

Academic Wanderings

Interview with Haris Vlavianos: The Fragile Realm of Poetry

by **Victor Tsilonis**

translated by **Athena Avgitidou**

Haris Vlavianos shares with us, through one of his rare interviews, his thoughts on the diachronic issues of education, publications, arts and certainly poetry [pp. 71-91].

His last book, "Does Poetry Matter? Thoughts on a Useless Art", whose publication coincided with our own parallel enquiries about the readers which should or conditionally could regard the interdisciplinary journal Intellectum, constituted the occasion of this interview.

Up to that moment we considered poetry as a dangerously challenging *terra incognita*, an exceptionally significant but at the same time inaccessible area. However, the reading of the above book demystified our 'prejudices' by offering an accurate spot of what is poetry and who it concerns. Nonetheless, it should be noted that the word poetry in the book left us many times with the impression that it could be easily replaced with the word 'art' or even- the word 'life', a fact which adds even more value to the book. Thus our desire to host an interview of Haris Vlavianos, *inter alia* director of the journal "Poetry" and professor of history and history of ideas at the American College of Greece, emerged spontaneously.

Despite the initial communication adversities we finally managed to contact and persuade him to accept our invitation. The interview which is presented below was taken in Athens on Wednesday, September 26, 2007, i.e., the same day that the great poet T.S. Eliot was born 199 years

ago. Unfortunately, in the final and compact interview version we were forced to leave out, due to space limitations, some really interesting interview parts.

Thank you very much for accepting our proposal to give an interview for the interdisciplinary journal Intellectum.

The pleasure is mine.

In your last book, you do not hesitate, even with a dose of irony, to refer to poetry as a useless art. Which may be the role of this useless art in difficult times, such as the war in Iraq or the disastrous fire in Peloponese? In other words, maybe even more excruciatingly: who can or should poetry concern in such difficult times? Can we state eventually that arts are a luxury which man can enjoy only in times of serenity?

Every era has to resolve its own tragic problems. I do not think that the forest disaster or the war in Iraq are more dramatic events than the First or the Second World War or the Holocaust. In the past there have been poets called to write in times even more difficult and extreme than ours. I use the word useless with a little dose of irony and arrogance as well. In fact, arts in general always concern few people, those who love and are devoted to them but this should not dishearten us. Whenever I am asked who does poetry concern, I always give the same answer, by referring to Chimeneth: it concerns a vast minority. This is an oxymoron phrase. Can a minority be vast? Besides, how can we estimate the special gravity of those who read poetry and philosophy for example, and those who merely consume the seasonal best-sellers on the beach? Seferis published his first book in 300 copies, Rimbaud in 80 and Ungaretti in 100. How many of those prose writers who sell today thousands of copies will be read tomorrow? Very few. Consequently, numbers do not mean anything.

The commercial impact, however, of three or one hundred readers is not big.

Yes, but this does not concern literature. We have, indeed, 'writers', who -in order to ensure a place on the bookstores' shelves- publish a novel or some short stories every six months. It took Joyce seven years to write *Ulysses*, while they write massive novels in a few months, which naturally does not concern literature or anybody else and do not deserve a second look.

Certainly, the question remains: is this limited public eventually even more limited in our days; in other words, has it shrunk even more? While today people should regularly read more - since it is supposed that more and more people have access to education- poetry appears to have become difficult even for the decent reader. This is one of the issues I discuss in the book, since I believe that people's detachment from poetry is not the poetry's responsibility. Poetry today does not utilize a 'dark' and 'crabbed' language, as was the modernists' language; neither poems are so hermetic as were *'The Waste Land'* of Eliot or the *'Cantos'* of Pound. Hence, I think that there is a wrong evaluation of what our educational system offers today. In reality it offers a "certified ignorance". In other words, the students who complete their university studies know nothing but their science. The notion 'cultivation' has been lost. Family used to be a source of knowledge, but today it offers very few things, since in most houses, if there are bookcases, the shelves are not full of books but digital discs, i.e. cds and dvds offered with Sunday newspapers. Consequently, knowledge has disappeared and what dominates is information for arid matters.

And what about the internet;

Internet is a very useful mean but someone needs to know how to use it. It is useful for people who already have knowledge and search specifically for something. What is impressive, however, is how little Greeks read in comparison with other Europeans and how much the educational level has fallen down. Two years ago when there was a contest between all European high-schools, Finland ended first and Greece last.

So, I do not think that we should blame poetry for the fact that people are not concerned with it. It is not that we do not have good poetry. Our poetry is marvellous.

What can we say about the quality of writers and literature production in general?

Literature is a garden. You may have fragrant flowers as well as prickles. I believe that this occurs in every era, although in an era where overt offer and production dominate, it probably is even more difficult to distinguish good writing, since the number of moderate and bad texts' writers has been increased. However, in the past things were quite different. There was a separative line between literature and paraliterature. Nowadays this line does not exist or it is more difficult to discern it. A scarlet gives an interview to a female magazine and suddenly feels like Virginia Wolf.

In one of your interviews you have referred to the 'traffic policemen' of arts. How can someone get through the 'traffic policemen' of arts and reach the public without their contribution?

I believe that the public, which interests us, will find us. You did not find me? Someone could think that my book may concern only poets or literature critics. But it concerns people with general interests. Hence, not everything is sealed. When you do not wait for something it may come to you. There is certainly plenty of fog. And when I talk about 'traffic policemen', I mean journalists who are incapable of writing about something exceeding their 'height'. They usually write that they have read 'an amazing novel straight off the reel' and someone should remind them that literature cannot be 'sipped' or read 'straight off the reel'. Literature means to be unable to move on easily, to stop on a phrase and read it again and again admiring and enjoying its perfect architecture. Whatever can be read 'straight off the reel' does not even deserve the paper on which is printed. That does not mean that good journalists do not exist, but that the level is generally low.

Somewhere in your book you mention that writing is like turning the windlass in a deep well. A lot of times the bucket is lifted up to the middle but then the water is spilt. I would like to stand 'in the middle'. What is the value of a writer who reaches this middle point? How can someone judge that this specific work is incomplete? Is the middle always evident?

This is a bet between the writer and his/her self. For example, when Eliot gave *The Waste Land* to Pound, he considered it complete. On the contrary, Pound deemed that an important part of the book should be removed and consequently did so. Pound with his own aesthetic criteria thought that Eliot has written a great poem, which however needed significant abridgements. Eliot wisely accepted them and so today we read the poem in its current form. In any case, time is the final judge who decides whether the poet was right or not, i.e. whether the work he handed over will concern other people in the future and primarily Poetry. Poetry, just like life, is a marathon. A lot of people miscalculate the length of the course and stay in the middle, never reach the end.

In the train I had the chance to read once more a poet of George Paulopoulos, from the poet collection *The skeleton keys* (1988). At that poem the poet refers to the vain effort to conquer the art of poetry, although 'poetry is an open door', since when one tries to enter, the door closes. And he expresses the view that maybe all poems which have been written until now are just 'an endless string of skeleton keys in order to open the Poetry's door', but eventually none of them opens it. Do you embrace the view that poetry is an art which can never be conquered?

I cannot speak on behalf of Mr. Paulopoulos whom I love and appreciate as a poet and with whom I have read poets a few years ago at an International Poetry Festival in Rotterdam. I do not know whether he thinks that his own skeleton keys do not unlock the Poetry's door. But I am sure that a man like Paulopoulos would not have devoted to poetry for sixty years if he considered it a useless and gratuitous case. So I think that poetry unlocks 'something' inside all of us. The significance of this 'something' is recognized by each one of us, the significance of this which is unlocked for literature's account can be recognized only by literature and is revealed throughout time. Consequently, I cannot say you are unconscious of the fact that something is unlocked inside you when you write or read poetry. Otherwise, if this did not happen, why would you like commune it to others? You commune something when you think it is important. You commune ideas and emotions when you want to share them with someone because you believe they deserve

something. The same occurs with a book as well. In a different case we would all choose Emily Dickinson's path, hide our poems in the drawer and no one would ever know about their existence, unless an apt scholar-inheritor found them and did not throw them away, believing that they were recipes. Hence, since Paulopoulos and I publish books, it means that we are looking for an elementary communication, i.e. we offer our hands to the unknown reader. So I think that this particular poem expresses the sadness of a man who approaches the end of the road and evaluates the profits of his lengthy effort. However, I believe that this poet did not only offer but also earn a lot from poetry and via his work showed younger people how to make their own skeleton keys, which open the door of poetry they want to write.

In the extremely commercialised climate of our era, how difficult is it for a poet to publish his poems in Greece without putting his hands in his pockets?

Young poets do put their hands in their pockets.

Do they have to?

No, they do not have to, but since poetry books do not sell many copies, publishers ask poets to contribute financially to the publication of their book. One should forget that publishers are businessmen. I am not satisfied about that but for the time being there is no other way for young poets to see their poems published. In few cases, of course, if the publisher believes in one poet's talent, he may publish his poems without any charge.

I am saying this because once it was strongly supported that if you were a good poet you should not have to pay because payment meant that you did not deserve to be published.

Yes, but this is not true. Karouzos published his first books alone and Seferis published the 'Turn' only in 300 copies, although I am not sure whether he paid himself for its publication or not. It is a fact, however, that many writers began their career by putting their hand in their pockets. So, this rumor is false. I have myself paid too. I bought 300 copies of my first book.

Consequently, by buying 300 copies I covered the publication expenses. But from the second book onwards, I was luckier and did not need to contribute financially.

According to a quick search I did in the internet and other sources for the book ‘Does Poetry Matter? Thoughts on a Useless Art’, I obtained the impression that the book was initially going to be published in 2002 under the title ‘The Reality of Poetry’. Why it was not published then, what did happen during this five-year period? Did the work become more mature?

I had told my publisher that I will write a book under the title ‘*The Reality of Poetry*’. But this book kept changing continuously because, while I was working on the second part, meanwhile I had written other texts as well. So, in my mind, this book was gradually taking another form. Then I selected a different title which I liked as well and today is the title of the book’s first part ‘*The Fragile Land of Poetry*’. Nevertheless, my publisher informed me that, according to his own findings on bookstores, there were too many people unable to pronounce the Greek word ‘fragile’ (εὐθραυστη). Thus I had to think of a third title and that is the title I finally chose for the book. Nevertheless I kept the title ‘*The fragile Land of Poetry*’ as the first part’s title, while the initial title ‘*The Reality of Poetry*’ is the title of an included essay.

We have to acknowledge that the book was widely advertised by all popular newspapers.

Yes, it is true that many people wrote about it and, if a novel had had the same promotion, it would have sold at least 10.000 copies, while my book has sold only 1.000 copies thus far. But I do not mind since I am satisfied with few good readers.

The readers of Harry Potter are they good readers? Don’t they converse with themselves, don’t they feel liberated?

Of course they are. The Harry Potter novels simply concern a certain age of people. One hopes that after Harry Potter and the witches the young reader would move on to something else

more demanding. The issue is that one should not stop to Harry Potter, not submit to an imposed fashion, like when people read Louis Karol and Tolkin in England. Harry Potter should constitute the basis of something else, literarily more complex and substantial.

This is also a matter of personal aesthetic, isn't it?

It is a matter of education as well. I mean that when the Prime Minister of Greece, Mr. Papandreou at first and New Democracy later suggested the unification of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labor, it becomes obvious that education is considered as something completely instrumental in Greece and aims at the labour market and not individual cultivation. Does anyone want such a one-dimensional society with 'successful' people who have not read any literature at all? I was told, I do not know if it is true, that Mr. Voulgarakis, the ex-minister of Culture, took the following test: he was asked to listen to Seferis, Elitis and Varnalis and then was asked to recognize and discern their voices. Quite naturally, he failed to recognise any of them. I truly wonder whether the present minister could pass this test. We organised the Olympic Games in order to prove to the world that 'we know how to eat with cutlery' for seventeen days. But what does happen the rest of the year? Culture means duration not ephemeral feasts. These end someday and the next morning we wake up after a hangover.

Let us now return to your writings. I was surprised but paradoxically not irritated -and that is why my surprise was multiplied- to find out that you often utilise English words with Latin characters in your poets. When exactly did you start writing like this and which is the reason, the practical value of this 'mechanism'?

First of all I have entitled one of my poetic collections 'Adieu', a word which usually appears in Shakespeare and romantic poets. Poetry and literature in general, as Russian formalists have ascertained as well, subvert the familiar, i.e. art makes the familiar unfamiliar. Hence an English, a French or a Latin word inside a Greek text creates a small 'inflammation', if it is placed in the right place and serves a certain cause. This fact forces you to pay attention not only to the

word itself but also to the words surrounding it. So a new frame is created, which is suddenly lightened in a novel way.

I do not know however whether in our era, where the invasion of English in Greek language is so overwhelming, this 'unfamiliarity' is present.

It depends on the word which is used and the spot where it is placed.

Because we no longer speak utilizing only English terms, but a lot of magazines as well, such as Cosmopolitan, utilize overtly this mode of writing in an irritating way.

It is not the same. When a poet utilises a foreign word in order to give a distinct meaning within a poem, this differs from life-style magazines which overtly utilise foreign words within their childish texts so that their editor informs us that he/she knows English and has learnt Italian in the 'Homer' private school as well. The point however is whether the poem itself needs at that exact time this little lingual 'aberration'.

What is your opinion about the relation formed between English and Greek language? Has it currently taken a particular direction?

A lot of young people write only in Greeklis and consequently their messages are usually written in an incomprehensible language for older people like us. They take out all vowels and leave only the consonants, as I see. So they have invented their own way of writing and vocabulary. Will this not affect the evolution of the Greek language? On the one hand it is quite funny that our kids speak a language with more and more English terms and on the other hand that we react against the sixth grade's history book as pure 'patriots'. *En passant*, I could tell you a story relevant to our discussion. When I was studying in Britain I had an English girlfriend, who gave me -a few days after our acquaintance- a book with the characteristic title 'How to be a perfect gentleman' in order to tease me. I have lost it since then, but I still remember how impressed I was by the book's first chapter. It was entitled 'Furniture' and its first phrase was: 'A gentleman never buys furniture.'

He inherits them.’ So I was thinking that we are exactly the opposite of the ideal gentleman, since from the moment we inherit our grandmother’s house, we throw the furniture away as ‘obsolete stuff’ and then rush to buy ‘fashionable’ sofas and armchairs for the masses. Of course, some of us let regret about this and run to Avisinia square, in Monastiraki, to buy as antiques the furniture that once they threw away because now they are considered as valuable and fashionable. So we do not have an easy relation with the past. We may be bothered by the ‘bumpkin’ English who eats his sandwich in front of the Parthenon marbles touching with his other free hand an amphora but we liked very much that in the first, I remember, issue of the Greek Playboy our national star, Zoi Laskari, lied naked on the Delos’ lions. If you dare to complain most people will tell you: ‘Ah! These are ours and we can use them as we like’. Thus, since we have such a complex relation with our past, how can we protect our literature and language? How can someone speak Greek well without having read Roidis, Papadiamantis, Seferis or Elitis? By using the 200 everyday common communication words or the 100 deficient sms words?

Nevertheless, the latest efforts to publish some Papadiamantis and Roidis’ works ‘translated’ in modern Greek were much discussed. What is your view?

I have already answered! I think that difficulty is a part of virtue. Otherwise we should translate Kalvos as well. Solomos uses difficult words too. So it’s time we made a new modern Greek language! Let’s depart from from Solomos’ modern Greek and create a new one. But this is not the proper way to solve this problem. Why did Englishmen not translate Shakespeare’s’ sonnets even though it is hard for a Londoner to comprehend them? But here in Greece we want to make everything easy. And when we oversimplify everything the ell will eventually ‘reach the ground’.

And why this oversimplification is so harmful, one could insist?

Because, by trying to oversimplify everything and supposedly make them ‘functional’, i.e. according to the commercial concept, we will gradually reach a level where everything will be

useless, not only poetry. Brilliant ideas, such as the merging of the Education and Labour Ministries, as mentioned above, prove that we do not consider education as an end in itself but a mean for labour purposes. While I always believed that education is an end in itself. Because, otherwise, why should one studying media or finance read literature, attend a picture gallery, listen to an opus since he does not earn money or adds something to his resume? But culture does not have to do with application because there are a lot of useless things which are more necessary in life than the 'useful' ones.

I think that the problem is traced in the problematic relation we have with the past. Exactly because we think that it 'belongs' to us, we do not know it, since, as something so familiar, we do not even bother to observe it. To name but one example if one examines the publication of Greek ancient texts, one will discover that they are published by Oxford University in the United Kingdom, by Harvard University in the United States and by Kaktus Publications in Greece and not an institution such as the Academy of Athens. Consequently a lot of texts are translated by Kaktus' publishing team as it is indicated on the title pages. Hence, who is eventually responsible for the translation and annotation of such difficult and demanding texts? I am not optimistic about the evolution of this field. But I am sufficiently optimistic in order to continue writing and believe that there are still little islets where people with common needs and sensitivities can discuss and be moved. As I have aforetime said about myself: 'I am the happy side of a sad man'.

Since you referred to the happy side of a sad man, I am impressed by the fact that Greek thinkers, especially during the last few years, seem to have banished humour from anything 'serious' they publish or attempt to present. Is this eventually a mean through which they set themselves and their 'valuable art' in the social margin?

No, I believe this is a matter of general culture. If you see a tv series or a comedy, everyone screams like a neuropath. Greek people are quite melodramatic. Humour is based on a subtle reversal. Of course we have had people with great humour, such as late Bost or Tsiforos but good humour is difficult because it functions on the base of lingual reversals. If one reads Wild, who is a

metre of the kind, or Tsesteron one will discover that all their jokes are based on the reversals of what the reader or spectator expects to listen. In poetry, poets like Kavafis or Eggonopoulos, or coming to our era, Aranitsis or Varveris prove that there is a strong antidote against this unbearable demureness of our days.

Returning now to publications, I think that one of the impressive parts in your last book was your reference to a real event, the farce of an imaginative student in 1975 who submitted as his own work for publication Jerzy Kosinski's awarded novel *The Painted Bird* in order to receive negative responses from all publishers (the initial publisher of the book in the United States included). Does this case reveal that there is *inter alia* an issue of an existing but not explicit writing fashion? In other words, except for the significance of the 'name' behind a piece of work, do events like this prove the difficulty of a work not only to be considered but also be timeless?

I do not think that this incident is related to a work's timeless value. This incident merely demonstrates that publishers rarely read the books they publish. This also means that if a poetry contest was taking place in Greece and I was sending a Seferis' poem with the nickname Kostas Papadopoulos, it might have been rejected. Due to the tremendous speed everything occurs within a climate of general ignorance and indifference, incidents like this are very likely to happen.

Is it true that abroad the agent's role includes the duty to filter, i.e. make the first 'clearing' of the submitted texts, in order to send the most decent ones to the publisher?

No. this is not the agent's duty. In the United Kingdom and United States there are 'readers' in the publishing houses who read the texts and if these do not worth they initially inform the publisher and then the writer. There are potent readers who can even 'censor' an Updike's or Roth's novel. So the authors often write in their acknowledgements, "I thank Y or X who was the first reader and editor of my work". But, here in Greece, everyone is a misunderstood genius, so who might judge whom?

What exactly do you mean with the phrase misunderstood genius?

First of all I mean that only a few would accept corrections in their work from a third person and also that if one publishes a nonsense and a critic notes it, the author will consider that the critic is wrong because nobody is in position to evaluate his/her work. Some remarkable writers with powerful writing style certainly do exist but they are not as many as the magazines and media talk shows attempt to present.

Is generally the critique's acceptance a difficult case?

Difficult, surely. Look, I do not maintain that all critiques are good. Besides, I also write it in my book that a lot of critiques are written off the cuff, as well as a lot of poet critiques for poets. But we should not misjudge critics. There are many critics such as Kurtovic or Hatzivasileiou who are not only bold but also write apt texts. But there are certainly a lot who just add another arid text every week to the thousands they write.

So we talk about critiques of expeditious production and consumption.

Yes, ones that you buy, swiftly read and then throw them away. In the past, Anagnostakis was telling me, the books of poetry published every year were so few that every book constituted a little publishing event in poets and critics' communities. Nevertheless, the situation is different now. How can somebody follow up the publication of so many books?

Yes but what does happen now with book reviews into special newspaper and magazine sections where one should pay before finding his book there and which essentially constitute advertising space?

This is not true. The publishers' advertisements differ from the critical book reviews. I could not argue that critics are paid by writers or publishers in order to publish their views. Certainly, there are sympathies and antipathies which sometimes obfuscate the critics' criteria.

However, the last few years many journalists have also entered into the sphere of book critique who do not know a lot about literature and consequently write feeble book reviews.

I would like now to talk a little about the relation between poetry and music. In the texts of your last book it seems like you do not particularly accept the relation between poetry and music. In other words I was left with the impression that you consider poetry as a pure art which does not allow any musical or other mixtures.

No, I do not mean that. Simply, sometimes I am told something like “how tremendous was Theodoraki’s and Hatzidaki’s contribution to poetry”. But I respond that, on the contrary, poetry assisted them. They found significant poems which consequently set them to music. In other words, poetry constituted the fertile field on which their music blossomed. Poetry however did not win much, neither did it become a more famous art because those who love songs like ‘The Mystic Seaside’ (To Perigiali to Krifo) never bought a poet collection by Seferis. Besides, in poetry every word has its own ‘music’ which every reader listens to within him differently. However, the point is that the music a powerful musician will write for the poem, such as Theodorakis, seems definitive. But I have not read ‘Axion Esti’ so triumphantly in such high tones as Theodorakis has. So, Theodorakis’ ‘musical reading’, despite its great significance, remains his own. It is certainly neither mine nor yours.

I would like to pose another question about music. Rap music, primarily heard by million young people...

I hear this music too.

. . . is distinguished by the adoption of the classical form of poetry writing, the writing with rhymes which is in turn now considered as a second class way of writing in contemporary poetry.

No, this is not true. There are both good and bad poems with rhymes. And there are both good and bad free versus poems as well. The issue is why a poet chooses one or another form of writing for his poems. *Ab initio*, the choice can not be initially judged negatively. The final result will determine the choice. Anyway, when one adopts past forms, this is not only 'lawful' but also risky. One should not return to the past to stay there but advance further ahead. Past should constitute a starting point. One cannot travel in first class with a third class ticket.

So, can one argue that rap is poetry's distant cousin?

Rap is something that combines rhyme with music but the point remains: if you deduct music, can the poem stand alone? A lot of songs are supposedly based on a poem, usually with rhyme, but if music leaves what does remain? This year at the International Literature Festival in Berlin a popular American rapper played a song. During his performance he definitely offered an impressive show. But, so impressive like a firework blowing in the sky: we admire it for a little while and then it disappears forever. Because the endurance, the poetry's strength, derives from one's desire to return to poems again and again. In ten years from now when our music taste will change and will listen to something else, will the rap poems of today be read them? I doubt so.