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The Cyprus Problem in Literature and Theory

Interview with Stephanos Stephanides

Roger Marios Christofides, Stephanos Stephanidis

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Interview with Stephanos Stephanides

Roger Marios Christofides

Roger Marios Christofides: To begin with, let's talk about your work. You have quite a peripatetic background, living and teaching in many different parts of the world. So tell me how these diverse experiences have fed into your writing.

Stephanos Stephanides: I was born in Cyprus in 1949 and I was taken away rather suddenly by my father in 1957, in the middle of the anti-colonial struggle. My parents had split up and my father grabbed me and took me to England. So that early experience of dislocation without warning was a very significant event in my life. All the more so because I lived with my maternal grandparents in the village of Trikomo during those early childhood years. I experienced a rural Cyprus that has now vanished. I feel privileged to have the experience and memory, a way of life that remained in my memory and affections and continues to inspire. I was resistant to suddenly being taken to England and being forced to learn English. I was unhappy being separated from my mother and my mother tongue (the Cypriot Greek vernacular). In retrospect, I see how this opened up whole new worlds for me. My mother re-married and moved to Taiwan with her American husband. I was reunited with her in Taiwan in the early 60s and I spent my teenage years living between these three islands, these three worlds, which opened up a cosmopolitan vision without ever having lost the attachment to the world of my early childhood in rural Cyprus. I had spent thirty-five years moving around, as you say, peripatetically, and did not return to Cyprus until my early forties.

R. C.: It's quite a unique odyssey for you between these island spaces. Do you think the fact that they were islands has formed your sense of self in a particular way, and, if so, does that affect your writing in any way?

S.S.: I guess so, yet although they were islands when I first experienced them, I was not aware of them *as* islands, but the metaphor of the island gradually emerged in terms of my writing. It was like negotiating three separate selves, changing and adapting to different identities, and the changes were within me as my parents were continents apart from each other so the negotiation was within myself.

R. C.: This sense of different identities competing is actually quite a Cypriot problem, even though you were far away from Cyprus: these different identities were competing over you in the way that different identities were competing over Cyprus at the same time. Do you think that's a fair comparison?

S.S.: I would say that my experience provided me with a different prism through which to see the issues of Cypriot identity. Nationalism in Cyprus wanted to impose a singular identity on Cyprus. I think that's been a large part of the problem. I think this multiplicity of the island's identities has been denied largely through the post-colonial and anti-colonial nationalist groups. The task of the writer is to find an autonomous space or a line of flight from symbolic powers of languages that are imposed by official narratives and ideologies.

R. C.: On the one hand, then, there's this sense of multiplicity in your writing. On the other hand, multiplicity is precisely the thing in Cyprus that has been denied, with Greek nationalists and Turkish nationalists trying to claim the island for themselves. Could you give us some examples of how that multiplicity you associate with Cyprus is manifested in your work?

S.S.: I'm multilingual, I have lived in different places and learned several languages along the way. The Cypriot Greek vernacular is my mother tongue, but English became my dominant and literary language. I write in English. You could say I was exiled in English. However as writers I believe we are always strangers in language as we work on the threshold of language. Even monolingual writers seek out their own idiom of expression. For the bilingual or multilingual writer, this is perhaps more evident and requires a degree of experimentation. I have to filter different affective experiences through the experience of English. So I'm always working on the edges of language. And I also have a desire to bring in tropes of the vernacular or what you might call the rural maternal language. It's an important part of me but there are many other layers to my identity. But I cannot easily

identify how this multiplicity is manifested in my work. It is up to the reader to find it.

R. C.: Perhaps there is no such thing as a core Englishness but a multiplicity of 'Englishes,' which allow you to articulate something that is, in fact, very Cypriot through these various articulations of English.

S.S.: I think that my engagement with Caribbean writing has been a great experience for me and Creole poetics have given me a great sense of freedom as well as my deep connection with India. Caribbean Creole poetics and cultural experience has inspired a way of imagining differences and possibilities. Derek Walcott is one of my favourite poets, in the way that he is able to integrate the Creole vernacular world with a cosmopolitan imagination, and play with it in creative ways. His work has helped me think through the gaps across languages and cultures. I would also say that the translation of my work involves challenging and redistributing the borders between the vernacular and the cosmopolitan. When my work is translated into Greek, for example, or another language I know, I often work with the translator. It's an interesting experience of creative self-reflection.

R. C.: The Derek Walcott connection is interesting: he writes a poem about *Othello*, so there's this strange return to Cyprus even via Walcott.

S.S.: Yes, and of course, he has a deep affection for the Mediterranean. And like many Caribbean writers, he puts the two seas into counterpoint. For example, Edouard Glissant talks about the Caribbean as an open archipelago whose writers seek a poetics of relation in the constantly differentiating process of language practice. He argues that the Mediterranean is an insular sea with three monotheistic religions in competition. It's been interesting for me to explore this idea of seas in counterpoint from the perspective of the Mediterranean. The Mediterranean is not altogether insular. It has fractures that allow for exits and entries. The straits of Gibraltar, also known as 'the Pillars of Hercules,' allow the Mediterranean to be replenished by the Atlantic. The idea of travelling 'beyond Hesperia' or beyond the Pillars of Hercules has inspired the creative imagination since antiquity. And much later the construction of the Suez Canal facilitated the passage to the cosmopolitan Indian Ocean. Walt Whitman celebrated this

achievement of modern technology in his poem 'A Passage to India' in *Leaves of Grass*.

R. C.: I want to run with that idea of the Creole poetics of Cypriot Greek. Part of the problem in Cyprus has, as we know, been a linguistic problem, especially post-1974, with the official adoption of Demotic Greek. Since then writing and pronunciation have changed to an 'official', Athenian way, and as a result there's this marginalisation and denigration of the Cypriot Greek dialect—perhaps we should call it a language, not a dialect. That marginalisation also marginalises what that language represents, which is that layered history you mentioned, a palimpsest of cultural and linguistic influences. So, the question is, how do you think the Cypriot language can be used to articulate a different kind of Cyprus beyond Greek and Turkish nationalism?

S.S.: If you look at the vernacular language, what is it? It's always totally changing, shifting, and many different languages filter in. If we take the Cypriot Greek vernacular, it has appropriated elements from the various languages of colonisation and trade on the island throughout its history. It has taken from the long French medieval period, the Venetian period, the Ottoman period, the Arab world, and more recently British colonialism and global English. So within the Cypriot vernacular there are multiple reference points that you can move around in. I think there is a danger of fetishising the vernacular as simply more 'authentic' or as an expression of nostalgia for the rural past. Vernaculars are not simply 'natural.' That idea relegates the vernacular to the folkloric or to rural nostalgia. Vernaculars are willed into being through creative interactions and transactions with other languages and cultures with which they come into contact. A vernacular is multi-layered and always changing across time and space in the same way that so-called 'cosmopolitan' languages do. The question is how do we as writers get involved in this process that is going on around us and how we open up new ways of seeing the world around us. I have engaged in this kind of exploration in my prose piece 'Adropos Moves in Mysterious Ways' (<https://stephanosstephanides.com/2016/01/10/adropos-moves-in-mysterious-ways-cyprus-dossier/>).

R. C.: Is the problem then with literature and literary studies that we tend to think of literary traditions as being written down, whereas Cyprus has a rich oral tradition often overlooked?

S.S.: Oral traditions can be a powerful force on literature that is written. I do not write poetry without an acute awareness of how it will sound when it is read aloud. While this is not exactly oral tradition, it is an example of where poetry has not lost its oral quality. I think the issue is a question of mediation between different kinds of media. Creative expression through language may be oral, written, and nowadays, digital. One does not simply replace the other. They co-exist and creatively interact with shifts and overlays. Film and digital media have brought new possibilities for articulating the oral layer of culture and I have enjoyed making video documentaries that engage with the oral and performative aspects of poetry, and with ritual process and performance, as in my work with Indo-Caribbean culture. We can work across media, across languages and across culture. But I think a transcultural literature for me is more interesting because spaces in-between are more interesting, in themselves, as they reflect our realities as liminal or peripheral subjects. Rather than going for either/or, I'd like to say that we can have a cosmopolitan language, a language of mythical, symbolic, cultural or spiritual reference, and an affective vernacular language and all of these reflect our experience of being in the world. And I think all these various strands can be interweaved. The writers who have interested me most are often those who write out of place and out of language, and they're able to experiment and defamiliarise our perception.

R. C.: In terms of other writers, who is producing this kind of transcultural literature that operates on those different levels? Are there any, for example, who are Cypriot or writing about Cyprus addressing those linguistic issues?

S.S.: Now, what's interesting is that when I first returned in the early nineties, I didn't know any Cypriots writing in English. Suddenly, after the checkpoints opened in 2003, I realised that there were some dispersed through the island or living abroad and we got to know each other. We emerged as a kind of community. I'm not saying we're doing the same thing but we're all writing out of dislocation and are uneasy about the symbolic orders of our Greek or Turkish legacy. I have worked closely with some of these writers such as Alev Adil, who has a Turkish Cypriot father, and lives in London, and with Aydin Mehmet Ali, who returned from London to live in Cyprus a few years ago. But I have also worked closely to Cypriots writing in Greek and Turkish. The process of translating each other's work is a creative process of literary exchange. I have translated many poems of Niki

Marangou, and although I do not speak Turkish, I have worked in dialogue with Turkish Cypriot poets to render their work into English, especially the poetry of Gur Gench. Nora Nadjarian from the Armenian community also writes in English and says that her soul is Armenian, but doesn't write in Armenian. Of course, it's very much a minority language here, and she speaks Greek as many Armenians do, so there are many ways of writing 'in-between'. How it manifests itself stylistically or thematically is different for each one of us, but it's the diversity that's interesting.

R. C.: What is also interesting is that you are brought together by a dead space symbolic of division (the no man's land or Green Line that sits between the checkpoints of north and south Cyprus). Everyone you have described is dislocated from traditional Cypriot identities and is attracted by this great big marker of difference, this site of dislocation, with the literary and the geographical overlapping.

S.S.: And this is something Alev has written on, the idea of border poetics, and I've produced a documentary, *Poets in No Man's Land* [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bveahqD22wQ>], which brought people writing in different languages into the buffer zone and looking at different responses to it, not just the Cyprus Problem, because it can get tedious always talking about the Cyprus Problem. Poetry is not just about politics. Imagination is also a no man's land. Poetry is also a no man's land. It doesn't belong to anyone. It seeks a release from the forces that make up the symbolic order.

R. C.: I'm interested by your use of the term 'symbolic order.' What do you mean by that in this context, and what should we take it to be? Are you using it in the strictly psychoanalytic sense of an order in language that provides the linguistic foundations for the order of culture at large, or in another way?

S.S.: In terms of language, it's what is considered within the nation as the point of reference for identity and language. As writers we want to break this easy connection between language, culture and identity. We are, in this sense, trying to escape from language. I write in English, but I am also trying to flee English. Language, culture and identity are not coterminous. There is an overlay and the point of congress is most interesting for creative processes.

R. C.: Where they are in congress, is that where an imaginative space opens up?

S.S.: I think so.

R. C.: And if we're talking about the symbolic order in Cyprus, we are talking about language that forces you into thinking about identity in quite polar ways, either Greek or Turkish.

S.S.: Yes. For the cultural symbolic order, the points of reference are usually Athens and Istanbul. There's a charged politics that you are forced to gravitate towards, and it's good to fracture those symbolic orders and let other possibilities emerge. I've also been writing a kind of memory fiction that's not totally fiction but written as fiction, and there's been an emerging interest in memoir in postcolonial writing. At first the big themes after independence were reclaiming oneself, decolonising the mind and so on, but there's also the experience of the individual because, in the same nation state, you find different responses to the socio-political experiences and how that is expressed through the diversity of the individual psyches is what's important in shaping a literary voice.

R. C.: A different way of imagining identity. Traditionally identity was something seen as an idea we all participated in, an idea imposed from the top down, but writing as the expression of a specific kind of identity seems quite deconstructive. Language is always changing as it moves along; it is always in the throes of perpetual difference. So even when it sets out the symbolic order it also undermines it because, as a process, language is mutable. Your writing, it seems, exploits this paradox of a language that states an idea it continually undermines.

S.S.: Yes, it is that, yet I not say I am a deconstructionist without a sense of affective affinities. Felt life depends upon and is articulated by these affective connections, and our particular experience of place and time.

R. C.: Well, language still has to work while it's doing those things: it still has to *mean*.

S.S.: Otherwise it goes into total abstraction. So bringing that feeling of place is crucial to felt life, while standing outside of it so that it's seen through a different prism.

R. C.: Are you trying to reconstruct a lost Cyprus or remember it?

S.S.: Both. In some of my writing I try to recapture a world that had evaporated for me when my father literally abducted me from the island in 1957 and which has left its traces in me and my way of being. The experience of dislocation brings with it a desire to retrieve, which may sound nostalgic and romantic, but it does not have to be only that. The act of writing is always an act of retrieval. But it's also a process of reflecting critically, a kind of critical or self-reflective nostalgia, in the same way that there's a critical cosmopolitanism. Although I wasn't here when the war broke out in 1974, I was born in the north and spent my childhood there, so the impossibility of return after 1974 because of military occupation and de facto partition brought a whole new dimension to the experience of dislocation.

R. C.: I'm interested in this folding up of different dislocations—geographical, linguistic, temporal. I find it interesting as a member of the Cypriot diaspora, which is as big as the population of Cyprus itself. There cannot be many nations with such a big diaspora in relation to the population of the country. That folding, that dislocation, is embedded into the heart of what it is to be Cypriot; it's always dislocations upon dislocations.

S.S.: This is why, I think, the Greek word for diaspora, *ομογένεια* (which also means homogeneity), really bothers me. I like the word 'diaspora,' because it's related to dispersion. Someone once asked me 'Can you talk about the *ομογένεια*?' and I thought, 'Why is it that word?' Although there may be a thread that connects us, our responses to dislocation are highly diverse.

R. C.: Is that uniquely Cypriot, or does it just expose the fallacy of national identity? In other words, does the large Cypriot diaspora and its varied experiences just make clear how unstable notions of national identity are?

S.S.: I think you're probably right. Maybe it's not uniquely Cypriot. In effect, in the twentieth century, after the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century, we've been shaped to see the world as a body of nations, and now we're beginning to see it in other ways. And there are new dangers. The idea of globalisation has created a global economic elite, another challenge to transcultural experience. Global capitalism has created transnational economic power, and at the same time there's transcultural identities formed by the multiple migrations that have arisen from

these new economic powers. I think as writers with transcultural identities we must find ways to resist nationalism and globalisation in its elitist capitalist forms.

R. C.: Let's speculate about the future. Cyprus seems a paradigm case of transculturalism, where, despite the violent efforts of nationalisms, transculturalism is still embedded into Cypriot life. We've touched on its transcultural history and language, but also it's now a diverse place with new communities—Asian, Eastern European, African—who are Cypriot in their own way. What do you see as the transcultural future of Cyprus and what, if any, is the potential relationship between literature and that transcultural future?

S.S.: That's a complicated question. It's hard to prophesy, although poets are supposed to be seers! But I think it's unpredictable. In the nineties, the idea of a Cypriot English literature never came to mind and then the checkpoints opened and it was a big surprise to see new literary communities. For me this was a big moment for new creative engagements. For example, it was after the opening of the checkpoints in 2003 that the new literary journal from the European University of Cyprus, *Cadences*, emerged for Cypriot literati to publish their works in Greek, Turkish, English, or in translations among these languages [<http://www.euc.ac.cy/en/university-publications/cadences>]. But where it's going is anyone's guess. But maybe that is what's exciting, giving possibilities of hope through alternative ways of seeing and experiencing the island beyond ethnocentric visions.

R. C.: What do you see as literature's role, then? Is it just a counterpoint to the symbolic order we spoke about earlier, or does it have a more active role? Can it be more aggressive, stating and organising those alternate possibilities?

S.S.: Writing literature is a way of exploring our sense of being in the world, so this is why I'm reluctant to give it a conscious political direction and I do not think literature should be aggressive. It can be challenging. I think it's political in the sense that literature explores what it means to live and be in the world. It takes the familiar and established and asks us to perceive it in a different way. In that way it has the possibility of being radical, but not, for me, in the sense of direct political action. That doesn't mean we're not committed or engaged politically. We often take political stances, like when the checkpoints opened and groups of poets from

both sides came together and wrote a collective poem. But, you know, that's half politics, half poetry. We are political, we have views, but the role of literature and art is to convey our sense of what it means to be in the world and the possibilities and responsibilities that it entails.

R. C.: So if there is a political responsibility, is it the reader's?

S.S.: I think political responsibility is everybody's. I have been speaking about what I believe is the agency of the writer in the act of writing but all of us who live in the 'polis' should have a sense of political responsibility.

R. C.: Finally, tell us what writers influenced you as a reader and what attracted you to them.

S.S.: Well, I think I've mentioned that my favourite living poet is Derek Walcott.* But looking at world literature as a whole, there are many names I could mention. I love Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, because of the interweaving of stories through the idea of the multiple transformations that have taken place since the beginning of time. Since we're talking about transculturation, for me stories of metamorphoses is a wonderful template for depicting moments of unsatisfied passion and crisis that bring about transformations in nature, in the cosmos and in human beings. That weaving together of stories with wit, intelligence and emotion really captured my imagination a great deal. So although it's not always obvious how it relates to my work, as influences are often elusive, it is a work I frequently turn to. Ovid has a sophisticated voice and evokes a complex world. In terms of modern poets writing in Greek, Cavafy, for me, is the most interesting. I like his voice, which is de-territorialised and cosmopolitan, and he's also very linked to eastern Hellenism. And it recalls for me the non-European dimension of Cyprus and its links to Asia Minor, Egypt and the Levant. These links really fascinate me, especially as I'm fascinated by India. Paradoxically, these influences come about because I spent my early years and a part of my career in Guyana in South America, which has a multi-ethnic population with more than half of Indian descent. Their ancestors migrated as indentured labourers in the nineteenth century, and I think participating in the life of the people, their everyday life, their rituals and ceremonies was very significant for me. So that really got me deeply into Indian culture, and the trajectory between Western Asia and Hindustan and the trails in-between, which

constitute our pre-European past. I have explored this in my poems such as 'Blue Moon in Rajasthan' among many others. I have, in this way, resisted Eurocentricity. In that respect, the fascination with Ovid is because of his fantastic evocation of the ancient Mediterranean, which gives us a sense of a Cyprus very different to the Eurocentric one with which we have become accustomed and which we have been challenging in our conversation today.

*Derek Walcott died in Saint Lucia in March 2017.