



**To cite this article:**

Deligianni, Efrosini. “‘Prophecy without Oracle’: A Deep Existential and Religious Poem by S. S. Harkianakis.” *The AALITRA Review: A Journal of Literary Translation* 15 (December 2020): 119-123.

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Australian Association for Literary Translation

**“Prophecy without Oracle”: A Deep Existential and Religious Poem by S. S. Harkianakis**

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*«Το ποίημα συλλέγεται με χούφτες τρεμάμενες  
όπως τα δάκρυα στο μαντήλι*

...  
*το μαργαριτάρι από πληγωμένο κοχύλι»*

*“The poem is collected with trembling palms,  
same as the tears on the handkerchief.*

...  
*the pearl from a wounded seashell”<sup>1</sup>*

Stylianos Harkianakis, the author of “Prophecy without Oracle”, is more than a noted poet of the Greek diaspora. He is also a distinguished academic and, above all else, the Archbishop and Primate of the Greek Orthodox Church in Australia. His varied, yet intersecting interests blend in his deep existential and religious poetry. Manos Loukakis, a Cretan philologist and the editor of Harkianakis’ anthology “Ο βαθμός της εκπλήξεως” [The degree of surprise], writes in the introduction of his edited volume:

*Ο ιερωμένος και ο ποιητής όταν συνεμφανίζονται, δεν πλησιάζουν απλώς. Ταυτίζονται. Και ταυτίζονται εν αίματι και αδιαίρετως, εφ’ όσον πριν ακόμη ανέβει στον άμβωνα ο κληρικός και πριν πιάσει το χαρτί και το μολύβι να γράψει ποίημα ο ποιητής, ποιητής και κληρικός είναι ένα και το αυτό ψυχικό ανεξήγητο του ανθρώπου.*

The clergyman and the poet, when they show up together, they do not simply come close. They become one. They unite undividedly in blood, since before the priest even steps on the pulpit, and before the poet grabs the paper and the pen to write a poem, poet and clergyman are essentially one and the same inexplicable mystery of the human soul.

(Harkianakis, *In Foreign Land* 10)

Harkianakis is a prolific writer. He has published twenty-eight collections of poetry in Greek. Out of his numerous accolades and awards, I will restrict myself to only two of the most prestigious ones: the Herder Prize for his contribution to European culture (1973) and the Academy of Athens Prize for Poetry (1980). Harkianakis’ dedication to his poetry does however come with pain and anguish, of the kind all writers are eerily familiar with, as the epigraph to this review clearly shows. Costas Montis, the great Greek Cypriot poet, writes to him, in one of the letters which they exchanged: “you hide a tragic, dramatic note whose hydrants you persistently try to close but a careful reader can certainly trace it” (“The Cypriot experience of Archbishop Poet Stylianos Harkianakis”).

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<sup>1</sup> (Harkianakis, *In Foreign Land* 204). All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

In “Prophecy without Oracle”, the poet talks about the perennial issues that haunt Greece, his motherland. It is the word ‘drachma’, the country’s old currency before the introduction of the euro, that betrays the specific reference of the word “τόπος” [land]. Otherwise, it could be about any other land plagued by similar troubles. The poet/prophet decrees that everything needs to be razed to the ground and be rebuilt.

The title is also very intriguing. The prophet has no oracle, no shrine dedicated to him; he seems to be treated as, or at least to consider himself, an outcast. Money and shallow pursuits have replaced moral values and spirituality in his land: fasting has been replaced by dieting, repentance by retreat, optimism by boastfulness, incense by narcotics, prayer by fatalism.

My overall goal in translation was to feel the pulse of the poem and transfer its intent, style, tone and context to the target language via a process of transcreation. I was guided in part by my fascination with Stylistics,<sup>2</sup> a study of linguistic style which lies at the interface of language and literature, and in part by a deep understanding of Harkianakis’ oeuvre as a whole. Cultural transference was facilitated by the fact that any culture-bound information is rather accessible to an English audience, or can be easily inferred via context.<sup>3</sup>

Following my educational background then in Linguistics, the language of the poem itself was my first point of departure: What lexical items are being chosen instead of any potential alternatives? Which recurring linguistic patterns can I identify? Are there any figures of speech in the poem?

To give a specific example, the repetition of the negator “δεν” [not] six times in a short poem of nineteen lines sets the tone for all that is constantly failing and needs to change in the author’s home country. It seems far from a coincidence that “not” is the first word in the Seferis quote that immediately precedes it. Harkianakis though has to offer his own explanation for his country’s insurmountable challenges, which is stated in the final stanza and is thus foregrounded; a number of substitutions need to take place for a new era to rise: dieting has to give way to fasting, fatalism to prayer and so on and so forth. The juxtaposition of these seemingly opposite words, and the fact that a parallel grammatical structure is used in all four antithetical pairs, highlights their importance in the poem’s analysis. It was this stark opposition that coloured my own interpretation and dictated the appropriate English word for the Greek equivalent. In the case of “ναρκωτικά” for example, I decided that the most suitable English translation was not “drugs” but “narcotics”: a general and all-encompassing term which refers to any substance that dulls the senses and relieves pain.

Beyond the lexical level, I familiarized myself with the life of Harkianakis and his other poems to get a broader picture of his work. The poet’s deep concern and agony over his fellow humans are also echoed in his other poems, which show high sensitivity and a deep sorrow for humanity:

*Μιὰ ζωὴ γράφοντας ἢ μιλώντας  
δὲν φιλοδόξησε τίποτε ἄλλο  
παρὰ νὰ δείξει ποῦ εἶναι πληγωμένος*

A whole life writing or talking

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<sup>2</sup> Translation from a stylistics perspective has been largely explored in Translation Studies (see e.g. Jean Boase-Beier 2014 inter alia).

<sup>3</sup> Contextual information in footnotes could also be used to avoid ambiguity e.g. for culture-specific words like *drachma* and *Ephialtes*.

He did not aspire for anything else  
Other than showing where is he hurt

(Harkianakis, *In Foreign Land* 55)

His words are interweaved with trauma and grief, not only for his own personal hurts, but also for the hurts of everyone around him. We see the agony of a man who serves God's will to offer hope, solace and relief from pain. In 1992, in his poem “Γλώσσα ελληνική” [Greek language] he concludes with the stanza:

*Η γλώσσα τούτη είναι κυμαινόμενη ψυχή  
μικρού λαού με σταθερό πεπρωμένο  
που έζησε την κάθε μέρα σαν μελλοθάνατος  
αγωνίζεται να διδάξει  
τους εγγύς και τους μακράν  
πως υψίστη αποστολή ήταν πάντα το όραμα  
όχι το πρόγραμμα.*

(Harkianakis, *The Degree of Surprise* 213)

The poem tells us that the Greek language, the author's native tongue, is the “wavering soul” of its people, of “a small country with unquivering destiny”. Harkianakis believes that Greece, which has always faced all sorts of threats and “lived every single day as if on death row”, is now fighting to teach everyone, either close or far away, about “the vision” rather than “the programme”, that is a spiritual and inspired form of living rather than a scheduled and predictable life. According to Nikoloudi-Souri, Harkianakis' poetry “is conceived in the whirlpool of worldly affairs, and points to values which confirm the concerns of the priest to console, to be of assistance, to understand his fellow humans, to overcome the stereotypes and restore order”, the famous ‘golden mean’, which lies at the very core of Greek civilization.

A thorough stylistic and contextual analysis of Harkianakis' poems offers a deep understanding of the author's literary universe and guides the translation process. In Harkianakis' poetry we see the multiple identities of a complex personality that cannot be easily pinned down: a priest of the highest order, a renowned academic, a Greek of the diaspora, a visionary. The input of each aspect of his personality is what makes his poetry so distinguished and unique; it is the perspective of a leader at the forefront of society.

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## ΧΡΗΣΜΟΣ ΧΩΡΙΣ ΜΑΝΤΕΙΟ

By S.S. Harkianakis

*Δεν θα τολμούσα να μιλήσω για προσευχές, κι  
όμως κάποτε σφάζουν ένα αρνί για τις θυσίες.  
Γ.Σεφέρης*

Ο τόπος αυτός δεν λυτρώνεται  
χωρίς ένα πάνδημο καθαρμό  
των πολιτών από τα γεννοφάσκια.  
Η αλλαγή των κομμάτων στην  
Κυβέρνηση  
η υποτίμηση της δραχμής με  
προπαγάνδα  
και ό,τι άλλα καλλυντικά διεθνούς  
χρήσεως  
δεν κατορθώνουν πια να  
παραπλανήσουν.  
Ο τόπος αυτός δεν λυτρώνεται  
αν δεν συλλαβίσει από την αρχή την  
Αλφαβήτα  
στο φαί, το περπάτημα, το χαμόγελο  
λειτουργίες πρωτόγονες που βουλίαξαν  
στη νύχτα  
του Εφιάλτη για το κατά κεφαλήν  
εθνικό εισόδημα.  
Ο τόπος αυτός δεν λυτρώνεται  
αν δεν μάθει χονδρικά να ξεχωρίζει:  
την νηστεία από την δίαιτα  
την μετάνοια απ' την υπαναχώρηση  
την αισιοδοξία από τον κομπασμό  
το λιβάνι απ' τα ναρκωτικά  
την προσευχή απ' την μοιρολατρεία.

Sydney-Ashfield, 14-1-83

## PROPHECY WITHOUT ORACLE

By S.S. Harkianakis  
Translated by Efrosini Deligianni

*I would not dare talk about prayers, and yet,  
sometimes they slaughter a lamb for the  
sacrifices.  
G. Seferis*

This land cannot be salvaged  
without a universal purification  
of the citizens since birth.  
The change of parties in the Government  
drachma devaluation by propaganda  
and any other ornaments of international  
use  
can no longer beguile.

This land cannot be salvaged  
if it cannot sound out the alphabet from  
scratch  
in eating, walking, smiling  
primeval functions which sank in the  
night  
of Ephialtes for the gross national  
income per capita.

This land cannot be salvaged  
if it cannot roughly learn to set apart:  
fasting from diet  
repentance from retreat  
optimism from boastfulness  
incense from narcotics  
prayer from fatalism.

Sydney-Ashfield, 14-1-83