

Vrasidas Karalis

University of Sydney

Nikos Karouzos (1926-1990): a Christian poet between nihilism and tragedy

Very few things exist in English on Nikos Karouzos, despite the excellent translation of his work by Philip Ramp (Shoestring Press, 2004). Yet his poems are amongst the finest in modern Greek literary tradition and constitute some of the most significant experimentations with grammar, versification and meaning in post-war Greek poetry. While Karouzos never achieved the popularity, or the literary iconic status attributed to other poets like Yannis Ritsos, Tasos Leivaditis, Manolis Anagnostakis and more recently Kiki Dimoula, his poetic idiom is quite distinct, embodying a strange mythography of death, nihilism, faith, doubt, rebellion, fatalism and love for life, all fused in one and all turned against each other. Unlike other poets, Karouzos kept publicity and state recognitions away from him, mocking prizes and awards, taunting all bureaucratic committees and challenging any ministerial or governmental authority on matters of poetry and art.

His approach was a mixture of contempt towards all self-serving art coterie that dominated literary scene and an almost romantic mentality of a poet maudit which determined his total war against everybody with the complete rejection of all forms, directly or indirectly, of official recognition. During the last years of his life, his social persona took on prophetic rage and Bakunian negation, characterised by a relentless critique of the establishment and of all those poets who slept with the enemies of poetry in order to acquire fame and money.

Yet despite the deeply theatrical behaviour, his self-inflicted demise gave to his work a profound maturity and humanism. Karouzos was the

son of a priest and his early poems resonate with the liturgical incantation of psalms, enlivened by biblical imagery and occasionally by sublime religious, almost mystical, immediacy. Around the late sixties however he went through a debilitating spiritual crisis, indeed through an existential fall of Dostoevskyan dimensions, from which he never recovered. From the transfigured world of the resurrected Jesus, he fell into the silent immensities of space that terrified Blaise Pascal and terrorised Søren Kierkegaard. The miraculous cosmos of a Mediterranean Christian which celebrated the phenomenal brilliance of luminous surfaces started becoming darker and ominous and most importantly losing its material transparency. The horizon of his work shrunk and the sharpness of his vision disappeared. A corrosive nihilism started taking over his language: grammar and syntax became disjointed and dislocated, sentences lost their structural completeness and images became over-condensed and opaque.

In the eighties, the spiritual crisis was exacerbated by many other problems (drinking and cancer) while his poetry developed an incredibly profound tone of a mournful elegy full of prophetic fury and luciferian fatalism. The specific time and place in the history of the country also played a significant role in this transmutation of his doxological, post-Easter poetry, to an Augustinian theologia crucis, a poetry that un-founds the intelligibility and the shapeliness of the experienced world into shards and fractions without connections and links amongst them. The only thing that the poet could do was to revive analogical imagination, create in language the events that would re-found and re-institute a topos for their restoration to their former completeness.

The poem we translate here is an anarchist oratorio, with antiphonal structure and choral stasima interrupting an imaginary dialogue between probably a man and a woman in the last hours before the anarchist rebellion of the sailors of Kronstadt, March 1921, was crushed by the Red Army and the mythical hero of the Soviet revolution, Trotsky himself. Musically, it is based on Johann Sebastian Bach's Oratorios, especially the Passion According to John, one of the works deeply admired by Karouzos. In the poem, Karouzos also introduces himself as a dying organism who dreams of his liberation from political oppression, social malaise or the burden of his own decaying sick body. A fusion of Soviet political vocabulary, the language of

the Gospels, the traditions about Buddha (in French) linked by a continuous meditation of human mortality create a kaleidoscopic poem full of unexpected power, expressive immediacy and fascinating energy.

The poem has, probably, its implied origin in a very popular book on the Kronstadt rebellion written by Volin or Vsevolod Mikhailovich Eikhenbaum (1882-1945), *The Unknown Revolution* (1947). The Greek translation of the book had the status of a minor cult book in politics as it revealed the oppressive character of the Russian revolution since its inception and counter-revolutionary role of respected figures like Lenin and Trotsky. Volin developed a systematic critique of the official Marxist Communist Party which evolved into a significant counter-theory, what he called 'synthesis anarchism'. His synthesis anarchism tried to deal with the question of the individual and its position within collective action and social engagement, so that the individual would never lose its centrality and primacy under the Machiavellian worship of impersonal social structures. Karouzos intertwines the discussions and the style of proclamation as we find it in Volin's syncopated prose style with a passage from Luke's Acts about the life of early Christians and excerpts from the early life of the young Gautama, exploring the meaning of anarchism as the only way in which humility and acceptance can become the true basis of human solidarity and the only foundations of political society.

The result is an intensely dramaturgic text in a polyphonic style, structured around 'unknown and even unsuspected events', a book for the dead and the dying, dialogi mortuorum, framing an anarchist ontology of social action and human individuality. The old believer and the contemporary nihilist struggle in the language and the semantics of the poem: Karouzos fills the text with paradoxical contradictions and semantic conflicts, articulated through intense linguistic compression, which makes his verses on some occasions post-semantic or indeed post-lingual, entering the world of thinkers like Emil Cioran and Samuel Beckett.

He was already treated for cancer and the details of his struggle with his own body can be detected in the poem itself. At the same time, the whole poem becomes a statement of profound disillusionment and disenchantment with all political projects and ideologies, denouncing all those forces and individuals who were so easily seduced by power (having of course in mind the recent political failure of socialism in Greece). Amidst the hell of

lost causes, the poet salvages the dignity of language and therefore the ability of the human mind to envision new mythographies and give fresh narratives about its own existential adventures.

When he died three years later, his poetry had acquired the brevity of a pre-socratic fragment and the immediacy of a political slogan. If there is another poet like him, probably it must be Dylan Thomas, a poet consumed by drinking and destroyed by the passion of language. His poetry reads like an amalgam of Paul Celan, Rainer Maria Rilke, Friedrich Holderlin fused with Osip Mandelstam, Stephane Mallarme and William Blake. Karouzos struggled persistently and painfully with his own demons so that in the end he became one of the demons of his own being: his own voice was one of the other voices which his own poetry captured in his prolonged, tortuous and exhausting wandering through the opaque and dangerous underworld that his country had become in the eighties.

But his last poems retained an uncompromising rage against a society without ideals, a history without redemption and a world without horizon. The only thing, as it always happens, that remained undepleted in him, as to every poet, was the richness, complexity and heterogeneity of Greek language. From Homer, through the early archaic poetry of Sappho, to Sophocles and the Gospels, as well as the language of Romanos the Melodist and the demotic songs but also the highly personal idioms of his two grand masters, the self-divided national poet Dionysios Solomos and the prose-writer Orthodox pietist Alexandros Papadiamandis, Karouzos saw Greek language as an ethical battleground between two powerful forces, meaning and death. His inner battle was so total and fundamental that in the end it became obvious that death was the only meaning.

As Heraclitus would have said in his most revealing fragment, ἦθος ἀνθρώπου δαίμων, 'a man's character is his fate', which the demon of their own unpreparedness and innocence was the fate indeed of a whole generation of dreamers and idealists who were crushed by the corruption of language and the usurpation of all projects for social renewal by opportunistic technocratic elites. After 1987, a new dimension emerged in Karouzos' verses; his nihilism was transformed into a tragic sense of life, as his battle with his body became a hopeless conflict with the inevitability of dying. His surrender to an inscrutable Fate that could not be questioned or combated made his final verses pulsate with tragic irony, resignation and

abandonment that we only find in the tragedies of Sophocles. Cancer, like in the novel by Alexander Solzhenitsyn *Cancer Ward*, became for him a call from god, an invitation to another way of being, both terrible and sublime, beautiful and destructive, a catastrophe and an ultimate reconciliation with mortality.

After the publication of this poem, Karouzos released some of his most poignant and angry denunciations of life: 'I rage at the sunset with my cherry-coloured-brain'. His last poems are fragmented, spasmodic, incomplete. The Ode Nocturnal and Neolithic to Kronstadt stands as one of his most ambitious, visionary and apocalyptic works. In an era of diminished expectations and of the minimal self, it deserves more attention.

Recommended Reading:

Nikos Karouzos (2004), *Collected Poems*, translation by Philip Ramp, London: Shoestring Press.

(Note: I would like to thank Nick Trakakis for his insightful comments on the translation.)