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To the Rhythm of Kyriakos Charalambides’ *Dionysus* – to the ‘Pulse of Life’

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Abstract

Kyriakos Charalambides’ references to primeval myth, vivid images and eloquent linguistic choices aim to renew things in a magical way. This article focuses, first, on showing the richness of the vocabulary of the erudite poet and on exploring how the poem *Dionysus* is framed by carefully chosen words that create striking images which mark the rhythmic character of the poem. Second, this article sheds light on intertextual connections. These semantic bridges take the reader on an intertextual stroll where the most unexpected encounters with poetic forefathers transpire: there are intertextual references to Aristophanes, more specifically his play *The Birds*, to Dionysios Solomos and also to the concept of the “idea that rises steeply” and whose “rings gradually ripple outwards” (Politis 1961: 208) that is none other than Poetry. Concurrently, the sounds that can be heard bring to mind the Dionysian throb, the frenzied dance, the exhilaration. Moreover, *Dionysus* constituted a hymn to the joy of living. And it is precisely this that the poet wants to make manifest through the symbolism of Dionysus: ‘the pulse of life’.

Keywords

Dionysus, intertexts, vocabulary, Dionysian throb

The standard references in the poetry of Kyriakos Charalambides include history, tradition and knowledge of Classical Antiquity as well as events that marked his homeland – “that mythical land” as he himself wrote in *Ολισθηρός Ιστός* – “that gave birth to Aphrodite, went through hell and high water and acquired a steely sensibility whose tenderness and strength imprint themselves on cultural works”.¹ Thus a significant part of his poetry references Ancient Greek myth,² something evident in his recent poetry collections. One of the fundamental issues the poet concerns himself with is the tragic aspect of human existence which is mainly reflected in binaries: truth/lie, life/death, eros/psyche, eros/death.³

Personal mythology

According to Wolfgang Schadewaldt, Homer creatively reworked the material that “was given” to him through creative appropriation.⁴ Similarly, Charalambides’ ‘mythopoetic’⁵ technique simulates the Homeric technique of reflection because the poet likes to recall myths. Charalambides often has recourse to archetypal myth and transforms it or subverts it by converting it into ‘personal’ literary myth, nevertheless retaining the fundamental mythic model that he renews with various layers and extensions. He, thus, generates radials that “endow things with a different meaning so that they can be interwoven into life and the human condition”⁶ by adapting the mythical method.⁷ Primordial

1 Charalambides (2009a: 151).

2 Myth is word, speech, rumour, report, narrative, story, diegesis, fabula [folktale], account, legend. Cf. Liddell – Scott – Jones (1992: s.v. *μῦθος*). See also Anagnostopoulou (2002: 62). Richard Buxton (2002: 38) defines the Ancient Greek myth as “a narrative about the deeds of gods and heroes and their interrelations with ordinary mortals”.

3 Christodoulidou (2019: 21).

4 Schadewaldt (1994: 236).

5 The term ‘mythopoetic’ is used by Maronitis (1995) with reference to Charalambides’ poetry.

6 Christodoulidou (2019: 95).

7 The mythical method is “an objective correlation that has the form of a mythical tale” (Vagenas 1979: 153). “This means that while the objective correlative [...] is characteristic of all poetry from Antiquity up to our times, the mythical method is characteristic of the literature of a post-mythic era. More precisely, our contemporary literature, the one produced in the Anglo-Saxon space that started with the emergence of modernism (Joyce, Pound, Eliot) and in the Greek space with Seferis.” (Vagenas 1998: 59) “In manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. [...] It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance

myth becomes the source material for literary production and a criterion for the receiver's apprehension of the text. "It permeates all literary genres and forms, creating new plot and correspondingly new meanings. In this manner, the force of archaic mythic narration is recognizable along with its capacity to adapt to each new cultural environment" as Zacharias Sifalekis remarked.⁸

Following the sayings/directives of Claude Levi-Strauss ("Myths reflect upon themselves in men's minds.") and of Theon ("Myth is spurious speech depicting the truth."),⁹ Charalambides often poses the anguished question: what is poetic truth after all?¹⁰ He indirectly answers by saying that there are many truths; the truth is that which has volume and is composed of material in all its fluctuations and different levels. This is in keeping with the fact that man is a contradictory creature and life continues to be built despite its contradictions.

At times Charalambides employs the mythical method,¹¹ daring the reader to activate their imagination through allusive signs, without being offered the historic myth in its entirety. Charalambides' dialogue with Ancient Greek letters as a 'regenerative transmission'¹² is transposed to a deeper level, in addition to the surface one. According to Pierre Albouy,¹³ "literary myth consists of historic myth, which the author uses and reshapes freely, but also of the new meanings added to it. When such meaning is not added to the facts of tradition, there is no literary myth."

This article aims to explore the ways in which the poet uses the primary ancient material, the way, that is, in which the myth of Dionysus is transformed and represented within the poetic metatext. Does the poet fully or partially adopt the myth, or does he reject its ideological connotations completely? We will also look into whether other themes and patterns are included "during

to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." (T. S. Eliot, *Ulysses, Order and Myth. Dial 75, 1923, 483. In Vagenas 1979: 152).*

8 Sifalekis (1994: 22).

9 "Despite the definition of myth that the philosopher Theon provided us, 'myth is spurious speech depicting the truth', the question remains: What is the truth and how could it be considered outside the very myth in which it is inescapably interwoven? And what is myth other than something tightly bound to history and the truth that takes its light and shape from the person who sets it in motion. [...] Nevertheless, the fascination of myth resides precisely in its unreliability that emits glints of poetry." Charalambides (2009b: 159).

10 Giorgos Seferis in his poem *Ελένη* poses the question as well: "Where is the truth?"

11 After the mythical method was established by Yeats, Joyce and Eliot, it was later adopted by Seferis in order to use myth in a modernist way and creatively combine past and present. Cf. also the footnote n. 7.

12 This is a term used by Ramfos (2007: 13).

13 Albouy (?1998: 12).

their re-working and what, finally, determines [the poet's] choices".¹⁴ Mainly, though, this article concerns itself with this question: if myth is the outline, what is the deeper meaning?¹⁵

Dionysus - allusion and association

In the homonymous poem, Charalambides proceeds from the myth according to which the god Dionysus, a nomadic and vagabond god, symbol of the overthrow of the established order,¹⁶ went to Thebes, in human form, to impose his cult and there he collided with his blood relative Pentheus - symbol of rational order.¹⁷ The King of Thebes was doomed to a tragic end because Dionysus ensnared him in a treacherous fashion that led him to his death in his own mother's hands - Agave who was seized by madness and as a Maenad she mistook him for a lion and slaughtered him. I quote the poem:

Διόνυσος¹⁸

Μνήμη Ηλία Λάγιου

Φορώντας πορφυρά κρασιά
και λέξεις διαμπερείς,
κισσούς στα φύλλα των ματιών
και το ζουνάρι μιας κρεμμύδας
ασώτευε σε κρεμαστών θουνών καληνωρίσματα.

14 Charalambides (2009d: 275).

15 Christodoulidou (2019: 16).

16 "Dionysus represents the irrational component of man and Dionysian myths represent the conflict between logic and the social contract on the one hand and feelings on the other." Kirk (2006: 117).

17 In Euripides' *Bacchae*, Apollo's soothsayer Tiresias "embodies in the city the wise moderation of the elders, a wisdom somewhat conventional". In vain he attempted to bring Pentheus to reason, to make him back down and cease opposing the establishment of Dionysiac worship because Dionysus "discovered the liquid drink of the grape cluster [...], introduced it to mortals, that which stops wretched humans from suffering, when they are filled with the flow of the wine, and gives sleep as forgetfulness of the evils of the day, nor is there any other remedy for sufferings". Vernant (2009: 170). Cf. Eur. *Bacchae* (279-283): *θότρυος ὑγρὸν πῶμ' ἤϊρε κάσσηνέγκατο / θνητοῖς, ὃ παύει τοὺς ταλαιπώρους βροτοὺς / λύπης, ὅταν πλησθῶσιν ἀμπέλου ῥοῆς, / ὕπνον τε λήθην τῶν καθ' ἡμέραν κακῶν / δίδωσιν, οὐδ' ἔστ' ἄλλο φάρμακον πόνων.* Seaford (ed.) (1996: 82-83).

18 Charalambides (2019: 569).

Ήταν δεν ήταν τριέτικος και ταιριαστός
 με την αιώρα¹⁹ θραψερών θεομάχων.
 Η βαρβατιά του φούντωνε στο σάλεμα
 δεντρογαλιών και γιόμορφων στρουθίων.

Άξαφν' ο Βούτης και ο Πενθέυς
 του θέρισαν φτενά, λυμπά
 μ' ένα βροχόλουρο.

Καμιά δεν ασπρογάλιαζε
 μέσα του βαρυγκόμια. Ήξερε
 – αρχαύλης ήταν – ήξερε θα φύτρωναν
 χιλιάδες αχαμνά σε γη και σ' ουρανούς.
 Ο Εφταπάρθενος θ' ανέμιζε Χορός
 μ' ολολυγή και κρόταλα ορχηστρίδας.
 Θά 'χε καταλαγιάσ' η στενοχώρια
 κατάνακρα κατωφερούς ιδέας.
 Ημολίες θα μάζευαν αιγωλιούς
 κι αμπέλια με φτερά θ' ακολουθούσαν.

2003/2005

Dionysus
In memory of Ilias Lagios

Dressed in scarlet wines
and lucid words,
ivry on the lids
and girdle-belt of squill.

19 Most probably this is an allusion to the *Αιώρα* [Aiora, the Swing] – a Dionysiac festival: "Girls swung on swings suspended from trees: it was said that the ritual was performed in memory of a girl who committed suicide. Erigone was from Attica and she hung herself from a tree after her father Icarius' death. The latter was murdered by his fellow villagers because he advised them to drink wine and, when they got drunk, they believed he had poisoned them. For reasons that are not completely comprehensible the swing is a charm of fertility that could also have its parallel elsewhere. This swing must have appeared as if demanding some kind of explanation and the story of Erigone bears at the very least a connection to Dionysus from whom her father must have acquired the grapes. Nonetheless, it seems that the story exists independently of the ritual of which it is only a small part." Kirk (2006: 217–218).

*He vagabonds
prodigally among greetings of sheer mountains.*

*He was hardly three years old and suited to
the Aiora of well-fed theomachists.
His virility flushed at the slithering of the Balkan whip snakes
and beautiful sparrows.*

*Suddenly Butes and Pentheus
reaped his pudenda and balls
with a noose.*

*Not one grumbling arose inside him. He knew,
he was a shepherd who knew that
thousands of balls would grow on earth and in the sky.
The seven-time virgin Chorus would flutter
with ululation and orchestra rattles.
Troubles would settle down
to the very furthest corner of sloping thoughts.
Schooners would amass Aegolius owls
and vineyards with wings would follow.*

(Transl. by Galatea Dimitriou)

Personal experience is present in the poem, confirming Charalambides' pronouncement that one does not make art for art's sake. Rather than existing in and of itself, then, a poem is in dialogue with life. In this way the motto of the poem is dedicated to the memory of Ilias Lagios; in addition, the poem was finished the year of the artist-poet's death, that is two years after the first draft. Instinctively the poet felt the need to dedicate it – after his loss – in the form of a farewell indicative of his recognition of the poet's merits²⁰ but also because Charalambides' Dionysus “perfectly suits Lagios' poetic nature” as he “lends, as a figure, an additional note to the poem itself,” indirectly or directly, that is by “identifying thematically with the persona of Dionysus”.²¹ Subversive and unorthodox in both his life and his art, Lagios was made for Dionysian madness. With

20 Charalambides met with Lagios only once, in Athens. He admired him greatly as a poet and held the conviction that poetry lost “a resplendent star” with the death of Lagios. Charalambides also observed that, in spite of the fact that he was already esteemed, Lagios deserved even wider acknowledgement.

21 Charalambides (April 2017, private communication with the poet).

this dedication, the poet wanted to hint at their mysterious rapport even though their paths had crossed just once. Nevertheless, he knew his work well and, moreover, the two poets are linked by the eroticism of their poetic language.

Somewhere in-between the lines of verse we can detect fragments related to the Lagios' personality deriving from mysterious channels. It is well-known that Charalambides is governed by a strong sense of justice. As such he is occasionally compelled by the "need to justify the existence of a person for the reason that their worth is exactly what they wish to keep secret. Naturally each person's name is engraved on the stone of life, as it was conceived by the poetic imagination and vision of Saint John of the Apocalypse."²²

The poet maintains that Lagios "brims over with unrestrained talent but belonged in some way to the family of Faustian 'accursed' poets whom life made writhe (and perhaps poetry as well)". He believes that "possibly his very own demons pushed him towards the abyss, the same ones that engendered his oeuvre,"²³ because he tried to fit all the Dionysiac elements of life into his work, which constitutes the essence of the poem. The poem indirectly includes partying, erotic ecstasy and Dionysiac hedonism. It is implied that Lagios also lived a life consistent with the Dionysiac worldview. Besides, what Charalambides' poetry investigates is the mystery of human existence. Lagios had a special angle on life and enjoyed overturning the *status quo*, attempting to imbue life with Dionysiac elements through joy, liveliness, and climax: inebriation – liberation – catharsis – eros – happiness.

In this poem, the Dionysiac twofold character absented itself (song/wailing, etc.). Perhaps the Dionysiac duality is evoked only extratextually and indirectly, by means of a dedicatory motto in honour of Lagios. However, the poem promotes the joy of living, delight in life. It is a poem that is exhilaratingly contemplative.

The signals that metonymically target love, its lifegiving force but also life itself and its joyful manifestations,²⁴ are also obvious and they are emphasized by their connotations. Dionysus stands for all the above-mentioned because the lyre-playing god has an affinity with the life force. The erotic factor infiltrates the poem through the semiology of the compound word *εφταπάρθενος*, whose ambiguous and polyprismatic meaning on one hand points to the Pleiades, the seven daughters of Atlas, and on the other denotes a dance of virgins. The first

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Moreover, an essential characteristic of Dionysiac worship was that it banished from man "all the sorrows of the day". Kopidakis (1995: 61).

part of the compound word suggests that “the number seven is the distributor of life, according to Hippocrates”,²⁵ whereas Charalambides intends for the second part to be charged with the heat-inducing breath of love.²⁶ Consequently, he refers to the dance of the virgins with all its accompanying innuendos²⁷ that unavoidably imply the erotic act and are in keeping with the Dionysiac element given that the coordinates of the poem are bestowed by Dionysus who is the mouthpiece of eros, dance, song and the attendant ebullitions and ecstasies.

Linguistic euphoria

Charalambides articulates his poetry without hesitating to go against the grain and, in keeping with this practice, his reception of Ancient Greek myth is unorthodox. This nonconformist approach enables him to “impel the reader to self-regulate with regards to important issues in life”.²⁸

The poet leaves nothing to chance; references to primeval myth, vivid images and eloquent linguistic choices not only aim to renew things in a magical way

25 Charalambides (May 2021, private communication with the poet).

26 Charalambides is often playful and tirelessly ingenious with words. For example, he plays with the two constituents of the word *εφταπάρθενος* ('seven times a virgin'): “The Eftaparthenos Dance is the dance of seven virgins that leads them to their relative constellations. In parallel, it is also a dance that is utterly virginal. The use of words in poetry functions in an ambiguous and often polysemantic way. What matters is for someone to see how a word works within the poem and what associative interconnections and references it attempts to establish. The intertextual elements, even if the poet had not thought of them, exist and function in the background. Poetry always emerges from the ‘unknown’ with an advantage (intended or not).” (Charalambides, May 2021, private communication with the poet). It was his comment when I pointed out to him the article by Kyriakidis (1925: 490) where it is noted that “the unforgettable Politis found the origin of the denomination in the seven stars of the Great Bear constellation”. Charalambides refutes it stating: “But I confess that this interpretation is not clear to me. [...] I mean that it would also be possible to name them ‘seven girls’ but I think for common people the name *Eftaparthenos Dance* is difficult. Because first the image of stars circling around a pole as a dance is, I think, foreign to the popular imagination and second, the name and the image of seven virgins seem more religious than folkloric. Of course, Ancient Greek names include those for the star *Παρθένο[ς]* ('Virgin') but here as well the image does not seem to derive from common folk. The name *Eftaparthenos Dance* for the Great Bear constellation was recorded by the renowned epigraphist Hiller von Gaertringen, in Miletus. [...] The name also reappears, as Politis already observed, in an enigmatic arithmetical chant, but without seeming like it belongs to any kind of constellation.”

27 It should be recalled that in Plato's *Symposium* half-nude girls aflame with life danced to the delight of the dinner guests.

28 Charalambides (2017c).

but also to stimulate states that lead to the first primordial spasm of life, the original sense of things, that is “to reinstate man in his primordial sanctity”.²⁹ At the same time, with myth as a starting point, he puts emphasis on words, their auditory and semantic nuance, and attempts to perform a “reinstatement of their mythical element in the network of life’s mystery”.³⁰ Through the solidity of words, he wishes to ward off death and extend an invitation to life.

Consequently, the vocabulary that appears in the poem carries special weight and consists in the dominant index of the poetic style of Charalambides. We can trace the *λέξεις διαμπερείς* ('lucid words') of manic Dionysus that surpass everything logical and overthrow the established order.³¹ Words form a substantial component of the poem. They are malleable, ethereal words that breezily come and go and likewise adapt to all directions, because they are governed by internal movement and in his poetry assume physical and metaphysical substance. They are words that refer to Dionysiac rites, but they are also solid, ironclad words that outline Charalambides the poet and his recreative rapport with his own poetic output and with poetry in general, but also with divine inspiration and art.³²

The creator himself stated that “those words together compose a system that takes shape along the way as the poem discloses to the creator his hidden capabilities [and how] poetic creation has to do with knowledge of the self, that is with one’s secret forces from one’s inner world that surface in the act [of composing], that is as they are performed, at the very moment of their creative emergence in an almost magical way”.³³

This leads to the assumption that his poem *Dionysus* encompasses self-referential and self-knowledge elements, an assumption reinforced by the Dionysiac rites that the poem alludes to and which are in harmony with the way in which

29 Idem (2009a: 142).

30 Idem (2017a).

31 Idem (April 2017, private communication with the poet).

32 “Thus, the original inspiration came from outside, *from the gods*. However, the poet is not only a mouthpiece for the divine word. The elaboration of raw material requires practice, hard work and technical skill. Consequently, poetry is at the same time a providential gift and a personal achievement. According to Pindar is ‘Μοισάν δόσον’ [‘gift of the Muses’] (line 7) and ‘γλυκύν καρπὸν φρενός’ [‘sweet fruit of my mind’] (line 8). The poet is possessed by a divine spirit but also remains a builder of verse/craftsman, that is an artisan [...]. The Muses were Dionysus’ nurses, therefore this god is *leader of the Muses* and of *prophetic song*. The audacious conception of a poet inspired and possessed by God, who composes his work imbued by Muses and pronouncing prophesies, seems to have originated in the Dionysiac cult.” Kopidakis (1995: 15).

33 Charalambides (April 2017, private communication with the poet).

the poet conceives of “poetry as a ritualistic act”.³⁴ Furthermore, the richness of the vocabulary finds itself in perfect coexistence with the vivid images that thanks to the carefully-selected words are depicted in an imaginative way. A beloved habit of Charalambides is to deploy words that sometimes create antitheses,³⁵ like the compound word *ασπρογάλιαζε* which “is in fact not compatible with *βαρβατιά* and *βαρυγκόμια* which we imagine as dark and rough, in contrast with *ασπρογάλιαζε* which literally translates to *whitened*”.³⁶

In this way he polishes things and produces aesthetically appealing images, adding another dimension to his poetry. Scholarly terminology blends harmoniously with typical words from colloquial Greek, folk forms and idiomatic expressions that recall the context of the poem. For example, the Cretan idiomatic term *καληνωρίσματα*, that is positioned masterfully in the poem, denotes the soul of the countryside, the warm welcome of pure people. Moreover, the poem is framed by words that comprise an emblem of Dionysus,³⁷ like for instance the ancient words *αιδία/αχαμνά* which are inscribed in the poem as *φτενά* and *λυμπά*, idiomatic terms that are connotative of Cypriot indigeneness and regionality. The linguistic variety lends itself to a creative intermingling that serves the poetic function, allowing us to trace the hidden meaning in things. Words stream out to be incorporated into the spirit of Dionysiac worship; as such, Dionysianism is transported to words as well.

What prevails in the poem are nouns, adjectives and adverbs skillfully integrated into the Dionysian poetic landscape like *τριέτικος*³⁸ rather than *τριετής*, “with reinforcement of its attribute as adjective with the derivative morpheme *-ικος* as well as changing the stress”;³⁹ *θραψερός* instead of *καλοθρεμμένος*, *αρχαύλης* rather than *βοσκός* to convey the notion of the male member alluded to with sly poetic humor – winking at the reader – suggesting that he has sturdy testicles. Charalambides plucks the word *αρχαύλης* from the *όλθος* of Modern Greek dialects emphasizing the first part *αρχ-* to lend it a libidinal innuendo;⁴⁰ *ολολυγή* in place of *ολοφυρμός* (‘lamentation’, to denote ululation or wavering

34 *Idem* (2009a: 142).

35 Contrasting images, according to Aristotle (see Lypourlis (ed.) 2004: 1410b), is one of the most widely used rhetorical devices.

36 Charalambides (April 2017, private communication with the poet).

37 As is commonly known, Dionysus appears with the emblem of a phallus.

38 In Cyprus sheep farmers call two-year-old sheep *διέτικο*.

39 Tzitzilis (2008: 235).

40 It is not the first time Charalambides dared to exploit libidinal overtones; it is possible that it is his method to ‘consecrate’ through poetry words that provoke awkwardness or that are not used for modesty’s sake. He himself considers them a component of language and does not sweep them under the carpet.

vocal sound), ημιολίες instead of γολέτες, the Cretan *κατάνακρα* instead of *εντελώς στην άκρη* and the equally Cretan *καληνωρίσματα* (greeting expressing pleasure of receiving someone, *καλή ώρα*) in the place of *φιλοφρονήσεις*, compliment expressing cordiality. Furthermore, he incorporates words that refer to lively images borrowed from nature: *αιγωλιούς*,⁴¹ 'wild rapacious birds' whose screech is associated with ill omen and death. It is probable that the poet associates Aegolius owls with Bacchantes, nurses, women who followed the god Dionysus and were characterized by their frenzied violent conduct: *δεντρογαλή* (*Hierophis gemonensis*, or Balkan whip snake) is a species of snake. The *δεντρογαλιά*⁴² (*δέντρον* 'tree' + *γαλή* 'cat' = 'treecat') winds around the tree like ivy, lying in wait for the beautiful sparrows (*τα όμορφα στρουθία*), "eats flesh, rouses the living then consumes it:"⁴³ the law of nature is sovereign. These are 'moving', bright Greek words in an attempt at osmosis – completely harmonious co-existence of the Greek metropolis and the Greeks on the peripheries of Cyprus, Crete and other Greek territories, namely specific islands, like, for example, the word *αρχαύλης* that comes from an idiolect that can be heard on Sifnos, Syros, Rhodes and Serifos. Charalambides remarked that sometimes words magnetically stuck or affixed to the poem, pulled by their own impulse; words which have their own world that is subject to a rhythmic cause.⁴⁴

41 The two dots or diaeresis (trema) on the -ι- (*αιγωλιούς*) is the poet's own choice for reasons of internal rhythm. Likewise, the use of diaeresis serves to accent the alliteration of the consonant [l] in the verses *Ημιολίες θα μάζευαν αιγωλιούς / κι αμπέλια με φτερά θ' ακολουθούσαν* ["Schooners would amass Aegolius owls / and vineyards with wings would follow"]. In the Greek text, the triple repetition of the syllable [li] (in the middle of the word) contributes to the organization of what the poet intended as rhythm and meter. In an interview with Anta Katsiki-Gkivalou he notes: "The word is a symbol and its articulation demands coordination with its essential pulse, where its rhythmically purified form elevates it to the spelling of its self-righteousness." Charalambides (2017c).

42 See also the interesting select affinity between the lines of Yfantis' and Charalambides' poems: *Την πράσινη δεντρογαλιά την βακχική μου ζώνη / πάτησα με τις ρόδες μου όταν με το τιμόνι / έτρεχα τέλος για να βρω στο φίδι της ασφάλτου / που ζει στα μαγικά βουνά / Ξηρόμερου και Βάλτου. / Με ζώνη τη δεντρογαλιά και σκίουρους στους ώμους / ώ του Πενθέα θάσκιαζα όλους τους αστυνόμους. / Μ' αλλί θεοί ένα τρακτέρ σκότωσε την Αγαύη / κι έκτοτε πια δεντρογαλιές κανείς εδώ δεν ράβει.* ["My bacchic belt of green *dendrogalia* / I drove over it with my tires when I was at the wheel / At the end I ran to find the pavement snake / that lives in the magic mountains / Xiromero and Valtos. / *Dendrogalia* for my belt and squirrels on my shoulders / Oh, I would have terrified all the policemen of Pentheus! / Oh, God, what a catastrophe – a tractor crushed Agave / No one here stitches *dendrogalias* anymore."]. Yfantis (2007).

43 Charalambides (April 2017, private communication with the poet).

44 Ibid.

The language deploys its semantic adroitness and its timbre, or tone color, in such a way as to “secure the euphony and sweetness of words”.⁴⁵ The reiteration of the same vocalic sound, the alliteration of -ιώ/-ιό but also the alliteration of -ων (word ending in -ον) three times in the fourth verse of the second strophe (δεντρογαλιών και γιόμορφων στρουθίων) have an emphatic indicative as well as aesthetic function that along with the rhythmic pattern created by the alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables – due to the poet’s musical sensibility – ultimately produces an euphonic musical result as well as rhythmic and acoustic harmony.⁴⁶

Intertextual allusions

Also distinctive in his work are direct and indirect intertextual references. Ivory (κισσούς στα φύλλα των ματιών) refers to the thyrsus “staff of giant fennel plant with a tuft of ivy at the crown that were special implements in Dionysiac worship and transport”⁴⁷ that the Bacchantes of Dionysus threw onto the ground. The contemporary poet evokes by association the song of the dance in Euripides’ play *The Bacchae* (verses 99–104):

ἔτεκεν δ’ ἀνίκα Μοῖραι
τέλεσαν, ταυρόκερων⁴⁸ θεὸν
στεφάνωσέν τε δρακόντων
στεφάνοις, ἔνθεν ἄγραν θηρότροφον
μαινάδες ἀμφιβάλλονται πλοκάμοις⁴⁹

*And he gave birth, when the Fates
brought completion, to the bull-horned god,
and crowned him with crowns of snakes,
for which reason the maenads cast the prey
that feeds on beasts around their hair.*

(Transl. by Galatea Dimitriou)

The antistrophe *and vineyards with wings* brings to mind *The Birds* by Aristophanes – from where flows the joy of life – and consequently the legendary

45 Charalambides (2009c: 313).

46 Christodoulidou (2016: 294).

47 Kirk (2006: 116–117).

48 He is also called ταυροκέρατος “because he often appeared in the form of a bull steeped in fertility and force”. Kirk (2006: 119).

49 Seaford (ed.) (1996).

production by Karolos Koun in 1975 featuring Yannis Tsarouchis' stage design and costumes that vividly captured "the pulse of Dionysiac life that scatters fecundity and delight".⁵⁰ Moreover, Dionysus is a masculine god of perpetual fertility. The syncretism between paganism and Christianity is evident while it contributes to the unlocking of the polysemantic symbolism of the god Dionysus.⁵¹ On one side the wings are connected to angels and the Christian faith (metaphorically we could also say that thought and even life itself take flight) while on the other side vineyards are associated with the god Dionysus and the Dionysiac cult.⁵² Lest we forget that divine inebriation represented the sacred Delphic sanctuary itself – there where the oracle Pythia delivered prophecies with the statue of Dionysus next to the statue of Apollo: the coexistence of the irrational and the rational.

The verses by Charalambides *Η βαρβατιά του φούντωνε στο σάλεμα / δεντρογαλιών και γιόμορφων στρουθίων* ["His virility flushed at the slithering of the Balkan whip snakes / and beautiful sparrows"] seem to echo the lines from the poem *Melenia* by Palamas from the collection *Οι Βωμοί* where a similar thematic correspondence can be traced:

*Ἡρθες. Μια φούρια η χάρη σου, βακχίδα κι η ομορφιά σου.
Τα χέρια σου, α! τα δάχτυλά σου, τ' ασημένια αρπάγια,
δεντρογαλιές τα μπράτσα σου κουλουριαστά προσμέναν
κάποια ζωή να τιναχτούν να την απορουφήξουν.*⁵³

*You came. A Fury your charm, and your beauty a Bacchante.
Your hands! Oh, your fingers, your silver hooks,
your arms, Balkan whip snakes coiled in wait
for some living thing to pounce on and suck up completely.*

(Transl. by Galateia Dimitriou)

50 Charalambides (April 2017, private communication with the poet).

51 In support of our view with regard to the creative combining of Christian and pagan elements – as it is indicated intertextually – it should be noted that in Paphos on a Roman floor mosaic in the home of a wealthy idolater (*The House of Aion*) that dates to after c. 318 AD, Dionysus is depicted as the Infant Christ with a halo around his head sitting on Hermes' lap while the Theogony is also portrayed as the personification of the birth of the god.

52 "The grapevine and the wings are theologically charged and add sacred wine and angelic wings to the human experience of *Διονυσιασμός* [Dionysiasmos, or Dionysian transport]." Charalambides (April 2017, private communication with the poet).

53 Palamas (1960: 98).

The dialogue with Dionysios Solomos and the intertextual resonance that is detectable in Charalambides' poem is interesting. One tangible example concerns the ambiguous phrase *κατάνανκρα κατωφερούς ιδέας* ["to the very furthest corner of sloping thoughts"]. By way of self-commentary, Charalambides remarks in relation to this phrase that "imagistically brings to mind an idea rolling downhill". I wonder if this is reminiscent of Dionysian revelers tearing down the mountainside towards the prairie, or maybe it recalls by association Dionysios Solomos' interest in an "idea that rises steeply" and whose "rings gradually ripple outwards".⁵⁴

Concluding remarks

However, it is also a polysemantic poem – a fact that emerges through the tracing of the hidden meaning in things. Speech is inspired by a philosophical tone; the poetry of Charalambides is meditative, profound and anthropocentric. In the conclusion of the poem, an unusual metaphysical aspect is perceptible. The final lines – philosophical and existential⁵⁵ – conceal the inescapable event of death and, consequently, a feeling of the tragic aspect of things that is consistent with Charalambides' world view. He implies the 'finale of life' that, according to Charalambides, is our "assimilation by the universe" or it is born of "our disintegration and contraction with the universal matter that surpasses its materiality and integrates itself into the realm of Ideas".⁵⁶ Justin Popović expressed it very aptly as the "immobile Rock of the universe",⁵⁷ convinced that the method of perceiving the world follows each person's individual development. The poet maintains that ultimately "Poetry has only one face which is Everything",⁵⁸ adding: "My Dionysus embodies everything. I cannot manage to

54 Charalambides (April 2017, private communication with the poet). It should be noted that this particular verb formulation comes from the *Contemplations* of Solomos. Politis (ed.) (1961: 208).

55 He himself believes that this dimension of his work has not been widely studied. Charalambides (April 2017, private communication with the poet).

56 Idem (May 2021, private communication with the poet).

57 Popović (2001).

58 "Even if poetry is reduced to an oppressed colony in our digital empire, even then poetry will find a way to express itself and unlock the structure of the universe with mathematical equations, ultimately the structure of the universe of poetry itself." Charalambides (2017a). "I've laboured to grasp something of the universal laws of life and the analogies between things. It might sound paradoxical but in fact 'a certain something' deep within me compelled me to push things to a degree that they dream and express to the extent possible a simulation of the universe with its hypothetical

say (given that words cannot express the ineffable) but I let them hover in the hope of rousing the intuitive faculty of the reader-listener."⁵⁹ Consequently, Charalambides uses Dionysus as an allegory to highlight, as a *poeta doctus*, the plurality of meanings and, in addition, to indicate the connections that nourish the philosophical tradition in the realm of Ideas.

All this transpires within a ravishing poetic context that strives to express the cosmogonic element or the essential rhythm of Dionysus. The sounds and the colors are present in the poem and contribute to the revivals of Dionysiac mysteries, invoking the Dionysiac rhythm – the surviving elements of which are found today in the *Ανθεστέρια* (Athenian festival in honor of Dionysus in the month of Anthesterion, February – March) and in *Απόκριες* (pre-Lenten Carnival season) in certain regions of Greece where Dionysiac ceremonial pageants are re-enacted. Likewise, we note processions with phallic symbols in Thebes where they took place in the 14th century during periods of drought.

Admittedly, it is an unorthodox poem as were all the Dionysiac revelries with their life-giving evocative images of ivy and goats: for that matter, the god of Bacchic frenzy himself was unorthodox and paradoxical with his 'eccentric attributes'.⁶⁰ The poem, with its euphoric tone, is dominated by ululations/wailing and rattles that allude to those who emit Bacchic shouts, the possessed Bacchantes, during the Dionysiac rites in the throes of inebriation, frenzied dance and ecstatic transport in order to "drive out dark worries" as Euripides wrote in his play *The Bacchae* (verse n. 282). Consequently, the poem is imbued by optimism and becomes an ode to the joy of living, an affirmation of life. Through the Dionysiac symbolism it is precisely this vigor that Charalambides wants to emphasize – the pulse of life: blood flowing through the veins.⁶¹

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coordinates. [...] The enterprise was bold but beneath there was a subterranean trajectory that I assumed I had to follow in order to empathetically express the ethereal nature of the collection of poems." Charalambides (2017b).

59 Charalambides (October 2021, private communication with the poet).

60 Vernant (2009: 109): "Dionysus disturbed the human and social order, revealing by way of his presence another facet of the sacred – no longer regular, steady and fixed but instead strange, incomprehensible and controversial [...] like a conjurer he plays with appearances and effaces boundaries between the imaginary and the real."

61 Charalambides (April 2017, private communication with the poet).

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