

## Cypriot Writers Touch on their Poetics

*Theodossis Nikolaou (1930-2004)*: Before I start I would like to thank Professor Margaret Alexiou for her kind invitation for this colloquium, and for a moment to think of G.P. Savidis, first Professor of George Seferis's Chair and beloved friend. Let us pray for his memory to be everlasting.

It is not easy for me to talk about my own poetry. The danger is very close either to under or overestimate it. I might also occupy before hand my listeners or readers by leading them to see aspects which I myself think they are important, and so prevent them from having the freedom to judge and feel for themselves.

A poem should be open to several interpretations, on the condition of course that these interpretations do not surpass the limits determined by the imager, the rhythm, the assimilation of ideas, and all the other elements a poem consists of.

The birth of a poem  
is similar to the birth of a plant.  
Both of them start from a seed.

So my poems, my poetry is like a tree that plunges its roots in the national tradition, written or oral, of my country. At the same time its branches stress high into the sky reaching for light and moisture. They stretch towards the North and the South, the East and the West. Birds of different feather and colour come from the four points of the Universe. They rest in its branches, sing their own songs. The new voices harmonize with the other familiar voices that come from my native land, my tradition, and the tree becomes a singing tree. Now something happens: the intersection of the national with the universal, something which the poem could appeal the people of different nationality and different tradition.

So if you want me to tell you the influences on my poetry, obviously, I have to mention the Classics of Ancient Greek Literature, the poets of the Orthodox Church, as from the Modern poets I have to name the anonymous composers of Folk-Songs, Solomos, Calvos, Papdiamantis, Kavafis, Seferis. From the non Greeks T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and who knows from how many others, that I have heard, or read in the past.

The themes of my poetry is the life that flows around me. The experiences, but every experience does not ends up in a poem. A poem is the result of several experiences of the past that come to surface in a moment.

Let me give you an example. Suppose I had a diary, in which different entries could read as follow:

Entry 1 (1965). The Winter gives its place to Spring. Wild beautiful flowers around. But that dry stone wall is marvellous. A lot of flowers come out through the joint of the stones that you think the very stones are in bloom. Miracle.

Entry 2 (1969). I was driving up to the mountains, at the place where are the seven turnings, like seven narrow but long steps. A black snake folded itself, unfolded and refolded falling from the highest turning. I was scared, but it was an admirable event.

Entry 3 (1972). The anemones were short-stem. But think of the wisdom of Nature. How it happened to grow under this thorny bush. The anemone wanted to fulfil its purpose, struggles to come to blossom. The stem becomes so thin, almost like a piece of thread in order to get through the gaps of thorns and come into the light of the day.

Then in 1974 my country experienced a coup d' état after which the Turkish invasion followed. Thousands of dead people. Missing people over a thousand, are they alive or dead? Half the population refugees. Something must be done. We must find a solution. So in a moment all this were bounded together, like a bunch of flowers.

I understand inspiration as the moment, the fertile moment which recalls to the surface forgotten or not experiences given with rhythm, a rhythm similar to that one you see on mountain range or the waves of the sea. What counts it's not what you say, really one says two things: EROS and DEATH, but how.

Concluding my short comment on my poetry I would say that what I try to do, as so others, is to remove the dust accumulated on the objects and beings around us, and restore the shiness that the objects had the day they were issued from the hands of the Creator. Every poem is a knock at the gate of Paradise.

(G.P. Savidis Memorial Colloquium  
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*Ivi Meleagrou:* I personally believe that when redefining history, the novelist makes use of his license to apply a *historical reality* which is new to people. The novelist is not a historian, therefore historical accuracy becomes secondary in the structure of his/ her work. In fact, the novelist is an explorer of human existence.

In my novel *Proteleftaia epochi* (Penultimate season) my initial concept about the utter guilt of the “outlaws” (those who carried out the coup to overthrow Archbishop Makarios) was gradually differentiated over the course of writing, as if another voice had pushed me toward their own experiences and views, making me *redefine* the historic event. This voice I was hearing must have been what Kundera defines as “the wisdom of the novel”; a wisdom above the self that all true novelists take heed of.

I’ve been writing since 1950. My patrimonial land, overwhelmed with historic adventures, determines the themes of my work. I delve into analysis and foreboding of future developments of the historic ‘advancing into being’ (in Greek *gignesthai*) that affect both the individual and the social whole, whilst at the same time work into the literary conversion of the historic *gignesthai* and its relation to the individual, expressed through positions, attitudes, internal and external differentiations.

In my most composite novels (*Anatoliki Mesogeios* – Eastern Mediterranean, 1969 and *Proteleftaia epochi* – Penultimate season, 1981) again, through the examination of individual cases, the Cyprus problem is analyzed in its complexity along with its repercussions upon the individual’s life. The complexity of the problem is due to the interests of the mighty and therefore the simple issue of the freedom of a small island is turned into a thorny problem that threatens the stability of the whole Eastern Mediterranean region and Greece. Indirectly but nonetheless equally dramatically erosion and eventually the blatant violation of the human rights of Greek Cypriots are presented. In fact, today, Greek Cypriots are threatened by total extinction from their land, where for three thousand years generations have been living and creating culture. The Turkish factor is being activated by foreign powers, aspiring to cause civil unrest between the island’s two communities in order to promote their own interests.

*Panos Ioannides:* In compliance with my initial planning, from which I would rarely deviate, I drew my topics from different historic periods of Cyprus, always making sure to shed light on the facet that the official History tended to quiet or self-complacently tidy up. Even in my purely “historic” works I did not attach myself to the commonly acknowledged, to dates, events, major personalities and critical hours, but to any element among the above that would illuminate my topic from the facet I was most interested in. In fact, such elements were viewed through a spectroscope that

would for the most part bring forth the human aspects in an effort to extract the bigger through the smaller.

A second parameter in my work has been my quixotic attempt to contradict Cyprus' literary establishment which back then, throughout the 1950s was subdued with very few exceptions that underline the rule, to barren romanticism and idealism, morbid helleno-centrism and to the greatly misunderstood by their adherents – and therefore dangerous – Greek-Christian ideals.

Furthermore, both in my prose pieces dealing with the Cyprus issue, and in a few others situated in the historic past of Cyprus, I have tried: a) to look into the big problems of our land and our people, that no matter how much they transform over each new historic period, their hard core remains basically unaltered and b) to intermingle today with yesterday, to interweave them diachronically in a perpetual advancing into being. What I recount might have taken place, may be taking place, is bound to take place sometime in the future.

Another feature of my work is the extensive use of harsh satire, poignant humor and sarcasm, often enough of self-sarcasm. But in fact, satire, sarcasm or comic grimaces are there to cover abundant tears for the post-revolutionary Cypriot bourgeois society; they are a covert lament over the sheer decline of values, over arrogance, materialism and void megalomania.

In some of my prose pieces I utilize features of European modernist prose, especially in relation to the novel. Quite often I attempt to reverse narrative conventions, to disrupt linear narration, to fragment coherence, time, syntax, sometimes even words themselves (i.e. in a chapter in *Apographi-Census*), to utilize the rhythm and harmony of poetic discourse (in the novella “I siopi irthe ti nyhta” – Silence came in the night) etc.

*Kyriakos Charalambides*: “Elements of poetic DNA”

My relation with poetry dates back to when I first claimed consciousness of myself (from the age of nine or ten) and it has always been a relation of worship. Gradually, instinctual impulse and intuitive abundance that mobilized my poetic universe, granted their place to a deeper understanding of the world and history. Therefore, I could handle with more restraint (if not modesty) the language and other means of expression proffered to me by the poetic process. After all, poetry itself would train me

to discover ways in which I could nurse and serve it. Sometimes I wonder – as I have pointed out repeatedly – if truth is a biological condition. In fact, I have the impression that truth follows the body's physical development, transmuting with it. In other words, our relation to things is differentiated little by little, in the form of an organic evolution that expands as the spirit and the gaze mature. In this sense, my first topics sought to trace the world and conceive life's senses through the grid of an earthquake-stricken sensibility. Later on, my poetry received the stigmata of the contemporary Cypriot tragedy (Turkish invasion and occupation of a large part of the island) and this fact that caused everything to tumble, drove me to redefine poetry as essence and life. This is how I was graced with the understanding that in the end it is a miracle and a blessing for a people to keep their memory and all their cohesive elements focused on the condensed space of poetry. Starting from these, they may rediscover themselves *de novo* and consolidate their own conduct with decisive conditions of progress and History's deeper meaning. Further, they may vibrate existentially and grasp messages in their ontological dimension. Walking over a precipice and allowing a gap are necessary for these messages to bounce back in fresh combinations (new ways of poetic phrasing, new charge of words, new aesthetics).

Living in Cyprus, it is only natural that we are shaken from the tragic events befalling the island. On the other hand, I do not think it is honorable to take advantage of a wound. In contrast, art is supposed to add spirituality and a deeper quality to the passions of the people. Without the inclusion of tragedy in an ecumenical dimension of history, without that deep and abysmal property of existence, art is reduced to a descriptive trade of consumerist nature. Yet, its essence lies in this: it can cover a wider field than its historic context.

I owe to admit that History in itself does not interest me; and by History I mean idolatrous adhesion to a specific historic event. For me, deep down, perception of History means perception of the myth. The secret lies in turning history into myth. In short, history is useful as a basis for transcending facts and expanding them meta-historically. My poetry does not deal with History; it deals with its very refutation. However, in order for something to be refuted, it needs to preexist and this attests to the essential meaning of History as a material which is available for reversals.

At present, my evolutionary path leads me one step ahead, to something related with the reversal of myth itself. I've always looked at things from an

oblique angle – I’ve even handled language heretically attempting to re-integrate the whole intellectual treasure bequeathed to us throughout the centuries, not forsaking that my dependence on the genetic elements of our civilization are at the same time a debt. A debt to grasp the substance through the miscellaneous layering of history and myth, a debt to exist not only as a Greek of Cyprus but also as a citizen of the world, of which your homeland’s labyrinthine history makes part. It is precisely this apperception that allows me to release myself from my insular milieu and make way with my poetry toward redemptory escapes. It is my deepest conviction that poetry comprises a *science* and that each poem is an effort made by humans to raise their own truth as to the deeper mystery of art and life.

*Niki Marangou*: “What else are we?”

I was born in Limassol. My father came from Ammohostos and my mother from Kozani. This helped me maintain a broad picture of the Hellenic horizon, whilst growing up in its Eastern most point. I never questioned the fact that I belong to the broader Hellenic vicinity, the “great Panhellenium”. I never felt anything other than that. What would I feel anyway? My relation with the Greek language, ancient, Byzantine and modern, has always been a focal point in my life. That is why in 1980 I opened a bookstore in Nicosia, so that I may have every book I want; that is why I went back to the university looking for words to match my new toys.

I feel that we have been a fortunate generation that went through extreme situations. From my grandmother weaving on a loom to the gypsies with the dancing bears we’ve reached today’s computers. My themes could not but follow everything that had occurred in between. Cyprus, the Middle East, Greece and the whole world, now on hand for our generation, come complete with incentives for anyone keeping their eyes open to see them. I am fascinated by history, perhaps because I have been fortunate enough to grow up in a house with books, old books; to listen to all stories, to read. Today’s Cyprus with the concrete building blocks, offers no incentive for me. Maybe that is why I regress to earlier times – I am now writing a novel describing Athens in 1810. I’ve spent two wonderful years reading about that era. Even if I never manage to finish the book I will still gain a great deal - so wonderful and enriching has this experience been for me. I wrote about Cyprus in 1940, as well as about Alexandria around the same time; Vienna too. Cyprus is definitely a starting point but the whole world opens up before us, and when

the “Cypriot topic” is true, this concerns all of us, in Solomos’ words. It is the stimuli and memories of my childhood in Limassol and Ammohostos, mainly, but also in Kozani that empowered me to describe eras and people. Ever since I was a child I loved history and old buildings. I remember when they set up roadblocks in Nicosia in 1963 I would insist on riding my bike to the Turkish Sector, I would wander in the neighborhoods, I would read the inscriptions in tombstones, read Gunnis, spell the world around me. I would contemplate Pentadaktylos from the roof of Aghia Sophia. I am a curious human being and this has provided me with ample raw material for writing. In the summers I’ve always liked to walk at nights when people would sit outside leaving their doors open. I would register the interiors of houses, conversations, looks. Whilst studying hagiography I visited almost every church in Cyprus and learned a lot. I’ve traveled extensively in the Middle East for the most part, Turkey, Egypt – I have been nourished by these journeys. In Bursa I was in awe before the first Ottoman mosques, in Cairo I walked in the graveyards. All these have provided the raw material. I roamed around Greece, as Elytis once said, as if I perceived the space in view of some kind of heritage.

Whether literature written by Cypriots is Cypriot or Greek, this concerns philologists who need to make classifications. I am not at all interested in this question. The only important thing is whether what is being written is good literature or not, if it is true and spurts from within or if you are writing Kafka in Greek, especially in these difficult days when bookstore shelves are full of junk. To quote Samuel Johnson, «an ignorant age has many books».

*Myrto Azina - Chronides: “What does literature means to me”*

I always dream of the same situation: I invite guests, a lot of guests, but suddenly I realize there is not enough space in my house. I’m wondering in the rooms trying to open some connecting doors and find an acceptable solution.

The light, in my dream, turns violet and red and while opening an unknown door, new rooms appear in my house. Huge halls with columns and ornaments, covered with dust, but beautiful. I’m amazed from the clarity of their shapes

Then I open the close doors and let the guests in.

These closed, forgotten, rooms are my words, my literature, the way I communicate with the others, the way I sometimes, exclude the others from my secret world.

My literature is an act of the absolute freedom.

I can write the scenario I can direct and play the roles. I create, from nothing, persons, places, animals, and different universes.

My writing is my way of surviving among stethoscopes, injections, pain, children, casseroles, politics and role conflicts.

It's a gift I knew I resaved from the first day on, that I learned writing.

I'm a busy woman, as any woman in our century, and literature is also a struggle against the time. It keeps me moving and wet unchangeable.

Writing on paper-pads during the brake between two patient appointments, in the car while waiting for my daughter to finish her ballet lesson or while watching the football match between my husband and my son, is a way to resist the time rules and the routine.

Writing is my internal mirror, my truth and my eternal renaissance.

*George Christodoulides: The perspectives of poetry*

It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that in a river-less country, perhaps the only river flowing is that of poetry. It is into this river that I'd wanted to flow, maintaining the independence of a branch and the knowledge of a mountain that clouds, rain and snow – perpetual feeders of rivers – come from everywhere.

From the perspective of aesthetics, I believe in the denudation of words (not their demythologization) ridding them of the redundant weight and placing special emphasis on the poems' epilogue that needs to summarize, condense and eventually validate the preceding verses, at the same time opening a door to the next poem.

If I had to risk a general definition, I would say that poetry is the description of what instigated my feelings and not my feelings per se.

From the perspective of thematology, as a citizen of the world, I draw from its messages. When our expensive clothes are most likely to have been made by children in Asia, when they have been touched by maltreated little hands it would be irrational for me to miss the atrocious and inhuman backdrop of my prosperity, even if in the end this too is a form of hypocrisy. The unavoidable consciousness of my inability to change the world leads me automatically to poetry.

To the question how can anyone write about the experiences of others, I

reply that for this and perhaps only for this it is worthwhile being a poet; for when a fellow human being is silently going through their own untold tragedy to the utmost degree, so much so that death is the only way out, a poet will come forward to recount and assimilate it, yet going on living unredeemed.

For me, poetry is above all an act of solidarity. The idea of poet as the carrier of collective pain, “to whom there is nothing to give and from whom there’s nothing to take” is in fact wishful thinking for me. It helps me attempt to become what I know I will never become.

Other times, of course, I define myself in terms of the dashing flow of images gushing through the unsearchable advancing into being from within.

I am fascinated by existential questions without answers, the answers that were there but were never given, the questions that were never made, the irresolute gaze of people hovering over an abyss – and there’s so many of them today, walking amongst us especially in the form of economic immigrants – collective hypocrisy that is choking us, the unexpected encounter with a small miracle of creation. Man’s perpetual resistance to death, merely postponed through the futility of our daily routine, resistance to death through *eros*, cancelled a priori, destined to decline but so fascinating in its genesis and brief duration, the quiet observation of the insignificant that you seek to make significant; all these are incentives for a mental quest.

The Cypriot tragedy is not a minor parameter of my thinking; but I do believe that so many decades later, my least contribution would be to try and submit a literary version devoid of pompous and graphic elements, by displaying the tragedy of a *fait accompli*, through the harmonious interlinking of simple things and details that comprise it and in fact define its very essence.

The impact of small-countries poetry in the form of irrevocable insulation that appears insurmountable especially when surrounded by so much seawater that transition or escape to other places resembles more to self-delusion than to a possibility, cannot but be contained in my verses; just as the sun you cannot get away from, dry stone and the feeling that you are writing on a rock that is being carved throughout the centuries.

World poetry, the Greek poetic miracle, our ancestral achievements, all these are the foundations upon which I am trying to add my own little brick, lending my work a personal breath (that in the end will set one apart or not) with the humility of this knowledge: If I could add a couplet to the poem bequeathed to us through the ages – then I would be blessed.