

## Translators' Preface

*Maria Koundoura*

"In our days," writes the narrator of "The Emperor and the Cartographer," the final, and only, story in Yiorgos Chouliaras' book of poems *Roads of Ink* (Nefeli 2005) from which the two poems translated here are taken, "we don't consider ourselves subjects of an empire of the senses of language, but citizens of a democracy of its meanings." The story is about representation and reality in a time when the trope of the ambiguity that separates the two has become an old topos in need of reoccupation. *Roads of Ink*, Chouliaras' sixth collection, inhabits that space and makes it its own. Employing the characteristic playful self-reflexivity of postmodern writing, yet none of its vacuousness, Chouliaras' book is made of poems that appeal not only to the "empire of the senses of language," but also to its multiple meanings. *Roads of Ink*, with its razor sharp wit and sensualist's awareness, engages our mind and our sense of wonder in language.

It is this sense that led me to translate Chouliaras' work. It is a difficult task, considering the multiplicity with which he inhabits meaning. He pushes language to its limits, showing its elasticity, challenging the translator/reader to ground it. Yet he has a formal sense, not in the structure of the poem but in the structure of language. My translations attempt to portray the fluidity and openness in Chouliaras' writing, together with its architectonic sense. The poems have the material of writing as their theme with which they build an edifice that houses both spirit and body.

English-speaking readers are familiar with successive generations of famous Greek poets—from the 1910s, Cavafy and Kazantzakis; from the 1930s, Seferis and Elytis; from the 1950s, Anagnostakis and Rooke. Yiorgos Chouliaras belongs to the generation of the 1970s. He has lived Greece's modern metamorphosis both from the inside and out. Born in Thessaloniki and educated at Reed College and The New School for Social Research, he worked in New York as a university lecturer, advisor to cultural institutions, correspondent, and press officer. He has served as Press Counselor at the Greek Embassy in Canada, in Athens during the Olympic Games, and in Boston. Currently he is the director of the Press and

Communications office at the Greek Embassy in Washington, D.C. A founding editor of the influential Greek literary & arts reviews *Tram* and *Hartis* and an editor of literary and scholarly periodicals in the United States, he was the third writer from Greece, after Odysseus Elytis and George Savidis, to serve on the jury of the Neustadt International Prize for Literature. An Emeritus Member of the Board of the Ottawa International Writers Festival, he was elected and served on the Executive Board of the Hellenic Authors' Society as Vice President for international relations. He is the author of six volumes of poetry in Greek and numerous essays. Reviews of and translations from his work have been published in leading periodicals, including *Agenda*, *Grand Street*, *Harvard Review*, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, *Ploughshares*, *Poetry*, and *World Literature Today*.

## Ποίημα / Poem

## ΣΤΟ ΣΥΝΤΡΙΒΑΝΙ

Ο μαύρος πίδακας ασυγκράτητα ξειπηδά  
 μελανιάζοντας την καρδιά της πόλης  
 και τα ρηγά χείλη των τροχονόμων  
 που γύρω του ρυθμίζουν την κυκλοφορία  
 φασκισμένων με στυπόχαρτο μωρών παιδιών  
 σε πατίνια πάνω αν και δεν έχουν μάθει  
 ούτε μία λέξη ακόμη να γράφουν  
 ενώ συνωστίζονται να βουτήξουν  
 την μαλακή γραφίδα των δακτύλων  
 στο υγρό καύσιμο που υποκινεί  
 τα φευγαλέα οχήματα των γραμμάτων

## AT THE FOUNTAIN by Yiorgos Chouliaras

*Translated by Maria Koundoura*

The black geyser gushes uncontrollably  
 staining the heart of the city  
 and the narrow lips of traffic policemen  
 that around it direct circulation  
 of children wrapped in blotting paper  
 on rollerblades though they have not learned  
 to write not even a word  
 while they crowd to dip  
 the soft pen of fingers  
 in the liquid fuel moving  
 the fleeting vehicles of letters