

**“BODY, IT’S YOU WHO ARE THE SOUL”: GENDER,
SUBVERSION AND UNDERWORLD IN THE SELECTED
WORKS OF ELIAS PETROPOULOS**

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Anti-poetry is a poetic movement that attempts to destabilize normative rules and conventions of traditional poetry. This kind of poetic genre is distinguished by its intention to communicate as directly as prose. Leslie Bethell has defined Anti-poetry as, “a questioning of the value of poetry and the inflated egos of poets from within the poems (Bethell 281).” But Anti-poetry cannot be defined in a single sentence. Instead, Anti-poetry eludes any clear definition because this kind of poetry is an incessant quest for the source of uncontaminated poetic expression which does not fit into any rigidity of systematized-order. In fact, unveiling the intersections of word and image Anti-poetry offers a unification of randomly chosen objects and words. Hence, one need not be an erudite or scholastic in order to appreciate Anti-poetry. Rather this type of poetry, composed through ordinary languages, is meant for the ordinary people. An anti-poet usually begins the poem with a subtle refusal of responsibility for the shocking impact it creates on its readers. The anti-poet’s caustic apology for any aggravation sets the tone of parodied self-criticism which they maintain throughout the rest of the poem. In fact, the anti-poet is always engaged in a combat to free the language from its metaphorical associations, to make its vocabulary a simplified one and make poetry an efficient tool for liberated literary expression.

An anti-poet like Elias Petropoulos replaces the sentimentality or exoticism of lyrics by a language which is much colloquial and direct. This is where as an anti-poet he transforms poetry into anti-poetry. He makes the transformation possible because he feels obliged to express the quotidian ideas of existing life in a language which is direct. Elias Petropoulos (1928 - 2003), a self-described ‘urban anthropologist’, wrote on the issues of Greek life that had never been seriously studied before. He was imprisoned thrice during the Junta (1967-1974) and produced a disruptive and ‘of-humorous’ literary oeuvre that invites extreme reactions from his readers. The themes of Elias Petropoulos’s writings includes portrayal of subcultures, denunciation of the chauvinistic ideas, slangs, music of homosexuals, drug users, and criminals- all in a skeptical manner. At the core of his anti-poetry lies humour and Petropoulos, like a true an anti-poet, continuously communicates any profound theoretical

statement with the most comical and derisive assertions. Petropoulos, a proponent of direct speech in poetry, sees himself as a committed enemy to any jargon that interprets themes in pompous manners. Instead, he believes his poetic technique has to assume the voice of his critics and then a reply to them from the aspects of an anti-poet. The replies are often ironic and cynical, for he believes his critics' take on anti-poetry is a flawed one. He also admits that any defect in anti-poetry, as pointed out by critics, is intentional, because the very defect distinguishes his works from the ossified notion of poetry. Edith Grossman rightly says, "The alleged defects of anti-poetry are actually its virtues." (Grossman 56).

While treating a well celebrated theme like gender in his poetry, Elias Petropoulos delineates a sharp contrast with the fixed endings, forms and age old emotions that conventional poetry might offer to critique the issues of gender. Instead, Petropoulos feels that the inconclusiveness of anti-poetry is an anti-doctrinal position that an anti-poet always shares with its readers. The language of Petropoulos's works is not noble, his poetic appeal is not exemplary, and his anti-poetic tone is not at all amiably philosophical. His writing, instead, is devoid of lyricism. His anti-poetry does not convince the readers yet it communicates to its readers as directly as possible so that the readers become a part of its journey. The charges labelled against anti-poetry are, in fact, no more than a wistful defence of a particular poetic tradition which falls sharply in a banal emotion that expresses but does not serve to the feeling of ordinary readers. Petropoulos never questions the authenticity of the emotions of traditional poetry but disapproves the language in which they are usually articulated.

Elias Petropoulos creates a new language and vocabulary for poetry which are pivotal for any development of communication. They not only provoke creative venture but also withdraw themselves from any hyperbolic pronouncement. Regarding the poetic stance of Petropoulos Edith Grossman comments, "He achieves the necessary comic distance from his exaggerated position by establishing a sense of disparity and incongruity between the statements he is making and the language he uses for making them." (Grossman 59). The cliché of prosaic words subvert their take on the value of anti-poetry. Petropoulos consistently attempts to disorient his readers' poetic sense and sensibilities. The readers' ultimate acceptance of the linguistic and emotional contradictions in anti-poetry is the poetic purpose of Petropoulos.

Elias Petropoulos destroys the old phrases and begins a profound prelude to a new poetic mode. He records the harsh reality around him and replaces the old order and names of things with much straight

forward language. He communicates to his readers most directly and for this, if the language requires to be revised, he is obliged to do so. Petropoulos, believes that this new tradition of poetry is a spirit of anti-lyricism. Radical in nature, it is the anti-poetic stance. He used colloquial language, unexpected slangs and cant on themselves to undercut the hyperbolic ego that a poet attaches with himself while composing a poem. The conspicuous prosaic words used by him undermine his poetic pomposity. Works of Elias Petropoulos compel the readers to accept the corrosive juxtaposition of various modes of language and peculiar examples of linguistic innovation as the inevitable facts of the anti-poetry.

Unlike a traditional poet, an anti-poet's role is not only to simply write of the reality that surrounds him but also to reconstruct the vocabulary of poetry, if that is required for making the communication more plausible and direct. In anti-poetry, language has no rigid relationship with the objects it defines. In short, language is a system, a tradition of the construed world, but if someone feels the necessity, the system and its tradition can be disjoined. This restructuring of the traditional connection between the language and its referents appears to be the sole purpose of an anti-poet. Instead of making a decoupled dictionary, Elias Petropoulos searches for a deep sense of relationship between language and experience. Petropoulos, as an anti-poet, shows fidelity only to the quotidian language which he practices most consistently. This notion of language in anti-poetry is directly opposed to the elite concept of poetry which may be said to be rather an obscure discourse far away from the speech of common people. The objective detachment of the artist from any preoccupied idea and his complete identification with the mass is the major thrust of Petropoulos's works.

During the dictatorship of the colonels in Greece, Elias Petropoulos was convicted thrice for 'pornography' reasons. He was convicted for his anthology of Greek underworld songs, *Rebetika Tragboudia* in 1969, for his poem 'Body' in 1972 and for the dictionary of Greek homosexual slangs, *Kaliarda*. The 'Rebetika' that stands for country music, Black 'blues' and Black spirituals, was an existing oral cultural heritage in Greece. In his 'Introduction' to *Rebetika-Songs of the Old Greek Underworld*, Petropoulos himself declared that these songs were long detested by the upper strata of Grecian society. In fact, the songs, as interpreted by Petropoulos, contained themes of hashish, prison life, drug addiction, prostitution and overt sexual obsession. These songs must have miserably failed to constitute any particular discursive stance towards modern Grecian society. Rather, the songs express the melancholy of a class of people who are endlessly chained to the lowest class of the society. For Petropoulos, 'pornography' convic-

tion was a direct result of his use of hashish themes in his *Rebetika-Songs of the Old Greek Underworld*. In fact, it is this pervasive interest for the truth about the underworld and hashish subjects that provoked Petropoulos to come up with dictions, styles and language which are anti-poetic. A close reading of Elias Petropoulos's 'Introduction' to the *Songs* offers a great amount of information about this loathed social group. Further, the judges objected particularly to one line in the poem **'Body'**: "I forget even the fatherland when I see a young naked female body." (Qtd. in Taylor 10). An article of *Der Spiegel* magazine of the 5th February, 1973 brings up the close connection existing between sexual morality and politics of contemporary Greece. In fact, **'Body'** is an anti-poem that offers a direct communication with its readers. The unorthodox structure, diction, straightforwardness, unornamented language and radical choice of theme of the poem never escapes the reader's eyes:

Let's face it: a naked woman is a sad sight.

Unfortunately I have not become demented yet.

Art has its own code of morality.

Beauty is the legality of nature.

Confronted with a woman's naked body small children are awed and nice delicate men are shocked

A woman's naked body compels a discussion of personality.

(Translated by Nikos Germanacos, Qtd. in Taylor 11)

Petropoulos randomly reflects his rebellious motives in his work *Kaliarda*. He never hesitated to use terms in this work for which he was arrested. A strong objection to this work was concerned with the term 'U. S Embassy' which stands for the public toilets in Omonia square, a meeting place for homosexuals. Elias Petropoulos is bold and relentless enough to establish his idea of gender without any showcase of metaphor or other rhetorical ornaments. He never hesitates to utter: "I hope you cruise for a chicken and find the fuzz!" (Translated by Steve Demakopoulos, Qtd. in Taylor 12)

The anti-poetic nature of Elias Petropoulos is reflected in his work *The Good Thief's Manual*. Besides 'pornography conviction', he was also accused of attacking the Greek judiciary system and Greek Orthodox Church and its clergy. In **"Lesson 34"**, his unapologetic prosaic language readily denounces the traditional solemnity of the customs of the church while describing the way the prisoners respond to the prison rule which states that they have to attend the church services, "Prisoners

call the church the priest shop...Prisoners never listen to the psalmodies...Prisoner's don't have the money to buy candles. Some prisoners attend the mass in pyjamas and slippers. This is considered to be quite stylish..." (Qtd. in Taylor 15). The **"Lesson 37"** rings with his idea of prison homosexuality in which religious images and symbols are dealt with sexual implications. The work is replete with hard hitting black humour which allows him to speak: "Cigarette burnings, as a torture, probably don't go back any farther than the cigarette itself..." (Qtd. in Taylor 16). The poetic weapons of Petropoulos in treating the issues of gender and sexuality are humour, parody and sarcasm. Indeed, Elias Petropoulos shows that to speak about gender is nowhere restricted but to speak about gender in and with poetry and with humour is loathsome. Elias Petropoulos' language, slanderous and seditious in nature, shows the rude aspects of gender in Greek underworld society and it questions the fact which so long remained ignored. Black humour, an Anti-poet's common tool to demystify the ossified notion of poetry, is extensively used by Elias Petropoulos in *The Good Thief's Manual*. For example, in **"Lesson 21"**, he writes "The Torturer boils two eggs well. As soon as they are boiling hot, he thrusts them up under the armpits of the Tortured suspect, who squirms convulsively. After the Torture, the Torturer peels the eggs and eats them..." (Qtd. in Taylor 16). The true weapons of Elias Petropoulos for revealing the truth behind the judiciary nexus are humour, sarcasm and parody. In an anti-poetic manner Elias Petropoulos asserts in **"Lesson 26"**: "I doubt if the notion of Crime exists for Minerals, Plants, or Animals. According to our legislative wise men, only Man commits a crime." (Qtd. in Taylor 18).

Through his work Elias Petropoulos questions any haughty pre-conception on gender. Petropoulos practices in his works a quotidian language with coarse words. In his works we descend into an un-metaphorical world of sexuality. The works of Petropoulos always remain as anti-romantic and anti-establishment propaganda which raise questions on issues about which we still feel embarrassed and uncomfortable in this twenty-first century. In **'The Bordello'**, he unambiguously says, "We cannot formulate a definition of prostitution because we are not able to perceive clearly what happens, exactly, between the prostitute and her client..." (Qtd. in Taylor 19). Truly, the laconic and precise style of Petropoulos brings the reader close to the reality. In works such as *Kaliarda* or 'Body', gender presentation, gender identification and sexuality are comprehensively put together to evoke a serious parody which is based on ironic disparities between symbols and their referents. His radical choice of subjects, gender being a prominent one among them, makes the reader contemptuous towards the poetic protagonist and the reading process of his haunting lines involves no cathartic quality.

Petropoulos' language and gesture in his treatment of the issues of gender and sexuality may be banal or even comic, yet they show a deeply felt battle against restrictions of human condition. The language of anti-poetry, as practised by Petropoulos creates the psychic separation between the protagonist of the poem and its observer.

In spite of offering a photographic realism, the works of Elias Petropoulos are, by no means, documents on sociology. What makes Petropoulos an anti-poet is his ever present humour which always holds him up to reality. The humour used by the poet allows him to take a poetic stance which is objective and detached from any particular association. Calling the works of Petropoulos 'pornographic' will mean overlooking the presentation of crude reality of Greek underworld subculture. If he is seditious and subversive, it is due to his clarity, humour and unrefined language. Petropoulos tears the cloak of our preconception on gender with his untiring search for truth.

The fundamental difference between traditional notion of poetry and anti-poetry lies in the treatment of language. Anti-poetry suggests, quoting Grossman, "...every poetic thesis (defect) has its anti-poetic anti-thesis (Virtue)." (Grossman 90). The objective of anti-poetry is to split the poetic appendages such as metaphors, vocabulary, diction, imagery, to simplify the poetic language. Anti-poetry is seen as a result of the mutual understanding between the anti-poet and the readers. In spite of having contempt and contradictions at his heart, Elias Petropoulos argues for the constant renovation and renewal of the poetic tools. He opposes any belletrist decorum and favours the unornamented poetic language.

Any theoretical speculation on anti-poetry is moderated through a characteristic irony which is found in almost all serious assertions on the value of anti-poetry. Petropoulos establishes cynically formal relations with the readers yet he constantly invites them to participate in the adventure of anti-poetry. He not only condemns the ossified notion of poetry for its elitism, irrelevance and failure to communicate to the reader but also takes pleasure in sarcastically highlighting its all probable defects. Moreover, he vehemently directs his barbs of irony against his own inflated poetic pomposity and undermines his proclamations of domineering of poetic theory with incongruous language. The critics of Elias Petropoulos are mocked in such a way that apparent condemnation is turned into a perfect defence of his poetry. Therefore, the thrust of the poet lies in his determination to provoke the reader until he shares the responses of the poet to human existence. He understands this to be the ultimate objective of poetry and believes that only the quotidian spoken

language, devoid of any metaphorical overtones or anachronism, can sufficiently communicate to achieve that objective.

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