolving instrument of expression and communication; they do not feel that it restricts their expression in any way. For them, the Cypriot dialect does not mean they can only write about specific topics excluding others. Popular poets are not producing folklore. When employing the Cypriot dialect, they do not treat it as a folkloric material that needs to be documented. It is their own living language. That is why they have no difficulty using words that come into the language later on, or delving into contemporary topics.

Throughout our century, poetry in the Cypriot dialect stands next to poetry in the Panhellenic vernacular. It is the language of popular poets and minstrels (“*poittarides*” - folk poets reciting their poems in public), to which poets like Costas Montis and Michalis Pashardis, known for their work in the *demotiki* often turn when wanting to describe something lyrical. Still, the language these poets use is different, perhaps a little feigned, “clearer” than the genuine dialect of popular poets.

From 1974 onwards, Cyprus has been the scene of a true poetic climax. The devastating events and the tragedy that ensued gave rise to and inspired a multitude of works that expressed feelings of pain, bitterness, disappointment, struggle and hope. Dialectal poetry has a big share in this poetic effusion. Within this framework, earlier poets like Pavlos Liasides, Kyriakos Karneras, Demetris Ttakas, Elias Yeorgiou and many others pondered over contemporary topics related to the tragedy; shattered by the hordes of refugees, they had wanted to express their feelings in verse. Many of these poems may not possess a significant poetic value, but they are indeed valuable in the form of testimonies about the tragedy. In addition, they contribute to the preservation of the dialect, providing scholars with ample material to work with. They are

indeed a source of information on social, historic and linguistic topics.

Pavlos Liasides owns a special place within the sum total of Cypriot dialect. His work is from many aspects interesting and unique in terms of the wealth of his ideas and his passionate character. More than twenty years have gone by since his death; still, Pavlos Liasides continues to live in our minds as the poet whose work was putting into words our country's historic and social adventures for a period over sixty years. In his case, we realize that a rare poetic talent has been offered to us, a talent we recognize in his verses but also in his entire attitude toward life. We discern it in what P. Liasides stood for as a personality and to everything he has given us through his poetic yield.

This gift that was accorded to him, he had to carry through difficult and unfavorable living conditions. We are not in a position to say whether the development of his talent would have been favored or not, had he had other education opportunities or bigger financial ease. What we can say is that in the end, the life he led did not restrain his talent neither did it stop him from bequeathing to us a valuable sum of work.

Throughout his life, P. Liasides was first and foremost a poet. Not only because he wrote poems but also because he lived, thought and felt like a poet. Above anything else, he was a poet and no other aspect of his personality was as strongly illuminated. His dedication to poetry was almost phenomenal, setting him apart from the rest of the world.

Born in a village, barely educated, forced to win his bread sometimes as a shepherd, other times as a seasonal worker, a farmer etc, Liasides lived his life attached to the people, and from the people he derived many elements for his poetry. His language, the myths and scenes he describes, his images and symbols, the heroes of his poems, everything is drawn from the popular milieu within which he spent his life. Furthermore, Liasides applied himself to the popular and folk poetic tradition, from which he learned a lot. And what he took from it, he gave back, recreated through his poetry. After all, in his work the element of personal creation, personal experiences, his own feelings, thoughts and dreams are indeed prevalent.

Drawing from his popular surroundings and tradition, Liasides never yields to various poetic stereotypes that are being cultivated and often used as "molds" by a large group among those who write dialectal verses, those we are referring to as popular poets. These stereotypes are often applied at the level of verses but they also expand to means of expression and content, thus depriving their verses of any poetic value. Even the best samples of works by popular poets rarely escape these stereotypes.

In P. Liasides' case, as in the cases of all original craftsmen, regardless of whether they are popular poets or not and regardless of the language they employ, poetry is deeply personal and original. Within his verses we may trace his personal experiences, his thoughts and visions. We may discern the particular manner in which the poet grasped and accepted the world; we may even approach his own truth and specific poetic logic.

P. Liasides was born a poet. Poetry lived within him as a natural gift which he would discover everyday. Since his adolescence, when he was still a shepherd in the Agios Eufemianos region in Lysi, Liasides experienced some intense poetic moments, emerging through personal experiences, impressions and feelings suggested by the landscape, as well as through his personal thoughts and dreams. The poet lived the reality of nature and society as they expanded into the sphere of dream.

In his unique autobiography, which he wrote in 1954 upon a request by Savvas K. Xystouris, a collector of folklore material from Lysi, Liasides remembers and notes down a few verses from a larger, previously unrecorded adolescent synthesis.

*Whilst I was walking today I stumbled on running water
I thought the earth was torn in two and I slightly sank
There I met an old man, short and plump
I asked him who had brought the water down there.
He said, 'it's from the skies I brought it here
It is the water of immortality, do you want it? Here, take it.*

These verses contain true and original poetic images and above all they are charged with genuine emotion, born from the discovery of “running water” – an allegory for the encounter of the adolescent poet with poetry itself that like running water starts coming out in spurts from within him.

This discovery he is going through and the special emotion that overwhelms him, he gradually identifies with the form and idea of poetry. His thematic categories are distinctive of a popular poet; they emerge from the symbols of fairy tales, such as the “water of immortality”, “the loving princess” etc; or they derive from rural life and rural images. However, owing to their original concept, they often take off and lead to more abstract domains. In the collection “*I parallae tou tziarou*” [The change of time] (1937), Liasides publishes the poem “*I niki mou*” [My victory]. There, elaborating a myth that resembles a folktale in terms of its images and symbols, Liasides extends the idea of the pursuit of poetry. After providing

us with a description of his personal quests and numerous realistic biographical elements that are displaced onto the edges of the poem's mythology, he concludes:

*Both despair and fear have persecuted me
but I've won the one I love. – Poetry and speech!*

The perception of poetry as a gift offered to the poet, revealed to him as a secret source of running water, filling him with unprecedented joys and emotions, enriching him, is recurrent in numerous poems within *I parallae tou tzairou*. In the poem "Gelo tous" [I fool them], poetry appears as a cistern of truth and wealth that the supporters and keepers of falsehood hide from the world. However, the poet fools them: wandering into the night in his imagination and mind he reaches the hidden source whence he derives the "jewelry" of truth and beauty. As Liasides' poetry evolves, this abstract form of poetry becomes identified with poetic imagination. In fact, imagination becomes poetry itself and the poet is deeply moved for having been blessed to approach it. Imagination as poetic form, poetic idea, is expanded so as to take the form of the ideal poet. It becomes the truth, justice, happiness; it acquires the meaning of his social ideal, transferring him to worlds where he may encounter freedom and joy. For Liasides, this is the world of poetic imagination and at the same time the real world of the future. In this world, injustice, poverty, lies, sickness, oppression, the war, animosities between peoples etc. will be conquered and the sphere of reality will become identical with the sphere of dreams.

In the domain of erotic poetry, no other popular poet appears able to avoid the stereotypes of form and content, to which I have referred to at the beginning; therefore, almost invariably, a formalistic poetry ensues, devoid of the poets' living personal experiences and everything they have been through. However, this is not the case with Liasides. Deep inside almost his entire erotic poetry, his personal experiences lie hidden, albeit displaced onto the poetic sphere. There are very few instances where Liasides writes erotic poems following the genre's standardized poetics. But even in these cases, it is obvious that his own passion dominates the form.

Nevertheless, in a cluster of other poems, the biographical element lies hidden within his verses. I am not referring simply to specific events, but to things that may depart from a detail which goes on to feed the poet's imagination and emotions, thus building an alternative reality. For instance, when the poet sees the girl he loves washing clothes in the basin with her

sleeves rolled up, revealing “her forearms... white like rice”, this is a given reality. But when he goes on to imagine that the girl will later sit inside the basin in order to take her bath, employing an allegoric language to express the passion stirring up inside him, then the limits of reality are extended to a different, poetic reality.

*She's white like the almond tree that when in bloom
and sitting inside the flowerpot,
fortunate is the man who'll taste her first scent,
who'll eat the first fruit as soon as it sprouts.*

It is in another cluster of erotic poems that Liasides attains high levels of original erotic poetry. Aside from erotic passion, these poems contain the pronounced subversive passion that distinguishes the poet. In them, Liasides sets out to demonstrate that love works like a catalyst, powerful enough to overturn the world's equilibrium. Especially the irresistible female beauty is capable of reversing the tranquility of the world and lead to catastrophes, like an act of God. This theme is often recurrent in folk poetry; still he describes it in an exceptionally original and personal manner. In the collection *Ta tragoudia tou nisiou mou* [The songs of my island] he publishes the poem “Epartin na leipsei” [Take her, make her disappear], in which he addresses the Creator asking him to obliterate the woman he created; for with the power of the beauty he endowed her with she will destroy the whole world.

Various scholars characterized P. Liasides as a popular, ethnographic, gnomic poet etc. Others highlighted the social and class facets of his poetry. Together with all these that undoubtedly express certain aspects of Liasides' poetry, the element that mostly defines it is in my opinion its realism. It is a rich, deep, true realism that expresses the reality of his time from within, often with a pronounced critical disposition, with irony and humor but without being confined to the above. The poet tends to observe reality in progress, as something that keeps changing and reshaping. Summoning his dream and imagination, he endows it with a different dimension. This realism sets the tone in Liasides' poetry which transcends from the start both the ethnographic approach, traced in other popular poets as well as the folk poets' naturalistic imagery.

The world of Liasides' poetry is the world of the village, with its own pursuits, interests and problems. At the same time though, it is also the broader world of Cyprus and the overseas that emit the signals which influence the life of the village. When he describes the world wherein he

lives, Liasides is not just an observer taking notes but also a critical visionary.

In his first two poetry books, *Tragoudia tou nisiou mou* [The songs of my island] and *Ta fkiora tis kardias mou* [The flowers of my heart], the prevalent topics, aside from the erotic ones, are rural themes and scenes from life in the village. His heroes are the people of the village, with their faults and virtues, but mainly with their tribulations. They are tormented by poverty, the oppression of the rich and the State, usury but also prejudice, superstition, fatalism and illiteracy. In this domain of his poetry, Liasides is often satirical, sometimes sarcastic, all the more when he delves into questions of social critique. By describing the life of the poor and the oppressed, he exposes from the inside the mechanism of exploitation, obviously aiming to provoke reaction to the prevailing conditions. In the poem “Ston ftohon panta i-ppetei” [The poor man is always the one] the poet really penetrates the system itself that forces all to serve it.

At times, in these poetry books his social critique reaches extreme limits. His passion against injustice makes him the herald of a frustrated subversive attitude. In these two collections, Liasides is a fervent opponent of social injustice but he is yet to put forward his own vision for a different, just and luminous world that becomes for him a source of hope for the future. This vision first appears in his third poetry book, *I parallae tou tziarou* whilst it grows in his subsequent collections. Here too, by projecting his vision, Liasides is indeed putting up a world of his own, his own poetic system that takes us aback. Images and symbols are drawn from the rural milieu wherein he lives, but he elevates them to the first ranks of expressiveness. His verses are filled with emotion and they express original poetic feelings.

This path, traced in the collection *I parallae tou tziarou* is pursued in his subsequent collections, where each title contains a symbolic connotation and sends the message of one more step in the direction of man's liberation: *Haraman fou* [Daybreak], *Yenniman eliou* [Sunrise], *Broeman* [Dawn], *Entekamisi I ora* [Eleven thirty], *Dodeka para deka* [Ten to twelve]. Liasides' vision is clearly social; it is the vision of freedom from the chains of slavery but also poverty and oppression.

*Wake up, poor folk, enough, for the light has risen
Listen to the ship, it whistles, waiting for us.
The immovable darkness has started to dissolve
making room for our permanent, unending joy to come.*

Liasides' faith in the future is fostered on the one hand by the social

changes eventuating in the world and the development of socialist ideas, to which he passionately adheres; on the other hand it is fostered by the support of science and technology. His faith in science exceeds all conventional limits, mainly after the first manned flight into space. Science is identical with progress, freedom, justice, God, the idea and vision of the future. Indeed, rarely has a poet ever lived with so much passion the idea of the future, the idea of a new and happy life, devoid of any kind of lie, injustice and oppression, even death.

“Heaven will eventuate only when Charon dies”, he notes in an aphorism in *I parallae tou tziairou*. And in the collection *Na pethanei o Haros* [May Charon dies] he crafts these verses of exquisite conception:

*I want to enter back into the uterus of woman
be born in the world of truth
where life will smell of nutmeg
and thoughts will be rid of the dead and the thieves...*

Liasides expanded these ideas owing to the fact that he had been able to develop his own original poetic system, his own poetic logic, within which the whole world, life and death, the earth and the universe comprised a unity. In the collection “*I parallae tou tziairou*” there is one original quatrain that reveals Liasides’ way of thinking:

*Earth, you who bears bodies and then eats them away
delivering and collecting souls, as if you were a postman
Your own turn will come, no matter how late
the sun that breathes life in you, will finally suck you in.*

In the first two lines he simply formulates an observation within the framework of empirical logic, on which are based both the standardized and the religious standpoints on the ephemeral nature of human life. It is in fact an axiom on the existence of the perishable and restrained human nature, shared by all humans. The style and meaning of the verses are in fact evocative of the Genesis’ “for dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return”.

It is within this stereotypical framework that our entire popular poetry operates, from Kyriakos Karneras to Elias Georgiou. Liasides moves much further treading a different path. In the quatrain’s last two lines, the poet employs subtle irony that ends up in self-sarcasm to remind the earth of its own perishable nature:

*Your own turn will come, no matter how late
the sun that breathes life in you, will finally suck you in.*

This subverts common, empirical logic whence stems a specific and empirically proven truth, introducing a particular poetic logic to which all elements submit and transubstantiate, receiving a different meaning. The turn that takes place within the poem itself, incites the imagination, provoking both thoughts and feelings. Perhaps without knowing anything on this matter or at least without having purposely aspired to it, Liasides shows a path where poetic imagination and insight merge with scientific theory and observations. However, what is most significant in the poem is not the approach of its content through scientific theory but this magnificent poetic attitude: the challenge of empirical logic, of the limitations and perishability of human nature, the extension of the poetic "I" through feelings and irony (irony also extends to his own nature) to a universal and eternal world relieved of the above, compared even to the mighty sun. From a bird's eye view of the universe, freed from the human predicament, the poet contemplates himself and the world.

At the same time, poems like this one express his existential anguish and quests. As such, they do not allow of merely one interpretation; in fact it is difficult to grasp them throughout applying logic, but they do convince you through the emotion and feelings with which poetic perceptions are formulated. In all these poems, the idea of the world's unity comes forward. Nature and people, dead and alive comprise one single whole. This idea is recurrent in many of Liasides' poems, which are put together based on the same poetic logic, suggesting the vision of immortality and the future. In the poem "San vretho sto nekrotafeio" [Once I find myself in the graveyard] too, we observe a very interesting view of this matter:

*Unforgettable dead friends, resting in the soil
Fruit of youth, stolen from the enemy of mother life.*

Throughout his poetic journey and mainly in the years that followed the first launchings of manned space vehicles, Liasides' launching into science became stronger and evolved to a source of hope, not only for a better world but also for the attainment of immortality itself. Even in the *Broeman* collection (1947), the poet identifies science with God and predicts that it will liberate man from lies, injustice, oppression, decay and death:

May God be like a scientific mind

*May the age be golden, a time for Epiphany
May from west to east, from north to south,
a single sky runs across, just like silver.*

The *Broeman* collection was written during the years of World War II, when Liasides' ideological affiliation to the Left became much clearer and loomed through his poems. Division and destruction inferred by the war enhance the poet's wish for peace and unity among humans, but it also heightens the pressure that weighs upon the future.

The phrase "Na pethanei o Charos" [May Charon dies] has always been one of Liasides' favorite patterns-banners; initially it meant death of injustice, lies and oppression. Later on, its symbolic significance gradually became all the more identified with its literal meaning, signifying the annihilation of death itself. The celebratory collection published in 1966 in honor of his 65th birthday, is entitled *May Charon dies* and opens with a quatrain:

*My brothers, you who burn in hell day and night
Dreaming, wretched ones, of prosperity,
Be a little patient, brace yourselves with faith and courage
The time is near when Charon dies.*

As much as we know that Charon does not die, these verses by Liasides never fail to move us with their freshness, their originality and emotion.

Naturally, Liasides cannot be reduced to this brief overview. He has been a river of poetry – this is what I've attempted to suggest here alongside other things. Even today, more than twenty years after his death it is indeed a great joy to discover in his work things that are so alive as to offer you genuine emotion.

Reading Liasides, you cannot but be fascinated by the power of poetic talent.