

# *Austerity Measures*

*The New Greek Poetry*

EDITED BY KAREN VAN DYCK

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For Jacob, Benjamin, and Leander

It is difficult  
to get the news from poems  
yet men die miserably every day  
for lack  
of what is found there.

William Carlos Williams

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## INTRODUCTION

When there is less to go around, people fight, grab, get tough. Lately, Greece and the Balkans have been living with more than their share of less. Hunger, unemployment, slashed pensions, and ruined businesses draw chalk circles around victims daily in Athens. Electricity and water shortages reach levels associated with countries at war. More than 27 per cent of Greeks are unemployed. Fifty-five per cent of young people, particularly those in the areas of technology and education, have left Greece to find work elsewhere. Forty per cent of children were living in poverty in 2014, and the number is now approaching 50 per cent. Public debt is the highest in Europe, over 180 per cent of GDP, while austerity measures make staying in the euro zone as difficult as a Grexit. The need for fast answers pushes voters to political extremes. Broken promises and corruption on all sides breed unfounded accusations and fatalism. Hardly anyone keeps money in the bank any more. News of murders and robberies shares equal airtime with ads for high-tech security systems. Meanwhile, refugees fleeing Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq arrive on islands like Lesbos in their hundreds, and at times in their thousands, not wanting to be in Greece, but unable to get to countries with better social services. And where the refugee boats go, local fishermen follow, lining up on shore to jockey for their engines, hoping to resell them at a profit. More people, less to go around.

Poetry, though, is one thing there is more of. Much more. Poets writing graffiti on walls, poets reading in public squares, theaters, and empty lots, poets performing in slams, chanting slogans, and singing songs at rallies, poets blogging and posting on the internet, poets teaming up with artists and musicians, poets teaching workshops to schoolchildren



and migrants. In all of the misery and mess, new poetry is everywhere, too large and too various a body of writing to fit neatly on either side of any ideological rift. Even with bookshops closing and publishers unsure of paper supplies for the next book, poets are getting their poems out there. Established literary magazines are flourishing; small presses and new periodicals abound. And if poetry production is defying economic recession, it is also overleaping the divisions of nation, class, and gender. Greek poetry – poetry written in the Greek language – can be written inside or outside of Greece, by Greeks or non-Greeks, rich or poor, women or men, young or old. Not since the Colonels' Dictatorship in the early 1970s, when poets such as Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke, Jenny Mastoraki, and Pavlina Pampoudi first appeared, has there been such an abundance of poetry being written, nor such a multitude of projects undertaken. Indeed, the historical affinity does not stop there: it is those same poets of the Dictatorship who are doing the lion's share of mentoring in the new generation.

The present anthology samples this living tradition, bearing witness not only to the hard lives being led in Greece and the Balkans today, but also to what poetry does best: offering new ways to imagine what can be radically different realities. From the lyrical dream fragments of Anna Griva to the apocalyptic neo-realism of Stathis Antoniou to Thomas Tsalapatis's wry postmodern prose poems, nothing here is as one might expect, even from the Greek poetry of the recent past. Not many statues; not much myth, at least in the classical sense; no patriotism; not even the very intense light or references to the sea we know from the Nobel Laureates George Seferis and Odysseas Elytis.

What most distinguishes the poetry of this new millennium from what came before it is, on the one hand, its diversity – there are no clear-cut schools or factions – and, on the other hand, the cultural conditions that it takes for

granted. Loosely connected, living in Athens, Thessaloniki, and smaller places like Patras, Ksanthi, and Syros as well as outside Greece in Nicosia, Bergen, Paris, and New York, many of these poets have had ready access to computers and the internet since childhood. The reality they seek to represent – here most obviously in poems with titles like 'Empty Inbox' and 'Txt Message' – is infiltrated by, and includes, the virtual. They have grown up with the understanding that vast stores of information and a wide range of different languages are only ever a click away. Even those who have not been exposed to a mixture of languages in their own cities, towns, and villages, even those who have somehow missed it on the radio and television, have inevitably found it on their computer screens; and mother tongue, as such, often doesn't determine the language they choose to write in. Some publish in two or more languages; some self-translate. There are more women writing than at any time in the intervening decades since the Dictatorship, as if by placing almost everyone on the front line once again the hard times have levelled other inequalities.

All of this variety, of course, poses problems for the editor of an anthology such as this. Although the criteria for inclusion are roughly language (Greek), age (under fifty), and date of publication (in the last decade), there are exceptions. A few poets write first in English, then in Greek, translating their own work. Some began writing elsewhere but went relatively unrecognized, or turned to Greek only after starting careers in Bulgarian, Serbian, and other languages, and are therefore suitable for inclusion despite their greater age: whether linguistically or geographically, they remain comparatively new to Greek poetry, if not to poetry as a whole. A handful of poems that anticipate the present mood and times, although published on the cusp of the new millennium, are also here. Literature often tells us what will happen before history has time to unfold.

Then there are the many possible ways of organizing a survey of this lively and fragmented scene. Should the poets be ordered alphabetically or chronologically? Around themes, or around poetic influences from previous generations? It is clear that some kind of organization is required, not least because many of the poets are making their first appearance in English and will be unknown to most of this book's imaginable readership. Ultimately, division into different venues of poetic activity has seemed to make the most sense. From the magazines and small presses to the blogs and performance spaces, in Athens, in the provinces, and abroad, it is the scenes and their internal variety that shape what this poetry is doing. Poets don't, of course, publish only with one magazine or in one place – there is fluidity and crossover – but the fact that they tend, in my experience, to be most aware of the work of contemporaries associated with their own sphere of production suggests to me that this kind of mapping does serve a real purpose. The underlying hope is that it will help to render an unfamiliar landscape significantly more legible, more navigable, and perhaps even more alive for the reader.

In the end, these poets are worth grouping together because they pose the question of what it can mean for poetry to be political, or to be apolitical, in times of social and economic crisis. They live within the limits of capital controls and unrepresentative referenda; if they live abroad, they are invested in the news of family and friends living within those limits; but, in every case, they write through it. Even in the work of poets who began publishing earlier than the past decade, austerity and an uncertain future are unavoidable presences, whether front and center or peripheral to their vision. But what is the relationship of poetry to the world it inhabits? If, as William Carlos Williams says in the lines which I have made the epigraph to this book, 'men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found'

in poetry, then what is in this writing that could have made those lives less miserable, or even saved them? What *is* found there? If it's 'difficult to get the news from poems', doesn't this mean that it is nonetheless somehow possible – especially if we come at poems 'at a slight angle to the universe', as E. M. Forster described the Greek Diaspora poet C. P. Cavafy?

There have been other anthologies of poetry about the Greek crisis. By expanding its purview to the whole of contemporary Greek poetry, however, and including a much greater proportion of work which *doesn't* directly address the political situation, this survey aims to provide deeper and more various answers. The poets associated with *φάρμακ* (*Farmakon*) magazine (the title means both 'poison' and 'medicine' in Greek) and grouped here under 'Myth and Medicine' seek to create symbolic worlds that deal obliquely, almost homeopathically, with society's suffering and bafflement. The internet poets in 'Unjust Punishment' – the most explicitly political of those collected here – mix pop culture and micro-level current events into poems which read like dispatches from the streets of inner-city Athens and elsewhere. Those in the 'Storytelling' section are more apt to use narrative and historical fact to place the present in its context; and the sixth and final section, 'Border Zones', moves the focus outside Greece altogether, connecting migrants from the Balkans and Middle East as well as Diaspora Greeks who write in Greek with the double vision of another culture and language.

One approach runs throughout the anthology. These are the 'measures' of the title, which refers not only to courses of state action, but also to the poetic strategies employed in response. Austerity measures call both for cutting back and for turning limited resources to new and creative ends. In poetic terms, this often involves rhyme and syllabic count. In the opening poem, A. E. Stallings dramatizes this resourcefulness by repurposing a news headline, 'Greece downgraded deeper into junk', and using that headline's

last word as one of the two repeating rhymes of a villanelle embedded in a prose poem. Similarly, the traditional fifteen-syllable line of the folksong, not coincidentally called ‘political verse’ (πολιτικός στίχος), winds its way through much of the original Greek in this anthology, surfacing at the most unexpected moments. Yiannis Efthymiades’s meditation on the final moments of a jumper from the World Trade Center, *9/11 or Falling Man*, takes still another inventive approach, following the spirit of its long 27-syllable lines by expanding the brevity of a ten-second descent into a series of poems that runs for twenty-seven pages.

This question of resourcefulness can also point to a more general ethos of recycling, reminiscent of the empty shopping cart, put to an imaginative range of uses, that shows up with growing frequency in contemporary Greek film, art, and even a promotional video for Piraeus Bank. More often than not, in this poetry, it is the icons of the everyday that bring the crisis home: IKEA cartons for a roof in Jazra Khaleed’s ‘Words’, for instance, or a caterpillar eaten alive in the center of Athens in Iana Boukova’s ‘Black *Haiku*’. In ‘Mama’s a Poet’, meanwhile, Glykeria Basdeki turns household chores into a grammar lesson (‘all day she cooks up commas / sweeps tenses under the rug’) and, in so doing, makes poetry about the everyday political: ‘comma’, in Greek, means both the punctuation mark and a political party. These poets’ relationships to history and current events are a mixed bag, sometimes in-your-face, at other times told at a slant, but always pulling at the corners of language, asking it to take in more, to be more open. The times are an invitation to speak out against dogma, division, and monolingualism – and also, often equally importantly, simply to register the lived experience of Greeks today, the news that stays new when headlines move on to cover other parts of the world.

As for the translators who have contributed to this anthology, many have linguistic identities as mixed as the poets

they translate. Like Olga Broumas, Diamanda Galas, and other Greek Diaspora writers and performance artists, Stephanos Papadopoulos lives and works in English, while his poetry often channels Greek with its preponderance of vowels, loanwords, and calques. The same can be said of the poetry of Rachel Hadas and Stallings, although they learned Greek as translators and scholars. Often translators take their diverse affiliations as a cue to experiment with their own language, to stretch readers’ expectations in all sorts of new directions, as when Peter Constantine’s version of Stathis Baroutsos’s ‘Speed Dating’ finds an analogue for the poet’s direct style in the lexicon of the gay online hook-up scene. This is particularly obvious when translators take on the same poet. Krystalli Glyniadakis translates her own poem, ‘The Next Hundred Years’, with a post-Black Mountain School use of enjambment that fits right into a dominant contemporary American idiom of lyric poetry. Chloe Haralambous ratchets up the register in her translation of Glyniadakis’s ‘National Hymn’ – perhaps to keep postcapitalist readers tuned in to feminism? – translating ‘*αυνανίζονται*’ (masturbate) as ‘accessorize their wanks’. Stathis Gourgouris, in contrast, imagines Greek and English as one: in a move reminiscent of Richmond Lattimore’s translations of Homer, he retains the definite articles and adheres at times to the word order of the Greek when he translates Phoebe Giannisi’s poem about Thetis. My efforts place Giannisi in a trans-Atlantic experimental tradition of visual poetics recalling not only her own concrete punctuationless poems, but also those of the late twentieth-century American L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. Her poem about Penelope swimming laps takes the shape of a pool in the English version. Other examples of experimental translation abound, and when possible they are indicated in translators’ notes and biographies. For readers and students of Greek, this anthology can provide

the additional pleasure and interest of seeing how translators relish the problems posed by the macaronic layers of myth, history, and language that contemporary Greek poetry exposes.

The translations chosen, for the most part, view constraints as enabling, rather than limiting: not as a cause for consternation, but as the basis for invention. What is lost in translation is found again, otherwise and elsewhere. The goal is not to reproduce the source text – you can't – but to learn from it so as to make something else possible in the new linguistic context, acknowledging the linguistic and cultural differences that translation is summoned to resolve but always winds up proliferating. Although this anthology maps out a particular segment of the poetry landscape in Europe, we must remember that what it discloses is always seen and heard through the English language. What can be conjured, woken up, written, and addressed in English? Editorial weight was consistently placed on the strongest translations, even at the expense of some very strong original poems. This anthology of new Greek poetry is representative, then, not only of a cross-section of Greek poetry now, but also, simultaneously, of that poetry as it stands in relation to other places and languages.

My goal has been to deepen and thereby alter the way readers think of poetry in Europe, especially at its edges where East and West blur, and to uncover the dilemma of learning to live with less amid the expectation of more: what in her last collection the poet and translator Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke called 'the anorexia of existence'. In post-crisis Greece, questions of blame and recrimination multiply in the face of rising suicide rates and hunger strikes. Did we do this to ourselves, Greeks ask, or was it done to us? The poems and translations collected here

demonstrate that the impasse Greeks are now facing is not only theirs, but all of ours, as we struggle to live in a faster, more culturally heterogeneous world with tools from a slower, more homogeneous past. To recast these poems in the rhythms and multilingual idioms of English with an emphasis on the translated text is to view the crisis cross-culturally, and to treat *Austerity Measures* as a project as much ours as theirs.

Syros, August 2015