

# *Perennial Penelope and Lingering Lotus-Eaters: Revaluing Mythological Figures in the Poetry of the Greek Financial Crisis*

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**ABSTRACT:** Since 2013, three poetry collections of the Greek financial crisis have been published by Anglophone presses. This article looks specifically at the manner in which these poetic anthologies speak (if at all) to Greece's classical antiquity. I explore the ways in which specific poets, who circulate in different spheres of publication (blogs, online magazines, literary journals, and published collections), engage antiquity in their poetry. While antiquity is not necessarily a unifying theme in contemporary Greek poetry of the crisis, I examine instances where antiquity has been used by individual poets and demonstrate how certain mythological figures, such as Penelope and the lotus-eaters, have gained particular currency in this poetry as a way of articulating an unprecedented material and social reality.

**T**HE 2008 GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS IS CONSIDERED to be a watershed moment in recent economic history, the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The crisis can be attributed to the practices of financial institutions, regulators, credit agencies, and governmental policies, among others. Despite early efforts to ameliorate the crisis through bailouts of financial institutions and other palliative monetary and fiscal policies, the crisis and its aftereffects continue to be felt today in varying degrees of intensity in different parts of the globe. The Greek financial crisis, which began in 2008, is a particularly extreme manifestation of this larger transnational crisis and is partly a result of Greece's failure

to address a growing budget deficit and its falsification of financial data to allow for its entry into the European Economic and Monetary Union in 2001. Since 2010, Greece has been given three international bailouts, issued by the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank, and the European Commission.<sup>1</sup> These bailouts, often referred to as “austerity measures,” have been accompanied by demands by the EU and international market participants to decrease government spending, overhaul the civil-service, health-care, and pension systems, and enforce fiscal reforms. These austerity measures have had severe social and financial repercussions for the general Greek populace and have been met with widespread opposition, including from the country’s labor unions.

The last five years have seen the publication of three anthologies that address the poetry of the Greek financial crisis. The most recent of these anthologies, *Austerity Measures: The New Greek Poetry* (2016), was published by Penguin Books, part of the global publishing conglomerate Penguin Random House.<sup>2</sup> It is edited by Karen Van Dyck, Kimon A. Doukas Professor of Hellenic Studies at Columbia University, who has published extensively on modern Greek poetry. Theodoros Chiotis’s *Futures: Poetry of the Greek Crisis*, was published in 2015 by Penned in the Margins, a small independent press based in the United Kingdom which publishes poetry, experimental fiction, and literary nonfiction.<sup>3</sup> Chiotis is a poet writing in Greek and English, currently the project manager at the Cavafy Archive (Onassis Foundation) in Athens. Dinos Siotis’s *Crisis: 30 Greek Poets of the Current Crisis* was published by Smokestack Books in 2014, an independent British publisher of radical and unconventional poetry.<sup>4</sup> Siotis is a poet and editor who also directs the Tinos International Literary Festival. These anthologies aim to offer international audiences a comprehensive survey of the Greek poetic landscape during the crisis.<sup>5</sup> Chiotis clearly comments in his introduction that he is “seeking to map out the poetic landscape of a small country which has been in dire economic straits since the beginning of the century,”<sup>6</sup> while Van Dyck explicitly states in her introduction: “This anthology of new Greek poetry is representative, then, not only of a cross-section of Greek poetry now, but also, simultaneously, of that poetry as it stands in relation to other places and languages.”<sup>7</sup> Siotis’s editorial manifesto lacks the clarity of Van Dyck’s and Chiotis’s introductions, but he does refer to the poems in his collection as “news bulletins from an undeclared war against the human condition,” implying that he sees the poems as summations of the Greek crisis.<sup>8</sup> He also refers to the current political and socioeconomic moment in Greece as a “contemporary Hellenic Odyssey,” a modern-day manifestation of Homer’s mythical *Odyssey*.<sup>9</sup>

Siotis’s description speaks directly to the central concern of my article: the relationship between antiquity and these Anglophone poetic anthologies of the financial crisis. I begin by noting that antiquity has been utilized by the West and Greeks alike to frame and engage with

<sup>1</sup> The third bailout includes the European Stability Mechanism.

<sup>2</sup> Karen Van Dyck, ed., *Austerity Measures: The New Greek Poetry* (London: Penguin, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Theodoros Chiotis, ed., *Futures: Poetry of the Greek Crisis* (London: Penned in the Margins, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Dinos Siotis, ed., *Crisis: 30 Greek Poets of the Current Crisis* (Middlesbrough: Smokestack Books, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> The ethics and dynamics of the fact that the anthologies are published by international presses are dealt with in a forthcoming article.

<sup>6</sup> Chiotis, *Futures*, i.

<sup>7</sup> Van Dyck, *Austerity Measures*, xxiv.

<sup>8</sup> Siotis, *Crisis*, n.p.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Greece's 2008 economic collapse. Although the aforementioned editors do not necessarily relate their literary projects to antiquity, I observe that the three anthologies contain poems with images or themes drawn from the ancient world. I assert that particular mythological figures, such as Penelope and the lotus-eaters, have gained currency or potency during the financial crisis and are used by poets who circulate in different spheres of publication (e.g., online magazines and blogs, literary journals, and published collections) to express the human experience of this unprecedented material and social reality. While the poems in the anthologies showcase the richness of the sources—popular culture and biblical, folklore, fairy-tale, and global literary allusions—informing the work of contemporary Greek poets, I focus on poems that feature ancient figures or motifs to highlight how antiquity has been an integral aspect of the way that the Greek financial crisis has been read and interpreted.<sup>10</sup>

Put crudely, ancient Greece's achievements in the fields of government, philosophy, theater, architecture, mathematics, and art have had a lasting impact on the creation and development of Western culture.<sup>11</sup> However, the financial crisis has prompted a great deal of discussion and reflection about the West's relationship with modern-day Greece: is the West in any way beholden to modern-day Greece owing to its social and cultural indebtedness to ancient Greece—the Greece that has laid the foundations for Western civilization—or has the scale and size of the Greek debt compromised Greece's symbolic capital? This idea of the West's symbolic debt to ancient Greece, shored up against the more tangible economic debt of modern Greece, is the central thesis of Johanna Hanink's book *The Classical Debt: Greek Antiquity in an Era of Austerity* (2017). For Hanink, this "classical debt" and the ancient world have affected how "the main players in the economic crisis (especially [Western] leaders and lenders) view Greece, and ultimately how they make practical policy decisions."<sup>12</sup> She argues that in debates invested in whether or not Greece should stay in Europe, Greece's supporters note that its legacy compels the world to "save the country at any literal cost," while Greece's detractors feel that modern Greeks have betrayed or forsaken their illustrious heritage, and therefore, severe austerity measures are a befitting punishment.<sup>13</sup> Certainly, the ramifications for excluding Greece from Europe dig deep at the very heart of Western identity, for, as Hanink puts it, "Can Europe claim the legacy of ancient Greece if the country of Greece is not part of Europe?"<sup>14</sup> Dimitris Tziouvas argues a similar point: "Though Greece represents around three per cent of the European economy, its cultural gravitas in the European project is much greater than its economic weight. Another country of similar size might have been forced to leave the Eurozone, but Greece still occupies a special place in the European imaginary."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Some of the poems I analyze were written in the years preceding the crisis. Although the crisis officially began in 2008, Greek poetry was already beginning to express feelings of disillusionment and dissatisfaction in the years following the overinflated optimism and buoyancy of Greece's 2001 entry into the eurozone and hosting of the 2004 Olympic Games. To suggest too clear a demarcation in the years preceding 2008, and after 2004, would be false.

<sup>11</sup> Studies of the influence of Semitic and African cultures on ancient Greek culture, and by proxy, their impact on Western culture, are gaining prominence, contesting this widely held view.

<sup>12</sup> Johanna Hanink, *The Classical Debt: Greek Antiquity in an Era of Austerity* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017), 25.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Dimitris Tziouvas, "Narratives of the Greek Crisis and the Politics of the Past," in *Greece in Crisis: The Cultural Politics of Austerity*, ed. Dimitris Tziouvas (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017), 53.

Although economists and economic historians may struggle to accept this argument as a legitimate reason for Greece's continued presence in the eurozone, compelling scholarship exists that observes a direct line of continuity from the ancient past to the present day in assessing the crisis. Both Hanink and Tziouvas variously point to political speeches, public rhetoric, newspaper headlines, cartoons, and popular culture circulating in the West that explicitly interpret modern Greece's financial woes through the ancient past. However, it is not simply the West that reads Greece's financial crisis through the lens of classical antiquity, but the Greeks themselves.<sup>16</sup> Most recently, Greek politicians attached to Syriza—the Coalition of the Radical Left, and Greece's ruling party since 2015—have reminded the West of the “classical debt” that it owes Greece.<sup>17</sup> For example, Alexis Tsipras (the Greek prime minister since January 2015 and Syriza's leader) has appealed to the ancient tragedy *Antigone* and the “famous ancient Greek concepts (*hubris*, *nemesis*, and *catharsis*)” to impress upon the West that if it views itself “in the cultural tradition of Sophocles and Aristotle,” it owes the Greek people of today its allegiance, especially in terms of its political support for Syriza.<sup>18</sup>

It is against this specific backdrop and within this complicated matrix, in which antiquity is used to negotiate Greece's position within the European project and the economic crisis, that we can observe how these poetry anthologies engage with antiquity. Admittedly, the editors of the anthologies have not curated their texts with antiquity as a central focus, nor have they chosen poems or organized their anthologies in reference to antiquity. However, in my reading of these anthologies, I discern compelling examples of poems that speak to antiquity and offer microcosmic literary narratives of larger economic facts and experiences. The introductions to both Van Dyck's and Chiotis's anthologies are largely free of claims linking contemporary Greek poetry to antiquity. Chiotis prefers to focus on the way that Greece's economic situation appears in the language, content, or form of some of the poems, and he uses financial terminology as a structuring principle in organizing *Futures*.<sup>19</sup> Van Dyck even warns the reader not to expect “many statues” or “much myth, at least in a classical sense,” when engaging with this new poetic current.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, Siotis's introduction to his anthology begins: “The roots of Greek poetry reach deep into the Homeric times, from the battles of the *Iliad* to the seashores of the *Odyssey*; from C. P. Cavafy's ‘Ithaca’ and George Seferis to Yiannis Ritsos and Odysseus Elytis,” thereby tapping

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<sup>16</sup> In Greece's Byzantine period, Christianity led to the suppression of ancient mythology. The western European rediscovery of classical Greece during the Renaissance had the effect of reviving ancient mythology in Greece itself. However, it was during the Greek War of Independence of 1821, spurred on by a rise in European-wide nationalism in the eighteenth century, that the classical world was truly resurrected in modern Greece. The Western powers, particularly Germany and England, cultivated a deeply romantic view of Greece in which the modern Greeks were the direct intellectual and linguistic descendants of the ancient Greeks. This view, imposed by the West, was internalized by modern Greeks. See Peter Mackridge, introduction to *Ancient Greek Myth in Modern Greek Poetry: Essays in Memory of C. A. Trypanis*, ed. Peter Mackridge (London: F. Cass, 1996); Vasilis Lambropoulos, *Literature as Modern Institution: Studies in the Politics of Modern Greek Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

<sup>17</sup> Hanink, *Classical Debt*, 235.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>19</sup> *Futures* is divided into four parts, each given a title that draws from financial jargon, or “bankspeak”: “Adjustment,” “Acceleration,” “Assessment,” and “Singularity.” Chiotis (*Futures*, ii) states that this move is “one small attempt to reclaim language from a semantic overdetermination imposed by the increasingly abstract processes of finance.”

<sup>20</sup> Van Dyck, *Austerity Measures*, xviii.

into Greece's internalization of the ancient past.<sup>21</sup> He further observes that "bearing the light of Greece, where poetry has thrived for three millennia, the poets in this book discuss the current reality and what it truly means to be *Anthropos*."<sup>22</sup> For Siotis, today's Greek poets carry a literary flame ignited in the ancient world: they look at the present and toward the future through the lens of Greece's classical past. For Siotis the work of contemporary Greek poets "reflect[s] the many faces of the crises which modern Greece has experienced since its formation since 1823."<sup>23</sup> Siotis's insistence on drawing a link between Greece's ancient past and the present somewhat problematically suggests that the current financial crisis is comparable to fictional mythological experiences: "The *Iliad* would not have been written if there hadn't been a crisis—a crisis caused by the capture of Helen by Paris. The same goes for the *Odyssey*—Odysseus was under the heavy spell of a ten-year crisis trying to return to Ithaca."<sup>24</sup> He also declares, "Poets thrive through crises. In this context, the poetry in this volume is full of social, political, and ecological explosions."<sup>25</sup>

Although antiquity by no means dominates the content of this poetry, all three collections contain a number of poems that invoke antiquity to express current dire economic circumstances. Van Dyck's anthology contains poems about Telemachus, Penelope, and the lotus-eaters by Z. D. Ainalis, Phoebe Giannisi, Chloe Koutsoumbeli, Kyoko Kishida, and Jazra Khaleed (a few of which I will turn to shortly). Chiotis's anthology includes a poem by Thanasis Triaridis, "The Minoans," which describes human sacrifices to the Minotaur, as well as Sophie Mayer's "Epid/Oneiros," an abstract poem speaking to ancient Greek tragedy and philosophy. In Siotis's collection, Kyriakos Charalambidis's "Aphrodite on the New Economic Measures" and Kiki Dimoula's "In Defense of Improvidence" refer to ancient mythology and Aesop's fables respectively. Furthermore, there are certain individual poems in all the anthologies that utilize ancient Greek phrases, images, or concepts, even if they are not the prominent feature of the poems. A. E. Stallings's poem "Austerity Measures," which features in both Van Dyck's and Chiotis's anthologies and contains lines such as "Weep, Pericles, or maybe just get drunk. / We'll hawk the Parthenon to buy our bread," is a case in point.

This appeal to myth is no doubt a consequence of a tradition in which Greek writers, especially the generation of the 1930s, use myth as "a warp on which to weave their poetry, a starting point for poet and reader alike."<sup>26</sup> Admittedly, referencing the ancient past for these contemporary Greek poets could have the effect of constraining them, forcing them to mimic or emulate classical forms, themes, or conventions. It also could have the effect of playing into cultural stereotyping. However, antiquity also acts as a source of inspiration, in which contemporary Greek writers are able to locate themselves within an established literary culture. Indeed, these contemporary poets profit from their connection with the ancient past, knowing that they draw on images or concepts with which both local and international (primarily Western) audiences are familiar. Furthermore, there is no doubt that the canonical status of ancient Greek mythology, and of concepts linked to antiquity, confers a value on modern Greek poetry on both a national and a global level, granting it a degree of esteem or weight.

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<sup>21</sup> Siotis, *Crisis*, n.p.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Mackridge, *Ancient Greek Myth in Modern Greek Poetry*, xxiii.

Interestingly, the mythical figures that have gained resonance in the financial crisis are not the grand heroes of the Homeric texts but rather Homer's more ancillary characters—Penelope, Telemachus, and the lotus-eaters. In other words, in this particular poetic landscape under the austerity measures, “the peripheral [has] become central,” with Greek citizens “identify[ing] less with the hero's journey and more with those who are left behind to fend for themselves and those who try to numb themselves against reality.”<sup>27</sup> In the following sections, I address poems from *Austerity Measures* in particular as a way of further exploring how contemporary Greek poets have invoked these marginalized mythological figures—such as Penelope and the lotus-eaters—to speak to Greece's new economic reality.

## **PENELOPE**

Penelope features in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as Odysseus's wife, who faithfully awaits his return from the Trojan War despite the importunities of many suitors. She keeps the suitors at bay by promising to make a decision about which one of them to marry once she has finished her weaving. Every night she unpicks whatever she has woven during the day to ensure that she does not have to make this decision. Although Penelope was not considered a compelling figure for textual appropriation and rewriting in the nineteenth century, in the twentieth century she gained currency in feminist circles. In the 1960s Penelope became subject to feminist rewritings and has been of interest to a number of Anglophone poets and writers, like Margaret Atwood, Louise Glück, Dorothy Parker, Gail Holst-Warhaft, and Linda Pastan, among others.<sup>28</sup> As Victoria Reuter points out in her book chapter “A Penelopean Return,” Penelope proves to be an attractive figure for rewriting, as she offers no subjectivity of her own in Homer's epic, allowing authors to project their own subjectivities or intellectual interests upon her.<sup>29</sup>

With respect to these contemporary Greek poems, Penelope's state of being in limbo—waiting for her husband's impending but also uncertain return—speaks in part to the psychological condition of individuals who live in a state of political extremity.<sup>30</sup> Waiting has been theorized in many ways, ranging from its being a feature characteristic of contemporary culture to how it functions as a power relation, in that waiting is often “assigned to the poor and powerless so as to ritualistically reinforce political and social demarcations.”<sup>31</sup> Giovanni Gasparini notes that waiting is at the heart of the idea of revolution and sociopolitical change and is central to various ideologies and movements, as “the present makes sense only in that it refers to the waiting of

<sup>27</sup> “Greece Featured in First European Literature Night in the US,” *National Herald*, June 16, 2017, <https://www.thenationalherald.com/166417/greece-featured-first-european-literature-night-us/>.

<sup>28</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2005); Louise Glück, *Meadowlands* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1996); Dorothy Parker, *The Portable Dorothy Parker*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 2006); Gail Holst-Warhaft, *Penelope's Confession*, bilingual ed. (River Vale, NJ: Cosmos, 2007); Linda Pastan, *PM/AM: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Norton, 1982).

<sup>29</sup> Victoria Reuter, “A Penelopean Return: Desire, Recognition, and Nostos in the Poems of Yannis Ritsos and Gail Holst-Warhaft,” in *Odyssean Identities in Modern Cultures*, ed. Hunter Gardner and Sheila Murnaghan (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2014), 89–111.

<sup>30</sup> The social anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano made these observations in relation to white South Africans under apartheid, but his theories hold true for other contexts and peoples. See Vincent Crapanzano, *Waiting: The Whites of South Africa* (New York: Random House, 1985).

<sup>31</sup> Giovanni Gasparini, “On Waiting,” *Time & Society* 4, no. 1 (1995): 29–45; Harold Schweizer, “On Waiting,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 779.



the future, which will establish the fulfilment and achievement of today's efforts."<sup>32</sup> Certainly, individuals living in dire political situations are understood to be locked into a perpetual state of waiting, "directed towards the future—not an expansive future, however, but a constricted one that closes in on the present."<sup>33</sup> Indeed, under political extremity individuals are waiting "for something, anything, to happen."<sup>34</sup> Such sentiments resonate strongly in the Greek context in that post-2008 Greece embodies a state of waiting: tentatively anticipating bailouts from the troika every few years, while also negotiating the fear of total financial collapse. Greeks are not simply pessimistic about or even fearful of the future (as opinion polls suggest) but deeply conscious of the precariousness of their position, looking toward the future in the hope that change will come.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the Greek photographer Eirini Vourloumis, documenting the Greek financial crisis, describes the Greek people as "exist[ing] in anticipation of their future."<sup>36</sup>

It is in this context that Phoebe Giannisi's poem "(Πηνελόπη—I Am Addicted to You)"<sup>37</sup> ["(Penelope—Έχω πάθος για σένα)"] modernizes the ancient Greek myth of Penelope, recasting her as a woman swimming in a pool.<sup>38</sup> The poem, which appears in *Austerity Measures* in Van Dyck's translation (although I use my own translation here), opens with the omniscient narrator's description of the woman's swimming and shifts to the internal thoughts of the woman herself only in its closing lines. The poem's opening lines have a strong temporal element, observing that the woman swims daily, repetitively doing laps up and down the length of the pool ("every day in the pool up-down / the same lane over and over again"). The poem emphasizes the woman's continual movement through the lane, her rhythmic breathing, the synchronization of her arms and legs, and how her head repeatedly lifts out of the water for air. When the poem later shifts to the swimmer's internal thoughts, the swimmer highlights the rhythmic repetition of her movements and keeping count of laps. She observes:

η πισίνα με κρατά στη ζωή  
το συνεχές τραγούδι  
το μέτρημα  
ένα δύο τρία τέσσερα πέντε  
έξι επτά οκτώ εννιά δεκαπέντε  
δεκαεννιά χτυπήματα περιστροφές

the pool keeps me alive  
the perpetual song  
the counting  
the repetition  
one two three four five

<sup>32</sup> Gasparini, "On Waiting," 39.

<sup>33</sup> Crapanzano, *Waiting*, 45.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>35</sup> Tziovas, "Narratives of the Greek Crisis," 20.

<sup>36</sup> Elissa Curtis, "In Waiting: The Greek Economic Crisis in Pictures," *New Yorker*, December 20, 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/in-waiting-the-greek-economic-crisis-in-pictures>.

<sup>37</sup> Parentheses in the original.

<sup>38</sup> Giannisi is trained as a classicist and architect. This poem featured in her anthology *Homerika* (Ομηρικά) (Athens: Kedros, 2009), which contains four poems about Penelope.

six seven eight nine fifteen  
 nineteen kicks to a lap<sup>39</sup>

Whereas ancient Penelope wove an unending tapestry in order to fend off suitors and pass the time, modern Penelope obsessively swims. In both instances, waiting has become routinized, with motions expressing a “consciousness of time embodied, of time endured.”<sup>40</sup> However, Giannisi’s poem takes a markedly sinister turn in its final lines, where the speaker declares:

το τραγούδι της πισίνας με σώζει  
 με σώζει από τη γνώση πως  
 δε μ’ αγαπά

the song of the pool saves me  
 it saves me from the knowledge that  
 he doesn’t love me.

Ancient and modern Penelope are strikingly similar—steadfast in their love and committed to an eternal repetition. But whereas the Odysseus of the ancient Penelope returns to resume their love story, modern Penelope’s love for Odysseus remains unrequited. This revelation is significant because it suggests that there is no closure to the act of waiting: Odysseus may never return to Penelope, or he may return but without any emotional investment in the relationship. Consequently, modern Penelope cannot be orientated toward the future: she is forever doomed to be locked into the present time of waiting, sealed into an interstitial period or interval, much like the Greek people during the financial crisis. In the same way that the financial crisis has had an enervating effect on the capacity of the Greek people to act as political and social agents, modern Penelope’s agency remains limited—she can occupy her time until Odysseus’s eventual return, should he ever return, but for the most part she is unable to control or alter her future.

*Austerity Measures* also features A. E. Stallings’s translation of Chloe Koutsoumbeli’s “Penelope III,” where Penelope meditates on the reasons why Odysseus does not return home:<sup>41</sup>

Γνωρίζει πια η Πηνελόπη  
 πώς δεν είναι οι υπερφίαλες Σειρήνες  
 που τον καθυστερούν

<sup>39</sup> In my translation I have aimed to follow the line breaks and stanza structure of the source poem rather than the more experimental or free translation provided in Van Dyck’s anthology.

<sup>40</sup> Schweizer, “On Waiting,” 779.

<sup>41</sup> This poem was published in Koutsoumbeli’s collection *Night Falls Early Now in the Ancient World* (Στον αρχαίο κόσμο βραδιάζει πια νωρίς) (Athens: Gavrielides, 2012). Based in Thessaloniki, Koutsoumbeli has been producing poetry since the early 1980s, while working in a bank. Van Dyck (*Austerity Measures*, 311) describes Koutsoumbeli’s poetry as reworking the “rich material of ancient myth” so it appears to us in a “new and contemporary light.” Koutsoumbeli’s *Night Falls* collection contains two additional Penelope poems, “Penelope I” and “Penelope II.” The numerals in the title of “Penelope III” may be a reference to Yiannis Ritsos’s poem “Return II,” chronicling Odysseus’s return, or his “Penelope’s Despair,” describing the complicated feelings that Penelope experiences when Odysseus arrives home. Ritsos wrote these poems in 1968 and 1969 during his imprisonment during the military junta. In “Penelope’s Despair,” Penelope appears to express a latent horror of the fact that she has spent so much time waiting for a man who is aged and ragged.



ούτε η γερασμένη Κίρκη  
 με τον καταχωνιασμένο πόθο  
 ούτε κάποια κακομαθημένη Ναυσικά  
 εγκλωβισμένη δε λάθος ηλικία  
 με άσπρες κάλτσες και φουστάνια παιδικά.  
 Δεν είναι οι Λαιστρυγόνες και οι Λωτοί  
 που τον κρατούν μακριά της.  
 ούτε οι συντεχνιακοί μικροθυμίοι του τάχα Ποσειδώνα  
 και τα μπλεξίματα με τους παλιούς συντρόφους.

Είναι που στον Αρχαίο κόσμο  
 βραδιάζει πια νωρίς  
 η Γη δεν είναι επίπεδη  
 και οι άνθρωποι κάποτε χάνονται.

Penelope knows by now  
 that it is not the insolent Sirens  
 who delay him  
 nor aging Circe  
 with her funneled-down longing  
 nor some spoiled Nausicaa  
 hemmed into the wrong age  
 with white socks and school-girl skirts.  
 It is not the Laestrygonians, nor the lotuses  
 which keep him far from her  
 and not the trade-union tantrums of, perhaps, Poseidon  
 and the mix-ups with old companions.

It is that in the ancient world  
 by now it gets dark early  
 the Earth isn't flat  
 and men sometimes get lost.

(translation by A. E. Stallings)

The reasons for his delayed return are neither mythological nor macrocosmic but mundane, everyday reasons—"it gets dark early," "the Earth isn't flat," and "men sometimes get lost." The poem amalgamates the ancient world with the modern: the young Nausicaa is a modern-day child or adolescent "with white socks and school-girl skirts." However, the reference to the "trade-union tantrums" of Poseidon imbues the contemporary moment with a markedly economic spin that is jarring: Poseidon's anger is given a decidedly labor-inflected charge that in this particular collection invokes associations with post-2008 Greece.<sup>42</sup> Koutsoumbeli arguably utilizes the figure of Penelope to explain why contemporary Greece, like Odysseus (the symbol of long-suffering humanity), is struggling to come "home," to return to a pre-crisis state. For the poem's

<sup>42</sup> In fact, Greece's labor unions have had a strong presence in Greece for decades.

speaker, the reasons that Greece cannot achieve this aim of “returning home” are simple. They have nothing to do with grand machinations: the strength of its trade unions (as symbolized by Poseidon’s bad temper), Greece’s education system (Nausicaa and her “school-girl skirts”), the aging and hardheaded older generations (which Circe embodies), or the younger generations (the “insolent Sirens”). Instead, Penelope offers a fatalistic reading in which Greece’s current political and financial situation has no solid cause. She is thereby doomed for eternity to continue her waiting.

### THE LOTUS-EATERS

Van Dyck’s anthology includes three poems by three poets that specifically address the lotus-eaters. The first is by the aforementioned Phoebe Giannisi (translated by Angelos Sakkis) and the other two are by Jazra Khaleed and Kyoko Kishida (translated by Peter Constantine and Rachel Hadas respectively). The lotus-eaters appear in a key episode in Homer’s *Odyssey*, when Odysseus, blown off course, arrives at an island inhabited by people who relish eating lotus flowers. The flowers have a narcotic effect, numbing the inhabitants into a dull stupor that makes them indifferent to the world around them. Those among Odysseus’s men who eat the flower lose all interest in returning home. Odysseus, fearing the loss of his entire crew, instructs his remaining men to return to the ship. They comply with his orders and continue their journey toward Ithaca. Crucially, this concept of the lotus-eaters features in the contemporary Greek media and has been cited in blogs and national newspapers, in relation to Greek politicians who are charged with a lack of care for the Greek people or the country.<sup>43</sup> In fact, most recently Syriza were accused of being lotus-eaters by certain members of the New Democracy Party.<sup>44</sup>

Giannisi’s poem, “(Lotus Eaters II),”<sup>45</sup> is written from the perspective of someone who has eaten of the lotus. The poem reads as follows:

θα μείνω εδώ στην στροφή του δρόμου στο γύρισμα  
 του κόλπου στην άκρη του ακρωτηρίου στην κορυφή  
 του υψηλού βουνού στις ανοιχτές της θάλασσας αγκάλες  
 στην εκβολή του ποταμού  
 θα μείνω εδώ  
 τα μήλα κόκκινα τα αχλάδια ζουμερά οι πάτοι  
 των παπουτσιών δεν φθείρονται

<sup>43</sup> See Aris Chatzistefanou, “Memory Elections in the Land of the Lotus Eaters,” *EFSYN.GR*, January 23, 2016, <http://www.efsyn.gr/arthro/ekloges-mnimis-sti-hora-ton-lotofagon>; Olga Panayiotidou, “K. Hatzidakis: Speakers and ‘Germanotsoliades’ in Syriza,” *CNN Greece*, May 2, 2016, <http://www.cnn.gr/news/politiki/story/32976/lotofagoi-kai-germanotsoliades-ston-syriza>; Christodoulos Stephanides, “The Lotus Eaters,” *Protothema*, August 10, 2016, <http://www.protothema.gr/blogs/blogger/post/408779/oi-lotofagoi/>.

<sup>44</sup> Syriza’s election campaign was focused on opposing further austerity measures. Kostis Hatzidakis, a New Democracy politician, stated that Syriza’s contradictory behavior in regard to the implementation and aiding of the austerity measures once in power pointed to its strategic forgetfulness, making Syriza modern-day lotus-eaters. In fact, Hatzidakis declares that this forgetfulness is actually a lack of patriotism, an act of disloyalty toward the Greek people. He declares: “Syriza isn’t just a demagogic party; it is a populist party, a party of lotus-eaters. Eat your lotuses and go vote, you too act like ‘Germanotsoliades’ [Greek collaborators during World War II].” For Hatzidakis, being a lotus-eater, reneging on or “forgetting” election promises, makes the Syriza no better than Greek traitors during the Nazi occupation of Greece. See Panayiotidou, “K. Hatzidakis.”

<sup>45</sup> Parentheses in the original.

ξυπόλυτος περπατάς με ρούχα ελαφριά  
 τέλος καλοκαιριού μα ο χειμώνας δεν έρχεται  
 μπορείς έξω να κάθεις την ώρα που νυχτώνει  
 αηδόνια ακούγονται τα φώτα ανάβουν  
 εμπρός στα μεγάλα τραπέζια δείπνα μικρά του δειλινού  
 με νυχτοπεταλούδες δείπνα μεθυσμένα  
 το φάρμακο το έφαγες  
 το φάρμακο ένα λουλούδι  
 το φάρμακο είναι το φάρμακο  
 η λήθη  
 το κάθε στιγμή καινούργια αρχή  
 είναι δεν ξέρω από πού έρχομαι δεν θέλω να γυρίσω  
 το φάρμακο  
 το πάντα τώρα πάντα τώρα

I will stay here at road's turn at the bend  
 of the bay at the end of the headland at the top of  
 the high mountain the open arms of the sea at the  
 mouth of the  
 river  
 I'll stay here apples are red pears juicy the soles  
 of shoes don't wear down  
 you walk barefoot in light clothing  
 end of summer  
 but the winter doesn't come  
 you're able to sit outside in the dusk at nightfall  
 nightingales are heard lights coming on  
 over the big tables the small dinners of late afternoon  
 dinners with moths  
 tipsy  
 you've already downed the medicine  
 the medicine a flower  
 the medicine is the medicine  
 forgetfulness is every moment a brand new beginning  
 it's I don't know where I come from I don't want to return  
 the medicine  
 is always now always now.

(translation by Angelos Sakkis)<sup>46</sup>

The poem opens with the speaker declaring that (s)he will “stay here,” before entering into an extensive list of places where (s)he would like to settle: “the road’s turn,” “the bend of the bay,” “the end of the headland,” “the top of the high mountain,” “the open arms of the sea,” “the mouth of the river.” The speaker then offers reasons for wanting to stay in this idyll: the food tastes better,

<sup>46</sup> Van Dyck, *Austerity Measures*, 118–19.

nothing ages or wears away, summer is eternal, nightingales sing. However, the poem becomes progressively darker, with the speaker asserting midway through the poem: “You’ve already downed the medicine / the medicine a flower / the medicine is the medicine / forgetfulness is every moment a brand new beginning.” The speaker’s reference to a narcotic flower that induces amnesia, a type of opiate that propels the user into the immediate present, makes it clear that the speaker is describing the experience of having eaten the lotus flower. Like Odysseus’s men who have consumed the lotus and forgotten their pasts and their previous homes, the speaker wants to “stay here.” Eating the lotus flower erases the memory of one’s past, of one’s home, and the poem ends with the speaker asserting, “I don’t know where I come from I don’t want to return / the medicine / is always now always now.”<sup>47</sup>

The fact that the poem’s title contains the roman numeral “II” pushes the poem out of the realm of the ancient world and into another temporality.<sup>48</sup> The poem is not referring to the original lotus-eaters; rather, this is the second episode of the same story. The poem, rather, appears to refer to Greece’s entry into the eurozone, a period of financial plenty. Certainly, strong economic growth that was largely consumer driven characterized the period between 2001 and 2007.<sup>49</sup> The euro allowed for low borrowing costs and interest rates, which made it easy for individuals to secure funds from commercial banks.<sup>50</sup> Also, around this time, public-sector wages doubled, and there were large public-sector investments in infrastructure owing to the Olympic Games of 2004.<sup>51</sup> In this respect, what the poem appears to be suggesting is that the euro is a lotus, which, once tasted, does not allow the eater to return to a pre-crisis state.

Kyoko Kishida’s “The Lotus Eaters” appeared in the autumn 2008 issue of *Teflon*, a magazine she cofounded with Jazra Khaleed, a hip-hop artist and poet. Kishida’s poem, quoted in full below, refers to Greece’s entry into the eurozone and its destructive effect on Greece, a reading that becomes fully apparent when her poem is placed alongside Khaleed’s poem “Re: The Lotus Eaters,” which was written as a poetic response to Kishida’s poem. Kishida’s poem reads as follows:

Αυτή η σιωπηλή κατανόηση  
 δε χωρά στις ντουζίνες χρόνια που μου δόθηκαν.  
 Φόνευσε τη.  
 Δηλητηρίασέ τη σταδιακά  
 όπως μόλυνε και αυτή εμάς

<sup>47</sup> The fact that the flower is referred to as a “medicine” in the poem foreshadows the statements made by Wolfgang Schäuble, the German finance minister, about the controversial third bailout, which would compound problems created by the first two bailouts: “The problem is that for the last five years the medicine has not been taken as prescribed. That’s why it is now important that those measures agreed to long ago are now implemented. In December, the troika made clear that Greece still hasn’t tackled 15 important reforms. That must finally change.” See Constantinos E. Scaros, “Greece Must Take Its Medicine,” *National Herald*, August 16, 2015, <https://www.thenationalherald.com/94850/>.

<sup>48</sup> As mentioned in a previous footnote, the poem is one of a series of Penelope poems in Giannisi’s *Homerika*.

<sup>49</sup> Valentina Romei, “Greece and the EU: A Brief (Economic) History in Charts,” *Financial Times*, August 10, 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/9436dfa7-cd88-3daa-a844-56da4b27ec54>.

<sup>50</sup> Phillip Inman, “A Decade of Overspending: How Greece Plunged into Economic Crisis,” *Guardian*, July 3, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/03/greece-overspending-defence-wages-taxation-economic-crisis>.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

που πάντα την αποστρεφόμεσταν.  
 Ποιος φύτεψε χαλίκια μέσα στα ζαχαρωτά;  
 Ποιος έδεσε αμόνια στα φτερά των γλάρων;  
 Γιατί χρησιμοποιούμε ακόμα το επίρρημα «στωικά»;

Σεβασμό;  
 Σε ποιους;  
 Στους λωτοφάγους;

This unspoken understanding  
 doesn't fit into the dozens of years I have left [that were given to me].  
 Murder it.  
 Poison it piecemeal  
 just as it contaminated us—  
 we who had always turned away from here.  
 Who planted pebbles in the candy?  
 Who tied anvils to the seagulls' wings?  
 Why do we still use the adverb "stoically"?

Respect?  
 For whom?  
 For the lotus eaters?

(translation by Rachel Hadas)<sup>52</sup>

The opening lines refer to an unspoken contract between two parties, neither of whom is explicitly named. In fact, the poet adopts a deliberately obfuscatory tone and style in which the “unspoken understanding” is never disclosed, and the identity of the poem’s speaker remains unclear but appears to be the country of Greece itself, which is critical of both its politicians and its people. Both the European Union and Greek stakeholders were covertly aware that Greece’s economic system was ill-equipped to enter the eurozone but adopted questionable financial practices to allow for admittance into the shared currency.<sup>53</sup> It is therefore this “unspoken understanding” that ensured Greece’s acceptance into the monetary union—the “dozens of years that were given to me [Greece]”—and that resulted in Greece’s gradual destruction and “contamination.” The speaker demands that similar unholy “understanding[s]” must be “murdered” or “poison[ed].”

However, with the questions “Who planted pebbles in the candy?” and “Who tied anvils to the seagulls’ wings?” the onus of Greece’s demise is placed at the feet of the Greeks themselves, pointing to premediated action and intent. In fact, the first stanza closes with the question “Why do we still use the adverb ‘stoically’?,” suggesting that the Greeks do not deserve any praise for living through a financial crisis of their own creation. The word “stoically” is deeply loaded and foreshadows how the word has gained in currency and prominence as the financial crisis in Greece has deepened. Since 2010, it has been used by the international media and Greek

<sup>52</sup> Van Dyck, *Austerity Measures*, 150–51.

<sup>53</sup> Robert B. Reich, “How Goldman Sachs Profited from the Greek Financial Crisis,” *Nation*, July 16, 2015, <https://www.thenation.com/article/goldmans-greek-gambit>.

politicians, on both sides of the political spectrum, when describing the Greek people's "dignified" response to the austerity measures.<sup>54</sup> Kishida's speaker rejects the "stoicism" of the Greek people, declaring, "Respect? / For whom? / For the lotus eaters? Instead, the Greek people are like the lotus-eaters of euro-abundance, who do not deserve "respect" because they have cultivated Greece's state of economic paralysis. Like the lotus-eaters, whose eating of the lotus made them disloyal to their homes, today's Greeks should not be viewed with veneration.

In Khaleed's poem, the use of "Re:"—the abbreviation for "reply" or "in regard to" in email correspondence—clearly situates the poem in a twenty-first-century context, in the digital age, thereby underscoring the relevancy of the ancient myth to the here and now. In the poem, cited below, Khaleed asserts that the Greeks grasped the gift of the euro with both hands and naturally, as well as understandably, enjoyed its many benefits. The reader should pity, not those who have enjoyed the fruits of euro-abundance, but those who have been forced to leave Greece, having gained nothing from the euro.<sup>55</sup>

Η ζωή δε μετρίεται σε χρόνια  
Μετρίεται σε ανάσες και μπιπ  
Ο πόνος σε βατ  
Η αγάπη σε λεύγες

Σε ποιον πρόσφεραν κρασί και δε μέθυσε  
Σε ποιον υποσχέθηκαν ήλιο και φόρεσε μαύρα γυαλιά  
Σε ποιον χάρισαν δέντρο και δεν αποκοιμήθηκε στη σκιά του

Μη λυπάσαι αυτούς που μένουν  
Να λυπάσαι αυτούς που φεύγουν  
Φύλαξε τον οίκτο σου για τον Οδυσσέα  
Ενώσου με τους Λωτοφάγους

Life is not to be counted in years<sup>56</sup>  
But in breaths and beats  
Pain in watts  
Love in leagues

<sup>54</sup> See Vassilis Vassilikos, "Crisis in a Stoic Land," *New York Times*, February 13, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/14/opinion/14vassilikos.html>; Marjory McGinn, "The Harsh Realities of the Greek Financial Crisis," *New York Times*, July 28, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/expat/expatlife/11765781/The-harsh-realities-of-the-Greek-financial-crisis.html>; G. Kmab, "Negotiation," *Enet.GR.*, March 2, 2013, <http://www.enet.gr/?i=news.el.article&id=347496>; "Bakogiannis: The Fourth Memorandum Is Here Already, but without Any Money," *iefimerida.gr*, April 1, 2017, <http://www.iefimerida.gr/news/378468/epithesi-moyzala-se-stelehi-toy-syriza-afinei-anoihto-endehomeno-tis-paraitisis>.

<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, in response to the question "What would you say to people who believe what is happening to Greece has been caused by external factors?," Khaleed answers: "I blame the Greek middle class and the Greek capitalist system." Marta Bausells and Eleni Stefanou, "Meet the Greek Writers Revolutionising Poetry in the Age of Austerity," *Guardian*, May 11, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/may/11/meet-the-greek-writers-revolutionising-poetry-austerity>.

<sup>56</sup> A more literal translation of the opening line would be "Life is not counted in years."



Who has been offered wine and did not get drunk?  
 Who has been promised sunshine and then wore dark glasses?  
 Who has been given a tree as a gift and did not sleep in its shadow?

Do not grieve for those who remain  
 Grieve for those who depart  
 Save your sympathy for Odysseus  
 Unite with the lotus eaters.

(translation by Peter Constantine)<sup>57</sup>

The poem's opening lines declare that life cannot be quantified in measurable units but only through bodily processes. Experiences such as pain and love must be gauged through watts and leagues—units traditionally used to measure electricity and distance. In other words, the poem demands that readers recalibrate their understanding of human experience. Interestingly, the opening stanza gives way to the cutting lines in the stanza that follows, thereby suggesting that humans search out experience and act in ways that must be understood through the open measures of “breaths and beats,” and that when individuals are offered gifts, it is inevitable that the gifts will be enjoyed or used, as it is a natural and human response not to refuse something beneficial or pleasing. The poem asserts that of course Odysseus's men would accept the lotus (in the same way that the modern Greeks accepted the gift of the euro).

Nevertheless, the questions are not entirely without an element of critique. When accepting gifts, the speaker notes, there is always the danger of overindulgence or excess: it is not enough to simply enjoy the proffered wine; one gets drunk. Rather than reprimanding the lotus-eaters, as Kishida's speaker does, Khaleed's speaker declares, “Do not grieve for those who remain / Grieve for those who depart / Save your sympathy for Odysseus / Unite with the lotus eaters.” Rather than see the lotus-eaters as national traitors or as disloyal citizens, Khaleed's speaker views the lotus-eaters—and, by extension, the Greeks—as acting in ways that are natural or expected and actively demands that the reader unite with them. The poem asserts the need for solidarity with those who have tasted the euro-lotus and suggests that Odysseus should be pitied, for he must ultimately leave the island without having enjoyed the euro, in a subtle allusion to the current wave of those leaving Greece in search of greener pastures.

## CODA

In Kyriakos Charalambidis's poem “Aphrodite on the New Economic Measures” (featured in *Crisis*), the ancient goddess of love, Aphrodite, announces:

Καθώς αντιλαμβάνεστε, άνθρωποι μου,  
 Θα περιπέσω σε ανεργία, θα είμαι  
 η Αφροδίτη των Βαρών, των Βράχων,  
 του Εξορθολογισμού και της Συντήρησης.

<sup>57</sup> Van Dyck, *Austerity Measures*, 172–73.

As you can see, gentlemen,  
 I am about to be unemployed, I'll become  
 Aphrodite of Burdens, of the Rocks,  
 of Rationalization and Conservatism.  
 (translation by Angelos Sakkis)<sup>58</sup>

Aphrodite's comments address the poem's overall interest in how the austerity measures during the financial crisis negatively affect affairs of the heart, reducing love and sexual relations to mere transactions and eventually making Aphrodite redundant. The "high subsidies on breasts" generally, the taxes on Aphrodite's left hand and right foot, not to mention surcharges on food, medicine, and the "accrued interest" on love affairs, all in the interest of austerity, will make love totally untenable for all. However, Aphrodite's comments are somewhat contradictory: she will continue to be employed but in a completely different manner—instead of coordinating erotic and romantic relationships and "ruling the body," she will be the goddess of "Rationalization and Conservatism." Somewhat ironically, Aphrodite's concern with her employment during the financial crisis speaks to the broader questions addressed in this article: how and under what terms antiquity is "employed" during the Greek financial crisis.

Even if Charalambidis's Aphrodite is fearful that she will lose her currency, or her value, in post-2008 Greece, in this article I have shown how contemporary Greek poetry converses with mythological figures, urging them to speak loudly and poignantly to Greece's financial crisis. But I suggest that this poetry appeals not to mythological figures who are agents of their fate, such as Odysseus, but to the powerless or peripheral figures that are able to strongly express Greece's current atmosphere of uncertainty, anxiety, and disillusionment. In a context in which the Greek people wait in anticipation for "something, anything, to happen"—the country's displacement from the European Union, the waiving of the debt, or the next economic bailout—Penelope's perennial waiting gains traction. Her waiting captures the state of psychological and sociopolitical suspension characteristic of today's Greece. In the same way that Penelope resonates in this socioeconomic context, the amnesia and disloyalty of the lotus-eaters toward their home gain purchase, and the lotus-eaters become symbols of national betrayal. The use of these ancillary mythological figures in contemporary Greek poetry should appease the fears of Charalambidis's Aphrodite, an influential and powerful goddess responsible for the fate of many. Indeed, when Aphrodite asks with trepidation about her future under "the new package / that Fate already has submitted at Olympus," she can rest assured that antiquity has a place in the poetry of austerity-ridden Greece. A

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<sup>58</sup> Siotis, *Crisis*, 16–17.