

The Responsibility of Testimony. Literature and History in Contemporary Cypriot Literature

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RÉSUMÉ

Des données dont nous disposons, extrêmement peu d'écrivains Grecs (poètes ou écrivains de prose) se sont inspirés de la tragédie chypriote de 1974. Au contraire, tant dans le dernier recueil de poèmes de Kyriakos Charalambidis que dans le deuxième récit de Yiorgos Haritonidis, ces auteurs se concentrent sur la relation de la littérature à l'histoire, ou continuent d'exprimer la douleur diachronique et contemporaine de la grécité.

ABSTRACT

As far as we know, only a handful of Greek writers (of poetry or prose) drew their inspiration from the Cypriot tragedy of 1974. On the contrary, the last collection of poetry of Kyriakos Charalambidis and the narration of Yiorgos Charitonidis focus on the relationship between literature and history, and continue to express the diachronic and contemporary pain of romiosini.

In 1973, George P. Savvides, in critiquing Kyriakos Charalambides' poetic book, *'To aggeio me ta ximata'* [The vessel with the shapes] formulated the following essential, if considered from a current perspective, remarks: "Logically, Cyprus remains as the only place outside of Greece from which we can expect a direct renewal of our poetics – a renewal analogous with those which were offered at times during modern Hellenism by Crete, The Seven Isles, Alexandria, and Asia Minor. I do not support that the renewal of our poetic discourse can be derived *solely* from a place found beyond the borders of the State, but that, if it is not to come from within the Greek melting pot, it appears to me more plausible for it to be given from the Greeks of Cyprus rather than from American-Greeks or foreigners of the West or Eastern Europe. I support even less that a possible renewal of poetics from Cyprus is prescribed by 'historical necessity'...I merely note that I consider it possible,

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according to our common philological experience: possible and desirable, not predetermined and 'fated.'"¹

Judging Savvides' estimation that Cypriot poetry may offer a 'direct renewal' of the poetics of Greek *logos* from the distance awarded by time, I would remark, firstly, that this estimation was not realized, if I were to judge by the fact that Greek philological and literary criticism, throughout the entire duration of the post-authoritarian period and till today, dealt little, and only occasionally with Cypriot poetics and more generally with literary production, in this way cutting it off from the body of Greek literature. At the same time, interest is generated by Savvides' comment that "a possible renewal of poetics from Cyprus" is disconnected from any type of "historical necessity." Having written his critique almost an entire year prior to the tragic events of the Turkish invasion and eventual occupation, Savvides was not of course in a position to know that as of the summer of '74 and till today, the historical necessity of the Cypriot and national tragedy would outline, more precisely would determine, the essential thematic axis of Cypriot literature, particularly poetry. Therefore, following the events of '74 and all that ensued as a consequence till today, Savvides' prediction can be broken down into a series of inter-related questions. The first is formulated in Savvides' own way: has or hasn't the Cypriot literature of the past 34 years, determined by historical events which marked and continue to mark the island, directly renewed Greek literary *logos*, particularly poetic discourse? Let us further specify the general question aforementioned in such a way that it will reflect the distinctiveness of modern Cypriot literature: has Cypriot literature enriched Greek literature, particularly poetry with thematic areas and expressive methods which during the same time period were cultivated much less by Greek litterateurs? Finally, let's place the two questions mentioned above within a historical context using as a point of reference the generally accepted lack of recognition of Cypriot literature by the Greek philologists and critics: Could it be perhaps that this enrichment has and continues to occur, but remains latent, precisely because, and in a paradoxical manner, Cypriot literature doesn't concern the community of Greek philologists and critics?

My indicative reference to two contemporary books by Cypriot authors, the collection of poems '*Kydonion milon*' [Quince apple] (2006) by Kyriakos Charalambides and the prose piece '*Me diavatirio kai visa mias meras*' (2006) [On a passport and one-day visa] by George Charitonides, books which were both published in Athens², has as its intent the subtle discussion of two issues which these books posit. I focus my attention on the issues in question

because it is within these, in my opinion, that the continued contribution of Cypriot literature to Greek literature can largely be found. ‘*Quince apple*,’ tenth in row and seventh of the books by Charalambides following the period of the Turkish invasion and occupation, stable in its focus on the relationship between poetry and history, continues to express the diachronic and contemporary anguish of *Romiosyni* [Greek race] testing the endurance of national poetry in our times. On the other hand, George Charitonides’ emotive narrative, which has as its central theme the psycho-sentimental reactions of the first person narrator and hero’s visit to the occupied territory, brings to the foreground the inescapable bond between literature and history, as seen from the perspective of the individual subject.

Perhaps concealed behind the gradual success of Kyriakos Charalambides’³ poetry over the past 30 years is the compliant acceptance of a Cypriot poet who was able to achieve recognition by the society of Greek literati and critics who, as a general rule, are guarded, if not dismissive of Cypriot litterateurs. I am of the opinion that the long-time successful and highly aesthetic worth of Charalambides’ poetry has allowed him to emerge as one of the most important Greek poets of the post-war and post-authoritarian period. In essence, the appreciation of the great worth of his poetry and the verification of its position run parallel with all its distinguishing features (relationship with literary tradition, thematic, linguistic ethos, moral demands) which allow it to differ noticeably, if not to be found at the antipodes, in contrast with the leading trends of contemporary Greek poetry.

Since the collection *Axaion akti* (1977) [Greek’s coast] and in all his consecutive books (*Ammochostos Vasilevousa* (1982) [Famagusta Regina], *Tholos* (1989) [Dome], *Methistoria* (1995) [Metahistory], *Dokimin* (2000) [Ordeal] and *Aigialousis episkepsis* (2003) [Visit to Aigialousa], the central themes of Charalambides’ poetry are the tragic, both direct and indirect, consequences of the Turkish invasion of Cyprus from 1974 to date. Charalambides, a man who carries within him the anguish of the lost homeland and a poet with a deeply rooted Greek national consciousness, could not but choose- a choice he continues to live by till today- to serve a poetic awareness which Greek post-authoritarian poetry, to a large degree, abandoned along its lengthy and illustrious modernistic past. I refer to the awareness of national poetry. To avoid any misunderstanding, I classify Charalambides as a national poet, using the term not axiologically but typologically, as within his poetry I discern both a contemporary and valid version of those features which were once used to define the category of the national poet.

I will attempt to present a schema of some of these features, using as a point of reference the book *Quince apple*. Of the 86 poems which are distributed within 9 parts, and as is the case in Charalambides' previous books, poetry contained within the firm learned consciousness of its creator is developed. With the poems of *Quince apple*, a dense dialogical relationship with the entirety of Greek literary and grammatological tradition is woven: with ancient Greek, Byzantine and modern texts, demotic songs, modern poetry. Although one would expect Charalambides' poems to sink beneath the burden of their own literariness, on the contrary within *Quince apple*, and with more success than his preceding book, Charalambides manages to imprint the traces of the Greek linguistic diachrony in words which are poetically animated. That which in essence vitalizes Charalambides' poetic discourse is its refined dialogue with Kavafian and Seferian poetry. At the centre of the relationship with the poetry of Kavafis is Charalambides' ironic or even sarcastic attitude towards history. The thematic and ethical focus of Charalambides' poetry can be located in his relationship with Seferian poetry, as that which could be defined in Seferian terms as "the anguish of the Romiosyni." I mean to say that as with Seferis, Charalambides also projects and immortalizes the harsh fate, the hardships, the difficulties and the injustices which characterize the diachronic course of Hellenism, particularly Cypriot Hellenism, throughout the hardships of History. Furthermore, and as occurs in Seferian poetry, so too in the poetry of Charalambides the depiction of the "anguish of Romiosyni" is transmitted to the reader on account of the fact that the juxtaposition of both individual with collective experience and contemporary with diachronic experience is achieved.

Charalambides continues to write national poetry, with a deeply assimilated knowledge of the Greek literary tradition, an active historical consciousness, a rare linguistic sensitivity and unique poetic rhyme, whilst no other Greek poet worthy of note considers attempting something similar. This acknowledgement is critical, as Charalambides' poetry confronts us with the question of whether a contemporary version of the national poet can exist today, that is in a period and place where this type of poet has long since been deemed poetically inactive and ideologically suspect. My opinion is that an affirmative response to the aforementioned question is provided by Charalambides' poetry itself on account of its distinctive uniqueness.

The narrative *'Me diavatirio kai visa mias meras'* [On a passport and one-day visa] comes as the continuation of George Charitonides' first book

Anamniseis me polla koukoutsia' (2003) [Memories with many seeds]. In that first book, the author, who has lived and worked in Athens for many years now, posits a personal literary testimony of the events of the Turkish invasion in Cyprus in 1974 (participation in the defense of the Island, captivity, freedom). The topic of his second book is a visit to his birthplace, the region of Keryneia, following the opening of the roadblocks towards the occupied areas. A short narrative, *Me diavatirio kai visa mias meras*' is comprised of 2 introductions, an epilogue and 37 enumerated parts, spanning one to two pages each. Within these, moment-episodes of the one-day visit are recorded which "unite sweet reminiscence with the silent rage of the occasion" (p. 39): to visit the place where you lived your youth, thirty years later, on a passport and one-day visa. The scenes of the natural environment as well as the changes brought about by man continuously recall the past, these consisting of either the happy moments of the first person narrator prior to the invasion, or the painful experiences of the invasion and captivity. The tug-of-war between the present and the past illustrates the traumatic personal experience of adult life which is stigmatized by the knowledge that its amputated youth has been unconditionally left behind, in a far off (under foreign occupation) yet familiar and much loved place. Balancing between the faithful description and literary transformation of his personal testimony, Charitonides simultaneously responds to the moral demand of depicting the unjust historical fate of his country. The illustrations incorporated into the book (mainly maps and pictures of Cyprus) bind it to a collective reality whilst at the same time Charitonides remarks upon the history of the land with subtle hints and accurate insinuations. Rarely raising the emotional temperature of his words and without sliding into melodramatic degeneration he allows sentiment to emerge from the dramatic nature of the narrated events.

I provide as an example of Charitonides' writing an excerpt from part 32 of the book (p. 72):

We don't near the mermaid Ammochostos. We look at her from afar amidst the colors of the aquarium.

Captive, isolated and with a wild eye she seeks a human.

She asks for Alexander.

What should we answer?

We walk away....

Taking recourse in myth and distancing the group of visitors from the actual ghost-town demonstrate the weakness of man before the unyielding

mechanisms of the history of the powerful. At the same time, whilst *Me diavativrio kai visa mias meras* reveals that literature does not distance itself as it remains close to the space and time of collective drama in order to remind us of its tiny victory against the powerful mechanisms of history: living memory, feelings and the souls of people are inalienable.

Perhaps the immediate emotion Charitonides' book evokes within a Greek reader can be attributed to the fact that it brings him/her face to face with the testimony of a man who narrates how he passed through the difficulties of his personal life-memory and history. In addition, to a Greek of my own generation who lived and lives history watching via live televised broadcast the murder of Solomou Solomou while sitting on his couch stunned, Charitonides' book reminds us that the consecutive parade of names given to the villages of Karpasia are the most irrefutable testimony that literature monumentalizes the beauty of language and life when it is created by materials of collective reality: "Vassiliatis, Airkotissa, Oktolithari, Aigialousa, Leonarisso, Koma tou Yialou" (p. 57).

Contemporary theorists of the history of Greek literature apparently leave for the future a question which, as time goes by, will continue to become all the more unanswerable: what is the rationale behind why Greek literature following 1974 and till today has referred so little, almost scarcely, to the Cypriot tragedy? Following a relative study I carried out within the field of Greek poetic production, the total number of single poems or collections of poetry making reference to Cyprus and the events of '74 comes to a one digit number. The national weight of the event of the Turkish invasion and occupation was and still is so great that it makes us aware that the question is not so much concerned with the subject matter of Greek post-authoritarian literature as with raising the issue of an ethical choice. Whether or not the position of avoiding or silencing the Cypriot tragedy conceals a feeling of guilt on behalf of the Greek literati towards Cypriot Hellenism regarding the events of '74 is an issue under investigation. At any rate, the poetry of Charalambides recurrently gave an affirmative response to the question of whether responsibilities existed both then and during the time period which followed and pointed out exactly to whom these belonged. I include as an example his short poem *Peri kladou elias* [Of olive branch], from his book *Methistoria*, a poem note-worthy for its accusatory rage and unfeigned bitterness:

Having in his quiver
Legal prophecies
With olive branch taken from

The deathbed of history,
In the presence of the enemy at the gates
Luxury, he said, of punishment redundant
(As for remorse, not even a mention)

- Take note; evil appears not of human hand
So that unsanctified acts may be written off
This unsanctified act must be written off
In order for this unsanctified act to be written off
The space in which it was enacted must not have existed

A false dog guards a false pen

Cyprus does not exist: it is being abolished
as a space of tragic events⁴

If in the first part of the poem it appears that the society of compliant Greek politicians responsible for dealing with the Cypriot problem on the international political scene is being satirized, in the second part, Charalambides exercises the poetic license to judge and rule, even in loud tones and in basically literal language, on the guilty stance of the “abolishment” of Cyprus. With reference to the question at hand and in considering the Greek social and ideological climate of the post-authoritarian period from a standpoint awarded by the distance of time, we can now ascertain that this climate bred litterateurs, and particularly poets, who chose to write about issues more private and less painful than that of the Cypriot tragedy or, in order to reiterate the aforementioned thought along the lines of Charalambides’ poem, they chose to write-off the “unsanctified” and consequently determine that “Cyprus does not exist.”

On the other hand, Charitonides’ prose piece, a literary narrative which feeds off the unavoidable relationship-conflict of a contemporary Greek with the history-open wound of his country, Cyprus, offers an impartial standard against which the position of contemporary Greek literature towards the Cypriot tragedy on the one hand and towards history in general on the other may be measured. The relationship between contemporary Greek literature and history is a complex issue. Modern Greek literature, up until the 1970’s fed off the exaltations but mostly the disasters of history: the Asia Minor catastrophe, the Greek-Italian war, the civil war. Most worthy Greek writers of literature measured up against the imminent need of the individual-

writing subject to express, from their own limited perspective, historical experience, in other words, how history determined their life, their body, their soul and how it stigmatized their memory. During the years of the post-authoritarian period and until today, this position seems to be changing and a consequence of this change is the circumvention of the Cypriot tragedy. Further commentary on the issue of the relationship between contemporary Greek literature, especially prose with historical reality cannot help but occur here, within two, almost demagogical questions: a) Could perhaps the widespread trend of the last few decades which saw Greek prose move towards works of fiction with historical subjects more or less rooted in a long ago and essentially unrelated past, conceal an escape from the present and consequently a repulsion towards all that constitutes, on the level of synchrony, the (sought after) historical identity of the Hellenes? b) How successful in standing the test of time can literature be when it does not draw its subject matter on the one hand from the present and on the other from those burning moments in history, such as the ongoing Cypriot tragedy, which affect the present? Finally, I wonder if the attempt to answer the aforementioned questions results in the divisive as well as moral dilemma which concerns the readers of contemporary prose production: we either read the literature of the Cypriot Charitonides or we read the contemporary bestselling Hellenic prose meant for the self-indulgent ladies of the northern suburbs of Athens, lost somewhere within their unhistorical microcosm.

NOTES

1. G.P. Savvides, “*Kypria hmaria zois*” [Cypriot vestiges of life] (Kyriakos Charalambides: “*To aggeio me ta sximata*” [The vessel with the shapes] Nicosia 1973, p. 96), *To Vima*, 26 August 1973. Republished: *Efimeron sperma* [Ephemeral Sperm] (1973-1978), Athens, Ermis 1978, pp. 166-172: 166.
2. I provide full publishing details: Kyriakos Charalambides, ‘*Kydonion milon*’ [Quince apple] Athens, Agra 2006 and George Charitonides, ‘*Me diavatirio kai visa mias meras*’ [On a passport and one-day visa] Athens, Kedros 2006.
3. Charalambides was born in 1940 in Achna of the Ammochostos district and was awarded the Greek state prize for poetry for his book ‘*Methistoria*’ after having received 3 Cypriot state prizes for poetry.
4. Kyriakos Charalambides, *Methistoria*, Athens, Agra 1995, p. 120. The poem upon its completion is dated: May 1993.