

## FUTURES: POETRY OF THE GREEK CRISIS

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# FUTURES

POETRY OF THE GREEK CRISIS

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## AN OUTLET FOR A TIME OF CRISIS

### WHAT TO SAY AND HOW TO SAY IT

*'But there is one unfortunate difference between us [the British and the Greeks], one little difference. We Greeks have lost our capital – and the results are what you see. Pray, my dear Forster, oh pray, that you never lose your capital.'*

C.P. Cavafy to E. M. Forster, 1918<sup>1</sup>

**I**t might seem ironic to juxtapose the nouns 'futures' and 'crisis' in the title of an anthology seeking to map out the poetic landscape of a small country which has been in dire economic straits since the beginning of the decade. The fiscal crisis which reared its head in 2008 initially seemed like an event out of a Ballardian narrative: a man-made catastrophe unfolding in spectacular fashion and contaminating everything in its path. Of course, that is the simplistic view. We know now how widespread the crisis of 2008 was, but its impact, though felt, was not immediately apparent. Any attempt to recuperate the pre-crisis world now serves to remind us that we are only left with after-effects and persistent signs of a world that is lost.<sup>2</sup> As the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century drew to a close, it became clear

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<sup>1</sup> E. M. Forster, *Two Cheers for Democracy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin [1951] 1972), p.237, quoted in Costas Douzinas, *Philosophy and Resistance in the Crisis: Greece and the Future of Europe* (Polity Press: London, 2013), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Evan Calder Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse*, Zero Books: London, 2011, p. 35.

that the world we thought we knew was irretrievably changed. I still remember walking through the centre of Athens late at night on a Sunday in November 2009. The atmosphere was filled with tear gas and helicopters were patrolling the skies. It seemed like an inversion of the image of Zeppelins flying above Athens during the great spectacle that was the 2004 Olympic Games. It almost felt unreal.

The quoted fragment of the letter C.P. Cavafy sent to E.M. Forster in 1918 seems to have suddenly acquired a new relevance. The bankruptcy of the Greek state in 2010 was termed ‘temporary’ and ‘orderly’, which seemed like an attempt to avert the gaze from a catastrophe too hard to bear. The crisis was not simply financial; it was the dissolution of a fantasy of a world that perhaps never was. It was also a turning point for Greek public discourse. Bankspeak has since then become ubiquitous; an eroding agent in how we think of ourselves and how we think about language. It was this observation that has driven my decision to structure this anthology around financial jargon (Adjustment, Acceleration, Assessment, Singularity, Implementation). It is one small attempt to reclaim language from a semantic overdetermination imposed by the increasingly abstract processes of finance.

Manolis Anagnostakis’ poem ‘Thessaloniki, Days of 1969 AD’ (1970) reads like an omen of a future foretold:

In any case the kids have grown, the times you knew have passed  
They now no longer laugh, whisper secrets, share trust,

Those that survived, that is, as grave illnesses have appeared since then  
Floods, deluges, earthquakes, armoured soldiers;  
They remember their fathers' words: you'll experience better days  
It's of no importance in the end if they didn't experience them, they  
repeat the lesson to their own children  
Always hoping that the chain will one day break  
Perhaps with their children's children or the children of their children's  
children.  
For the time being, in the old street as was said, there stands the  
Transactions Bank  
– I transact, you transact, he transacts –  
Tourist agencies and emigration bureaus  
– we emigrate, you emigrate, they emigrate –  
Wherever I travel Greece wounds me, as the Poet said Greece with its  
lovely islands, lovely offices, lovely churches

Greece of the Greeks.

(trans. David Connolly)

Anagnostakis' conclusion hints at the charged, often conflicted, relationship between Greeks and Greece. The picturesque conceals a history of violence, a history in which the collective and the personal collide with often catastrophic consequences.

In his chapbook *Ouselves and the Greeks* (2000), writer and playwright Dimitris Dimitriadis poses the following, rather charged, question: 'Is it at all possible that all these things we thought about Greece were all lies, fabrications of our imagination?' The question feels more urgent than ever before. The fiscal crisis has dramatically affected modern Greek identity in the wake of a decade characterized

by seemingly endless growth. Has it all been a fabrication? Is everything we thought we knew about Greece just another product of neoliberal economics?

The reality of the last few years has been sobering, to say the least. Capitalism has exploited the physical capacity of society and subjugated its nervous and psychic energies to the point of collapse.<sup>3</sup> Exhaustion and fatigue – concepts previously exorcised in the narrative of a booming economy – are now brought to the fore in the current narrative of crisis. The drastic changes instigated in labour management by technological and financial innovation have had a considerable impact on the social and political imagination; it is easy to infer how the increasingly volatile processes of production and value creation have initiated an erosion in the social sphere and have contributed to the widening of the gap between rich and poor.<sup>4</sup> It is in equal measures indicative and upsetting to think about it. The number of homeless people in Greece has risen to unprecedented levels for a European country: unofficial estimates in 2013 put the figure at 40,000 and it has risen exponentially since then.<sup>5</sup> The crumbling infrastructures; the harrowing stories of foreclosures; unemployment figures reaching stratospheric heights; the emergence of extremist political parties: all these events piece together a narrative of a social

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<sup>3</sup> Franco Berardi, *Uprising* (Semiotext(e): Cambridge, MA, 2012), p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> Giuseppina Mecchia, preface to Christian Marazzi, *Capital & Affects: The Politics of the Language Economy* (Semiotext(e): Cambridge, MA, 2011), p.10.

<sup>5</sup> Alex Politaki, "Greece is facing a humanitarian crisis", *The Guardian*, February 12 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/feb/11/greece-humanitarian-crisis-eu>

and economic apocalypse. In this 'age of austerity', meaning has receded in the face of discursive imperspicuity.

My choice of Anagnostakis and Dimitriadis is deliberate: much like these two writers, the poets whose work makes up the anthology map out the border where the personal dissolves into the political. These poems investigate not only the blind spots and cognitive bias we all have in a time of crisis; they also incite and excavate the voices that were previously silenced.

*Futures* sketches out new ways of acting, talking and thinking about the present (or, at the very least, the very recent past). Written in a time of upheaval, these poems trace the transformation of personal and collective formations and the impact of these changes not only on the individual but also on the form and practice of poetry itself. There is not sufficient space to talk about every poem individually but I would like to offer some context to a few.

Stiggas' 'The Road to the Newspaper Kiosk' or Universal Jenny's 'I will now write using words of the Left' map the scope, experience and scale of the losses incurred on a personal and social level. Both of these very different poems are replete with edges, limitations, silence, non-language and gaps in their bodies. Along with Allos' 'Violent Magnesium', they investigate the limits of language and the imagination in a world where there is 'an increasing desensitization in the exchange of signs'.<sup>6</sup> This is very much an

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<sup>6</sup> Berardi, 125.

inscription of the wound in writing.

The pictures of slogans and graffiti accompanying the five parts of the anthology underline further the underlying concern of this project: the gradual, often violent modification of contemporary personal and collective identity in a time of crisis.<sup>7</sup> The poems are often spoken by narrators who undergo some sort of modulation or transformation (as in Ioannidis' 'Polish', Iliopoulou's 'South', Hadzinikolaou's 'Den of Kasdaglis' or Chatziprokopiou's 'Hijras'); these texts demonstrate what it is for those who struggle to communicate on the lower frequencies without having anyone speaking for them.<sup>8</sup> Potamitis, Prevedourakis and Ttoouli communicate the frustration and intense affect generated by a system that seems to be running on a perpetual cycle of catastrophe.

But not all poems in *Futures* work on a macroscale. Those by Amanatidis and Apergis' 'Table' function as minute investigations of the world as occupied space, not by the desire for the transformation of the *here and now* but by a disconnection brought about by the microfascisms permeating everyday life.

Sifiltzoglou, Mayer, Critchley and Tideman borrow tropes and vocabulary from unlikely sources, their narratives becoming mirrors (in real time) of the historical and social moment we live in. In their poems, Doukas and Tsalapatis dramatize the pulverisation

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<sup>7</sup> The images in the book come from my walks through Athens and are gradually uploaded on the online repository *Appetite of Walls*: [appetiteofwalls.tumblr.com](http://appetiteofwalls.tumblr.com)

<sup>8</sup> cf. Hardt & Negri, *Declaration*, 5.

of the public sphere and the signs that accompany it.

This anthology began to take shape in October 2012 in London when Tom Chivers and I were discussing the state of modern Greek poetry and how the emerging generation of contemporary Greek poets is responding to the financial crisis. In my notes from the evening, I can make out the word ‘archipelago’ scribbled down somewhat hastily as a gut reaction to the idea of a *generation* of poets. It is perhaps fair to say that we cannot speak of a generation in the way we thought of that term in the past. The poets in *Futures* have very different approaches to the very idea of poetry, its function and methodology. Furthermore, I decided to include in this anthology not only Greek poets but also poets of Greek descent (e.g. Critchley, Ttoouli, Willey, Sikelianos and Potamitis, amongst others) and poets who have a personal connection or affinity with Greece. The decision to widen the scope and nationality of the contributors also subverts the idea of a national or generational anthology which is destined to fail from its inception.

Instead, what this book seeks to do is to meditate on how networks, clusters and grids of poets from across the world might gather around a particular theme. The majority of these poems were written originally in Greek and translated by me (apart from the poems by Iliopoulou, Kotoula, Ioannidis and Giannisi). The undertaking of translating a variety of poets who are often quite strikingly different from one another was a challenging task for all the apparent reasons:

different poetic voices with their own inner rhythms and idioms. The translation has to transfer not only the narrative but also the pitch and tone of the original poem to the destination language: English. At the same time, it is vital to preserve the *strangeness* and *difference* of the original poem; that is to say, the attempt to bridge the linguistic divide must take into account the particularities of the narrative ecosystems and sociocultural worldviews which each poem adheres to or subverts.

Modern Greek is a language spoken by specific communities and the attempt to translate literature written in this language for a global audience runs the risk of misrepresentation in the attempt to bridge cultural and linguistic divides. The risk doubles when you are writing for the present or if you are trying to assemble a representative sample of the country's emerging poets responding to a current and traumatic event. The interesting thing about the poetry written while in the throes of the crisis, however that is defined, is that it is spurred on not so much by a conscious desire to speak about the trauma itself as it is to act as a series of meditations unique to every situation it arises from. These are poems that communicate the ever-proliferating emergencies and attempt to conceive of new strategies to connect, speak, assemble, love and survive.

**Theodoros Chiotis**

ATHENS 2015

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## A NOTE ON THE TEXT

Poems marked with † were composed in English. Poems marked with ‡ were composed in Greek and translated into English by the poet. Where a poem is marked with ¶ the translator's name is recorded at the end. The remaining poems were translated into English by Theodoros Chiotis.



**FUTU**

**RES**





'Organise yourselves'



# ASSESSMENT



## AFTER A GREEK PROVERB

A.E. STALLINGS

*Οὐδέν μονιμότερον του προσωρινοῦ*

We're here for the time being, I answer to the query —  
Just for a couple of years, we said, a dozen years back.  
Nothing is more permanent than the temporary.

We dine sitting on folding chairs — they were cheap but cheery.  
We've taped the broken window pane. TV's still out of whack.  
We're here for the time being, I answer to the query.

When we crossed the water, we only brought what we could carry,  
But there are always boxes that you never do unpack.  
Nothing is more permanent than the temporary.

Sometimes when I'm feeling weepy, you propose a theory:  
Nostalgia and teargas have the same acrid smack.  
We're here for the time being, I answer to the query —

We stash bones in the closet when we don't have time to bury,  
Stuff receipts in envelopes, file papers in a stack.  
Nothing is more permanent than the temporary.

Twelve years now and we're still eating off the ordinary:  
We left our wedding china behind, afraid that it might crack.  
We're here for the time being, we answer to the query,  
But nothing is more permanent than the temporary.

## INCOMPLETE SYNTAX

### D.I.

what keeps me up at night:

the things I want to do without  
unknown bits of affection  
the rise of schizophrenia

I insert my future under the tongue  
my future voice represents something

perhaps a given moment  
perhaps a language-robbery

multiplies exponentially  
ask for a cessation  
white spaces on the page  
the sound from my own throat neutral

Mutation Of The Cry, p. 279  
p. 278, Mutation Of The Cry  
Nothing Ever Happens,  
Chapter One

devoid of meaning  
I attempt to seduce  
my sole evidence

## REFRAIN

GEORGE PREVEDOURAKIS

Your sorrow is a poem of the street  
placed on a bourgeois' lacquered shelf  
a cheap elegiac couplet  
a joke of decadence  
at some bar at peak time  
with sleeveless top and tattoos an actor-waitress  
it is a dog howling inside a military camp

your sorrow is a poem of the street  
crosswords on the deck, pocket-sized biosophy  
on a wet cobbled road a regal beggar  
a nightly gait, the border of your glance  
a May wellspring to quench your joy.