Re-Deeming the Past: Personal and Cultural Memory in Greek-Australian Poets.

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"Memory is the mind's greatest theatre."

Octavio Paz

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article explore le thème de la mémoire-personnelle et collective - dans l'œuvre de trois poètes grecs-australiens: Dimitris Tsaloumas, Antigone Kefala et Yota Krili qui ont émigré aux antipodes dans les années 50, ont écrit en anglais, et ont tracé plus largement leur marque dans la littérature anglophone. Ces trois auteurs sont analysés en relation avec leur dialogue imaginé avec le passé qu'ils achèvent en «construisant» plutôt qu'en se remémorant simplement leur passé. La diaspora comme espace de dislocation procure une place privilégiée d'où ils peuvent négocier ou dérouler les complexités du passé, qui «est une série des passés remémorés et imaginés, chacun dans un état constant d'argument et de flous comme: des passés privés, des passés familiaux, des histoires, des traditions culturelles». Tous ces auteurs, de différentes façons, sont très conscients de l'importance de la mémoire en tant qu'instrument qui leur donne la possibilité de se remémorer le passé. Le sens de la perte dans leurs écrits est profondément rédempteur, et comme nous l'avons déjà observé, «c'est précisément dans ce qui est remémoré de temps en temps par la mémoire» que leurs forces majeures se situent. Dans le travail de Tsaloumas, Kefala et Krili, nous reconnaissons que cette différence, le positionnement des Grecs en tant qu'«autres» du fait de leur appartenance aux Grecs de la diaspora en Australie, leur offre l'opportunité de voir avec un autre œil, avec la vision double, qu'on attribue à l'immigrant.

ABSTRACT

This article explores the theme of memory – personal and collective – in the work of three Greek-Australian poets: Dimitris Tsaloumas, Antigone Kefala and Yota Krili who migrated to the Antipodes in the fifties, wrote in English and made their mark within the wider Anglophone literature. These three writers are analyzed in terms of their imaginative dialogue with the past which they achieve by 'constructing' as opposed to simply reminiscing about, their past. The diaspora as a space of dislocation provides a vantage point out of which they can negotiate or untangle the complexities of a past, which is "a series of remembered and

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imagined pasts, each in a constant state of argument and flux: private pasts, family pasts, histories, culrural traditions. "All three writers in different ways are very conscious of memory as a rool which enables them to re-deem the past. The sense of loss in their writing is profoundly redemptive, and as already observed, "it is precisely in what is redeemed from time by memory" that their major strengths lie. In the work of Tsaloumas, Kefala and Krili, we recognise that their 'otherness' as diasporic Greeks in Australia, offers them the opportuniry ro see with (an)other eye, with the 'dual vision', attributed to the migrant.

Living and writing in the diaspora means inhabiting that space variously defined as 'a culture without a country' (Barkan and Shelton: 5), or a space which contains anything but '... a scattering of seeds [from a mother tree] capable of growth on distant soils' (Papastergiadis: 151). From a literary writer's perspective, Zeny Doratis-Giles likened her life, during the times of multicultural fever in Australia, as being "... in a caravan on the edge of Australian suburbia and be at the one time, inside and outside the action; able to look out from my special vantage point at the certainties of this [White, Anglo-Celtic] society." (Nickas 1992: 187) In other words, Giles recognised the 'otherness' of her situation as a diasporic Greek in Australia, but welcomed it as something which offered her the opportunity to see with (an) other eye: the 'dual vision', which Homi Bhabha attributes to the migrant. (Bhabha: 5)

All writers in a diaspora have a home somewhere else. In order for them to make sense of their present situation, they have to examine their past. Diasporic writers look forward by going backward. In order to do that, they employ memory, or *mneme* which, according to the dictionary, is defined as recollection; remembrance; recovery of one's knowledge by mental effort. *Mneme* is the opposite of *lethe* (or *lismonia*, in demotic Greek), which is, to forget. In some cases of diasporic writing, *lethe* may be more important than *mneme* and it is often employed intentionally, in order to forget the past. Or, in some cases, *mneme* is used as 'in memory of'; to keep alive the remembrance of something, or to keep a record of what deserves to be remembered.

Memory, however, does not imply a spontaneous or natural flow of images or facts. It has to be 'constructed' by inventive and creative writers. The diaspora as a space, which a literary person inhabits, can be a very 'productive' space, a vantage point, like Giles' caravan in suburbia, out of

which writers can negotiate or untangle the complexities of a past. As Liam Davison observes, memory involves an «ongoing dialogue with the past – not with one past but with a series of remembered and imagined pasts, each in a constant state of argument and flux. Private pasts, family pasts, histories, cultural traditions... Always there is a sense of the presence of the past...» (Davison: 6) This imaginative dialogue with the past, however, must also ring true. While one can claim that all writers speak of the past and use memory to reconstruct or re-invent it, diasporic writers construct pasts which do not bear any resemblance to that of the majority of readers in the country in which they live and where they are likely to be read. This fact actually makes these writers more interesting. By 'remembering' a past unknown to most, they invite comparisons and reflection.

To the title of this paper then: "Re-deeming the Past". My hyphenation of the verb indicates an emphasis on 'constructing' as opposed to simply reminiscing. The dictionary's entry for redeeming gives us the following: to recover; to reclaim; to rescue; to reconsider; to rejudge. This is what diasporic writers do. And, in particular, this is what poets do. As Octavio Paz has stated in his book, *The Other Voice:* "Poets have been the memory of their peoples. Homer sang of the deeds of a heroic age and told of what took place many years before." (p.115)

The three Greek-Australian poets treated herein all 'sing' of their origins, albeit in multifarious ways, but all three are the finest exponents of the art of 're-deeming' the past for our pleasure and edification, comparison and reflection. They are: Dimitris Tsaloumas, Antigone Kefala and Yota Krili. The commonalities among them are, first, geographical. All three have their origins on the fringes of the Greek world: Tsaloumas is from Leros near the Asia Minor coast; Kefala from Braila, Romania (from where she then went on to another fringe – New Zealand – before finally settling in Australia), and Krili from a small village in the Peloponnese. Second, they came to Australia/the Antipodes in the fifties: Kefala first to New Zealand in 1952, and to Sydney, Australia in 1960; Tsaloumas to Melbourne in 1952 and Krili to Sydney in 1959. Third, Tsaloumas, Kefala and Krili belong to the category which we loosely call 'first-generation' writers, meaning that they were not born in Australia but came at a later stage. English is therefore not their native tongue. Yet, all three do use English (either exclusively or intermittently) as their language of expression. This group of writers is

similar to that in America (and Canada, I may add), which is described by Karen Van Dyck as those authors who fall "between languages and cultures, either in the sense that they lived and wrote in more than one language, both English and Greek, or that they used the cadences, idioms, or syntax of one language in the other." (Van Dyck: 188) Among such writers we can distinguish Stratis Haviaras, Olga Broumas, Smaro Kamboureli, Irini Spanidou, just to name a few.

This so-called first-generation of writers in Australia is, typically, dominated by writers who were ***unwilling*** migrants, forced to leave their home for political or economic reasons. All three experienced, to varying degrees, the consequences of events in the forties in Europe and Greece, such as war and persecution, while Krili also experienced the poverty-stricken rural life of the fifties. It is often claimed that there is too much sadness expressed by so-called 'migrant' writers; that they don't feel at home in the country where they live. Germaine Greer claims that this is something endemic to 'Australian' culture: "The problem is that we're not at home. We always think of using the country as if it existed for an ulterior motive," and what's more, claims Greer, "We hate this country [Australia] because we cannot allow ourselves to love it. We know in our hearts' core that it is not ours." (Greer: 7) This kind of concern, while obviously a valid one, especially in white Australia's relationship with the land, is often expressed (by mainstream critics) with a kind of impatience about an inability to 'snap out of it' and embrace the new. However, in the case of new immigrants from non-English speaking countries, the problem lies elsewhere. It is true that most of the first-generation immigrants from Greece imbued their writing with much sadness and nostalgia. Their writing – mostly poetry – was looking back, either as documentary evidence or 'singing' in the old folk tradition. This is a standard process, considering the circumstances of their migration. Nonetheless, their writing is useful not only in sociohistorical terms but also as a means of 'cultivating' the mother tongue outside Greece.

The three writers chosen in this paper, are treated in terms of their *imaginative* dialogue with the past.

Dimitris Tsaloumas

> ... there hovered in the background demanding, insistent, resentful, the old forsaken world, haunting an ever-deepening perspective, forcing comparisons, providing standards, offering wisdom.
>
> Dimitris Tsaloumas, "The Distant Present".

Tsaloumas arrived in Australia in the early fifties to escape persecution on his island from the local gendarmerie for his leftist views and activities. Arriving in Melbourne in 1952, Tsaloumas immersed himself in study, work and a new family, keeping little contact with the Greek element for more than a decade. Despite having had two poetry collections published in Greece before leaving, he did not begin writing again until 1963. Forty years later, he is still writing (in Greek and English) and has been the recipient of many prestigious awards for his poetry.

Geographical and cultural dislocation of the self forms the basis of this poet's work. Despite the fact that over the past twenty-odd years he has been writing a plethora of poems not all directly connected to the theme of a 'home' elsewhere, the experience of exile most certainly continues to inform and shape his work. Indeed, it is this very characteristic of Tsaloumas' poetry that Australian critic Judith Rodriguez found early on as the most interesting and valuable in his work: "A Greek poet must come to terms with his past and his present... Maybe this is the generation [Tsaloumas' generation] in which the anatomy of past and present can be better appreciated in our arts". (Rodriguez: 146) However, if social reality is what might be expected from such a poet, it will be sought in vain. As has been often observed, Tsaloumas is not a writer of the 'migrant' experience, but there is in his work "a desire for evocation, of *Mneme* as against *Lethe*." In his work, "exile means to 'inhabit' outside the limits of a prescribed geographical space... A traveller between spaces, histories, cultures and languages..." (Bellou: 162)

In order to evoke rather than realistically depict a past, Tsaloumas explains that he concentrates on two key aspects of his situation in Australia: distance and isolation, which have had an enormous impact on his work as a poet. In addition, Gillian Bouras (an Australian writer who experienced migration in reverse, by going to live in Greece), recognized Tsaloumas' emotional state:

"In trying to settle in the new world of Australia, Tsaloumas, like so many others, was haunted by the old... The deeper he penetrated into his new world, the more insistent and obsessive the shadows of his other life became and, in the end, the more significant." (Bouras: 234)

This deep loss felt throughout his work is, of course, not of the melodramatic kind. He fights a nostalgic construction of the past through an extensive use of irony, a tool which checks any excessive sentimentality that the characters and speakers in his poems may be feeling. Even in his earlier poems, as the following example indicates, there may be at first a recollection of an idyllic island life only to be deflated by the ironic last three lines:

Temptation

In the middle of my brain, in the yard, a plum-trees
tands, open in bloom like an April window.
A yellow-beaked blackbird, jacket collar up,
swings on the Easter-vigil bough.
The colour on the flagstones in blossom.

With the books heaped on the floor
and winter jobs unfinished, I think again of seas,
of island neighbourhoods, of cornpatched hills.

The Book of Epigrams, p.179

Tsaloumas, as Australian poet Margaret Scott has noted, is an 'exile' as well as an 'explorer' of the migrant condition. (Nickas 1999: 97) He presents us with a wider, more complex view of his situation by not just looking back with nostalgia, mourning the loss of a past gone for ever. The poet checks himself constantly by dispassionate looks at past and present, providing many different perspectives on the experience of migration. Or he employs various personas, rendering his poetry polyphonic and multifarious. Through personas such as that of the 'hypochondriac' in the poem below, the poet reflects on the past:

The poets who, singing in bygone ages,
extolled immortal love, and the prophets
who heard God's voice from the scaffoldings
of the world, never knew the depression that is ours
who, locked up the whole day,
study the woodworm in the cavities of time.

("Observations of a Hypochondriac 10" *The Observatory*, p.5.)

The sense of loss, so profoundly expressed, is also redemptive. As Jena Woodhouse observes: "... while the realisation of loss may seem complete and final [in Tsaloumas' poems], it is precisely in what is redeemed from time by memory that one of Tsaloumas' major strengths as a poet lies... In his poetry, memory is not something hampered by nostalgia but an active, vital, shaping force." (Woodhouse: 194) The poem below illustrates this:

Eighth Poem

A small marble-wind of March
goose-pimpling the softest flesh
past barriers of yielding
pear-blossom.

From so many spring-cleanings
a minimum of rescued things,
a sprig of green smile and
chamomile sleep of old men
in pine wood sanatoria —
minimal comfort
in the austere azure of your eyes
the sterile sky.

"A Rhapsody of Old Men", *The Observatory*, p.103

Tsaloumas speaks of the past as essential baggage which would assist him in his life away from home. As he poignantly states: "I gradually realised that wherever one goes, the *City* truly follows, that whatever I saw and experienced in the wide world could only be made meaningful by reference to the microcosm of my island years. It was as though I had packed into my suitcase all that was necessary for me to build the rest of my days on..." (Tsaloumas, *Meridian* 2000: 72) And this is obviously what he does best, as Bouras observes: "The fine poetry of Tsaloumas, the result of much careful and persistent digging with his pen, makes us see that the pattern results from the weaving of two realities. This can only happen when the past is excavated and the present examined..." (Bouras: 239)

Digging for *language* is also one of the most significant functions manifested in Tsaloumas' work. While most writers who never left their country of origin write in their own native language and, one would assume, in a natural and automatic way and not using memory consciously, Tsaloumas states that "his main symbol for his poetic activity... is the falcon drinking." (Tacey: 189) He describes the falcon as 'a rapacious, greedy bird' which drinks '...at the stone-trough/hard by the spring of language'". (in his *Falcon Drinking*, p.44)

Living away from the home country where his native Greek is spoken means that memory for Tsaloumas involves *remembering* language by delving into the recesses of the mind. He did this for many years when he was writing poems in Greek (1963-1983). He did not use the Greek which is spoken today in Greece as he had not much contact with it. Instead, he dug up the language from his unconscious, thus keeping it, in a sense 'pure', not 'tainted' by the 'Europeanized' language of today, as Stathis Gauntlett has found. (Gauntlett: xviii) A look at any of his Greek-language poems will attest to this.

In addition, Tsaloumas is "a Greek... who had acquired early in his life deep resources of language which he hoarded like prized treasure." (Philip Grundy: 172) Konstandina Dounis has found this to be true in his Greek collection *The House with the Eucalypts*, where "one can 'taste the salt'"; more over, "This is a world of winds and shadows; their ethereality, their transcendence underlining this 'fluidity of the senses' that the poet has cited as being the precinct of the exile, the synaesthesia used throughout serving to poignantly highlight this." (Dounis: 202-3)

Tsaloumas used the language of his formative years in Greece in order to write several volumes of poems until the early eighties. But then, the issue of 'language' became a complex, intellectual dilemma. While he chose English, he did so with a deep sense of betrayal which he rationalized by saying that a divided life can only be expressed in two languages. To switch languages is, however, an impossibility for most. This accounts for the small number of Greek-speaking writers of the diaspora who have written in the language of the 'host' country. Most of those who migrate as adults rarely switch to writing in the host language.

Even though Tsaloumas has been writing in English since the mid-eighties, the same themes and preoccupations can be found in his English poems as in his Greek poems: the past is omnipresent. As John Barnes aptly points out: "As Tsaloumas came to English so late in his life, it is perhaps not surprising that age and memory are so central to his English poetry. 'Within the ribs/of this cage all song is memory, all praise/regret,' says the speaker of 'Portents'". (Barnes: 214)

Tsaloumas has also been using English (a non-native language) as a means of distancing himself from his subject matter. English gave Tsaloumas the distance or the perspective he needed to write about the past. So one can only agree that writing in a non-native language 'lends clarity' to his poems. English must also have a liberating effect, of which Stratis Haviaras also speaks: "I feel freer outside of Greece to write... America is large... you can expand and extend yourself." (Wallace: 36) The use of English as a distancing tool, coupled with the geographical and temporal distance from the place and the particular event, help to achieve a credible result: "Distance lends clarity to perspective; it sharpens one's perceptions...' has been repeatedly claimed by Tsaloumas. (Nickas 1999: 34)

In the poem "Anniversary" (in the collection *Exile*), geographical and temporal distance, but also the use of non-native language, turns the memory of a horrific experience into art. Again, we can refer to Haviaras, whose family's experience in Greece was a harrowing one. He said that "... the experience [of evil] was so banal... [as in *The Banality of Evil*] that it didn't even lend itself to prose. I wrote poetry instead, which veiled things." (Wallace: 36) In the following poem by Tsaloumas a childhood memory of a horrific war-time episode becomes a redemptive work of art:

Anniversary

(Battle of Leros – November 1943)

We both laughed that time
when I stepped off the back gate
above the stony ditch into the dark
and the dead soldier's gut,
who lay ripening like a fig
in the off-season heat of those
late autumn days.

That was fifty-four years ago,
too long a time you might say
for any stench to endure. Yet though
I've discarded my boots since
and washed my feet clean,
it has established itself in cavities
within the porous soul —
a standard, so to speak, by which
all smell and flavour's judged,
degree of pungency and smoothness
of sauce and condiment
or fragrance of woman's flesh.

A conquest surely, though that night
we laughed the way youth does
at things beyond its speech,
and maybe this boast can now be made
because words age tough, their touch
too coarse for the silk thread
into the maze back.

Yet as I write
a rose, brother, a big red rose
burns on his livid cheek
and I think of you in its glow
and hear sweet voices singing

that could be angels in the trees.
For nothing stirs abroad
on this bleak night but leaves,
and the ditch is full of rain.

Stoneland Harvest, p.133

Distance, clarity and wisdom are often words used by critics when referring to Tsaloumas' poetry. If, according to the ancients, wisdom comes after much suffering, then Matt Simpson speaks of wisdom in Tsaloumas as possessing an eye which is, in turns "compassionate', 'tearful'... Sometimes searing with pain... Always it is a living human eye, one educated by suffering..." (Simpson: 228) Tsaloumas' wisdom can be found in his balanced, considered approach which gives all the complexities of the exilic situation and makes his work stand out. The following poem (from his collection *The Barge*) exemplifies Tsaloumas' ability to express, in artistic terms, the "... sense of separation from the source of one's very being", to use the poet's own words. (Tsaloumas, Meridian: 72)

Conflict

Strange that in the native heart
of this unending summer
there should be another land,
and that this land should abide
where the mind fades
into a greyness,
like the monstrous continents
of antique maps with plants
and beasts unseen before
in the worn margins of the parchment.

Often this land moves out
of that far vagueness
into the light, precise and sharp,

to claim dominion
over these regions of older truth.
And then the day divides in strife,
and broken marbles,
split mirror ikons, shift around
seeking perfection.
Like a judge in fair detachment
I sit to match them as I can
and probe the ways of arbitration.
But long before the session ends
the continent begins to drift
back into greyness,
leaving the heart of summer to beat
in a void of absence.

(The Barge)

Finally, for poets like Tsaloumas, language can also work as a distancing tool, but in reverse. In the last ten years or so, Tsaloumas has been spending half of the year in Greece, on his native Leros, and the other half in Melbourne at his beachside home. The effect on his writing has been that he writes English poems in Greece and Greek poems in Australia. In order to 'remember' the past, he needs distance: "... distance lends clarity..." is what he keeps repeating whenever asked. The latest collection by Tsaloumas, which is exclusively in Greek and titled *Paratiriseis Ypochondriakou B'* [Observations of a Hypochondriac B'], consists of poems which he wrote in Australia. But while this book was being produced in Athens (Sokolis, 2003), Tsaloumas was already at work, on his balcony at his house in Leros, writing in English for his next poetry collection to be published in Australia.

Antigone Kefala

What if...
we forgot who we are
became lost in this absence
emptied of memory...

"Coming Home", *Absence*, p.86

Antigone Kefala, who was born in Braila, Romania, could be described as the quintessential diasporic writer having never lived in Greece except for a short period in the late forties, as a child of a refugee family from the Greek diaspora. From the fringes of the Greek world, she arrived with her family in antipodean New Zealand in 1952. For Kefala, the concept of 'home' was problematic. Born in Romania of Greek parents, she knew that Romania was not 'home' even though she spoke its language like a native. In that country, people like her were referred to as 'Greeks'. As a child, she fled with her family to Greece in the late forties, but Greece was a foreign country: she had never visited it before and she knew its language imperfectly. There, people like her family were referred to as 'aliens' and kept in refugee camps. In New Zealand, she experienced a totally different culture to any of those she knew in Europe but had to learn its language (English) and live within, but also outside, its Anglo-Celtic culture. There, people like her, were referred to as 'refugees'. Finally, in Australia, where she has settled since 1959, she moved perhaps a step closer to Europe, geographically and culturally (if we consider the mass migration of southern Europeans to Sydney). Yet she did not become an 'Australian'. An Australian was of white, Anglo-Celtic descent, so Kefala did not fit in this category either. In Australia, people like her were referred to as 'aliens', 'New Australians', and later, 'NESBS' (Non-English Speaking Background), 'ethnics' or 'multiculturals'.

All the above suggest a state of a perpetual *lack* of belonging. She was always disconnected from her past, and nothing around her reminded her of it. So in her work, the past is a constant presence, through memory. Her sadness – as is the case of Tsaloumas – is of a more considered, intellectual and imaginative kind. The title of her latest poetry publication is *Absence,* while a great many of her poems bear titles such as 'The Alien', 'Memory',

'Wayfarers', 'The Promised Land', 'Crossroads', 'The Place', and several others. The antipodes, which England and then Europe used as a dumping ground, is ironically named by Kefala as 'Promised Land'. But in her fairy tale, *Alexia*, the eponymous heroine shows that she has descended on a metaphoric 'underworld', where, paradoxically, she must try to survive. What will save this protagonist is memory. If she forgets, like Persephone, she will not be able to return. In this work, the 'mythical' island (New Zealand) where Alexia arrived with her refugee family, is not just a country of 'lotus eaters', but as her musician brother remarks, a country of 'resonance eaters' (p.70) So keeping the idea of 'home' alive, and the connection with a more 'civilised' past, becomes of the utmost importance to the protagonist.

All the above clearly supports Elizabeth Gertsakis' observation that "... she fulfils outright the *colonial condition* as woman, refugee and newcomer." (Gertsakis: 7) But, of course, Gertsakis goes on to examine Kefala's poetry beyond "these nominal observations", and finds that there is in it a constant evocation of death. (p.22) This certainly colludes with the idea of the antipodes as an underworld. There is a voice in Kefala's work which seeks to find meaning in a meaningless world. This duality can be better illustrated in the following passage:

> ... For there were always two inside. The one that moved and laughed, cried and was angry, had attitudes and demanded things and was stubborn in wanting... And there was the second one. The one that undermined every effort towards an involvement. The one that dwelt somewhere at the roots of my being and knew with an absolute certainty that everything was futile...
>
> *The First Journey*, p.39

This motif of duality is reiterated in Kefala's work and provides a kind of balance, whether in her poetry or her 'poetic' prose works (a fairy tale, short stories and novellas). Alongside this, there constantly seems to be an effort to find optimism. Kefala has repeatedly stated that optimism is needed by any migrant if he/she is going to survive. (Nickas, 1992: 229) Seen in its totality, Kefala's work forms a long, discursive narrative of memory. The main story tellers in her narrative are the adolescent Alexia and the adult

Melina. Kefala also uses other story tellers like Aunt Nikki who tells the story of the past, or aspects of the past which Alexia or Melina do not know. A key element in all her narratives is the status of the characters as refugees, first in Greece and then in New Zealand. Being a refugee seems to have had a lasting influence on her work. For example, the orphanage used as refugee barracks in Sounion, Greece, is imprinted in the narrator's mind:

> "... the memory of this place that I carried with me for many years afterwards. Sombre, the sound of the wind in the high trees, the view of the open sea, and the small scraggy trees on the hill near the chapel where I was trying to memorise my ancient Greek texts, 'Ekastos anthropos...'
>
> We were thrown suddenly into this claustrophobic place, waiting in long queues for food... always an acrid smell rising out of it...
>
> In the dormitories we were separated from other families by blankets... Narrow spaces that were constantly divided to make room for more refugees. The civil war had started up north.
>
> *Summer Visit*, p.87-88

The above scene is repeated, in various forms, in Kefala's poetry and prose; the uprootedness from home; arriving in Athens and living there as refugees for two years. In her poem "The Place", she recounts the story of the refugees being 'selected' for emigration to more 'accommodating' countries: "Bidders, in markets for flesh/untouched by the taste of the coffee..." (The Place", *Absence*)

Kefala's writing is about journeys, revealing constant shifts in time and place. She writes as if with the fear that if her tale is not told, the past will be obliterated. She is a bridge maker, connecting past and present. In her novella, *The Island*, set in the New Zealand of the 1950s, the narrator is unable to comprehend the inhabitants' emphasis on the present, instead of on the past. This issue of the past's importance is explored in detail in the

following passage, where Melina, the central character, talks about her boss Erik Gosse and his kind of 'work':

> He was doing research at the time for a book on the people who had come to the Island, in mythical times, in the big canoes... He spoke of his theory with which he was trying to revolutionise the attitude of the country to its past. He claimed that in order to understand history, one needed a type of vision that only people placed at the crossroads could provide. That is, people who lived between cultures, who were forced to live double lives, belonging to no group, and these he called "the people in between". This vision, he maintained, was necessary to the alchemy of cultural understanding.
>
> It was a limited hypothesis, he agreed, useful maybe only in a country such as this, in which only now were they beginning to take an interest in their past. But not quite yet, so obsessed was everyone with the future, bringing up their children as if nothing had gone before them, so that they ate and imagined that no one had eaten before them, and they built houses as if no one had built before them. Each generation that began here lived fanatically with the idea that it marked the start of the road.
>
> *The Island*, p.36

And another space in *The Island* where the past is examined is in the family's kitchen:

> We are in the kitchen making coffee. We speak constantly of the past, the distant past, the family. None of us remembers very much of the old life, we have been on the move for so long, changing places, leaving behind all the objects that would have been a tangible proof of their existence.

> Everything from the past now an unplaced, mysterious story we have been telling each other. But now that the older generation had gone, the past had become more fluid, at ease with itself, nostalgic. It had lost the set positions it seemed to occupy before, when formed by actual experiences, hurts, everyone locked in brutal events that had coloured their reactions.
>
> *The Island*, p.52

The younger characters in Kefala's works are constantly surrounded by family and friends whose past, as Melina's mother states, was "... here to torture us all the time." (p.56), or "Today we looked at photographs... (p.74)

In contrast to the new country in *The Island*, where the inhabitants' emphasis is on the present, in "Summer Visit", which is about a visit to Greece, the narrator marvels at how people view the past there: "Here, the everyday relates constantly to the past, you hear them asking: 'What did the ancients do? The reference point." (p.60) In Greece, the narrating protagonist appreciates the way Greeks there view the past as "... something that feels infinitely familiar. It is as if one can see where one has come from and where one is going..." (p.61)

Recounting of dreams is also an essential part of the narrative in Kefala's work. Dreams are an integral part of the story. "The past that we could revisit in dreams..." (p.107) The narrative is a complete story, not just through the conscious mind and words, but the unconscious, reflecting the protagonist's troubled existence: "... the nights were full of dark, agitated dreams." (*The Island*, p.124)

An exilic existence involves 'human frailty': "Their [the exiles'] memories cannot sustain them in the present, and the poem ["Memory"] depicts a sense of human frailty which is apparent in Kefala's poetry as a whole." (Michelle Tsokos: 57) The past, when 'retrievable', also seems to provide real 'sustenance' for the poems' speaker: "... we feasted on the past"("The Place", *Absence*). The word 'feasting' of course suggests that the speaker is looking not just for sustenance but for fulfilment and pleasure.

The whole collection of poems in *Absence* implies a lack. The past, the home and homeland are all missing. There is also real fear about loss of memory in so many of the poems. Memory is vital in keeping the past alive. The speaker in the poems relies on memory for sustenance, for making the connections with the past. Where she lives, there are no reminders of the past back in Europe. The fear of memory loss is expressed most evocatively in the following poem:

Coming Home

What if
getting out of the bus
in these abandoned suburbs
pale under the street lights,
what if, as we stepped down
we forgot who we are
became lost in this absence
emptied of memory
we, the only witness of ourselves
before whom
shall the drama be enacted?

Absence, p.86

Kefala moves from memory of a past connected with her family and herself, to the importance, or the universality, of memory as a tool against forgetting, against *lethe*. The narrator in "Conversations with Mother" ponders humanity's persistence not to be forgotten by posterity. Upon seeing a documentary on the pyramids in Egypt, the narrator remarks:

> This persistent, overblown desire to make something that will outlast us, be eternal, live in time, extend us, this struggle against death, our fragility, leaves in the long run only images painted in a dark tomb...

> I was always so aware of how ephemeral we are, was telling you [mother] then, I was afraid that when I touched something it would disappear under my hand."
>
> "Conversations with Mother" (*Summer Visit*, p.105)

There seems to be an existential angst about the impermanence of the human condition. Kefala expresses not just her fears but humanity's fears of its fragile and precarious presence in the universe. It is a fear that we will leave no trace behind us. Memory is vital then in keeping the past alive, in re-deeming the past for posterity, even when knowing how futile that may be. Our whole life, Kefala seems to be suggesting, is a fight against oblivion, against nothingness. This is evident too in her noticing of all the statues in parks: "... I felt closer to understanding why people have always built statues. The reassurance of a human body in the middle of the trees, the ability to bring to life by some direct, palpable means, someone that has gone." (p.112)

Similarly, when the narrator meets a Greek from Limnos at the cemetery, her thoughts embrace the universal fear about impermanence:

> Who knows where we are coming from, what race we are, if any race at all, moving on to a land, building a set of narrow truths, like a fence that will sustain us in this hopeless, terrible, magnificent enterprise that is our life? From nowhere to nowhere, passing on this folklore to one another, making a past out of it, a science, an art, anything that will help us survive, anything out of this desperation at being annihilated that we feel constantly. (p.115)

In Mary Zournazi's interview with Kefala (*Foreign Dialogues*), Kefala describes her position as a writer outside Australia's mainstream literary activity: "... I have already travelled through many cultures and I am always standing by the roadside." (p.46). This seems to me awfully similar to Giles' "caravan on the edge of Australian suburbia" and I have the feeling that while Kefala may lament being in such a position, in *literary* terms she should not regret that one bit.

Yota Krili

"Let us not allow the dead to be killed".

(Epigraph in Y. Krili, *Triptych*, p.80)

Yota Krili and Dimitris Tsaloumas share a common experience in having been high school teachers for a large slice of their lives in Australia. Ironically, both taught English to Australian children. In her own writing, however, Krili uses language not as a distancing tool but as a connecting tool or bridge by writing her poems in both Greek and English, either in parallel form or sometimes English first and then Greek. This is obviously an ability cultivated over many years, a pleasurable and satisfying task, as well as a right which she exercises in multicultural Australia.

Herein I discuss her poetry book *Triptych*, "a spiritual journey" as Vrasidas Karalis has aptly called it. *Triptych* consists of three groups of poems, reminiscent of the Byzantine tradition and the triadic form. An epigraph, chosen by the poet for the second group of poems titled "Memories", reads: "Let us not allow the dead to be killed". This epigraph poignantly indicates the poet's sense of obligation to resurrect the past and to honour it by immortalising it. Her writing is a process of remembering through language, images and experience. Her personal memory of people, places and events in her native Arcadia in the Peloponnese ultimately translates into cultural memory of a long gone rural life in Greece.

Having lived away from Greece since 1959, the Greek language is not natural or automatic for this author. Also, due to the geographical distance from where the mother tongue is spoken daily, Krili has to reach deep within the recesses of her subconscious for the language of her formative years. Just as Tsaloumas has to do, Krili re-invents the Greek language by creating a form which is purer and closer to the experiences she recounts. Krili is the creator of memorable images of rural life in Greece, helping to immortalise a time for ever gone. As Helen Kolias comments, her poetry is "marked by striking images." (Introduction, *Triptych*, p.6) Metaphor is a powerful tool of her craft, often transforming sociopolitical comment into memorable images. In a long poem titled "The Seasons", Krili does more for rural women through her powerful and striking images, than she would through wordy protestations about women's hard life in rural societies: "Women

carrying huge loads of hay/on their backs, moved like giant tortoises." (p.92) On the other hand, far from being gloomy about women's hard life, Krili also depicts the rural woman in a positive light as provider of sustenance, a universal human experience. The images of the 'mother' sensitively reconstructed in the three poems, which follow below, attest to this:

The Cheese Maker

My mother
worked the churn at the crack of dawn.
Milk's anguish, granular butter
we were waiting like fledglings
and scoffed down the slices of bread
covered with the thick fresh cream
sprinkled with sugar.

(p.102)

The Weaver

A warp like a river
our mother rolled on the loom's beam
and in the long, serene winter nights
fed her dreams with the fast flying shuttle.

(p.105)

The Gardener

When the swallows returned
she would work and rework the moist soil
of the garden into a fine texture
and lay each seed like a baby in its crib
whispering magic spells.

(p.106)

There is something timeless and 'profoundly true' in the above images and Anna Couani has aptly commented that "Memories" (the second group in *Triptych*) "is a magical part of the book filled with clear and limpid images from the poet's childhood in the village ... where nature is blooming and abundant ... like a beautiful Bruegel painting." In fact, in viewing some of those paintings by Bruegel after having read Krili's poems, one is struck by the truthfulness and authenticity of both works.

Krili depicts "time-honoured activities associated with the life cycle and the changing of the seasons..." as Helen Kolias has also observed. (Introduction, *Triptych*, p.7) It has to be said that if these rural scenes were not recorded by Krili's generation, they would be lost since life in countryside Greece has diminished and what remains has changed drastically. The present rural environment no longer allows the creation of folk songs such as those which enrich Krili's poems. Despite having been an inner-city dweller for more than forty years, Krili shows a deep understanding of the rural landscape. Her evocative descriptions of village life also reflect the poet's preoccupation with the problems of the world and indicate her concern for the degradation of the natural environment. In writing about rural life from her present perspective, Krili is not unlike Dimitris Tsaloumas, who has found that distance from a place gives the ability to write with more clarity.

While the poems in the group titled "Memories" collectively give us the story of rural life in Greece, there is one narrative poem in the book titled "Portrait of a Woman" (*Triptych*, p.150) which depicts, at a first level, the poet's mother, but which extends beyond the personal memory to a collective memory making her mother a symbol of rural life. This poem is also an evocation to the lost mother who is dead but resurrected through memory by an appreciative daughter.

In this poem, the daughter sees her mother not only as her own mother, but as a product of a long patriarchal tradition and culture. Memory in this poem is given through a feminist consciousness:

Portrait of a Woman

She was born before the dawn
of a bloodthirsty century
in a village perched on the limbs
of an Arcadian mountain
guarded by the country chapels
of four stern male saints.
Girls were not registered at birth
but that year was marked
by the war of 1897.
A deserving daughter
pliant and diligent;
hard toil became her halo
from the age of three
a mother to her mother's children.

(*Triptych*, p.150)

Krili powerfully delineates the history of rural women in Greece: marrying very young, becoming mothers to their mothers' children, becoming servants to their fathers and brothers, not receiving the nurturing and love they needed because women were not valued in their culture. The following lines may further illustrate this point:

She used to say
"God gave me only two children."
The girls did not count
fate had cheated her.
She taught her daughters to be obsequious
to venerate the men
who lorded over the household.

(p.152)

The daughter-narrator in this poem remembers what it was like not receiving love and affection from a mother who was steeped in the male traditions of the village and who, unwittingly, propped up the very system which oppressed her as well as most women of her time. In this kind of environment daughters were considered a burden.

The above poem offers a resolution at the end whereby the mother and daughter metaphorically 'find' each other. This is when the daughter visits her mother, who is by then 83 years-old, and tells her of her divorce and her new independent status. The mother does not disapprove: "'Good on you, my daughter!/I could never have done such a thing myself/I lived in hard times', she said wistfully..." (p.154)

In the above poem about her mother, as in "The Seasons" and many other poems in *Triptych*, Krili makes vital connections with the homeland and its rural past. This is not nostalgia for some idyllic past. Rather, these poems are a poetic evocation, a hymn and a tribute to the life of women in earlier times. These women are omnipresent in our lives today through memory. From the 'living archive of cultural memories', Krili employs memory in order to validate the experiences of her mother's generation; to re-connect past and present, urban dwellers with rural ones, an element missing in many younger writers who are often eager to see modernity as an erasure of the past." (Nickas, Introduction in *Triptych*, p.10)

Krili's poems on the mother (and the village) reflect a need to make, or remake, the important connection with our beginnings, proving that the bond between the daughter and her mother who gave her life is an all powerful one.

In conclusion, as is amply illustrated in the work of all three poets, the past is imaginatively constructed and re-deemed for us. Kevin Hart's comments below, taken from his review of Kefala's book of poems, *Absence*, seem to encapsulate the essence of all three writers and their poetry:

> "It is an old truth: inspiration requires absence rather than presence. Only when something is far away, or no longer exists, does it press upon the imagination and truly belong to the writer. Poetry is not an engagement with the present, but a belated meditation on the withdrawal of presence.

> Every poem tries to create a world where what has been lost may be found again. Sometimes verse carries with it a little of the pleasure of writing. Yet, not even the most elated of poems can wholly disguise the fact that it is a labour of mourning."

Hart's description of Kefala's poems as a 'labour of mourning', colludes with Kefala's expression of fear about losing memory and "forgetting who we are". But as long as poetry continues to be written, there is no fear of forgetting ourselves. We had better not, at any rate, for as Octavio Paz states, "if human beings forget poetry, they will forget themselves." (Paz: 160) Diasporic poets perform the task of remembering with a greater sense of responsibility so that the act becomes a matter of sheer survival. Through them and their writing, we gain optimism.

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