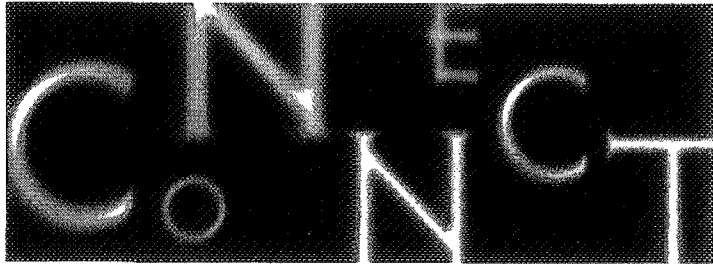


fall 2000



art·politics·theory·practice

# translation

# avant-garde translation:

a conversation with diamanda galás

karen van dyck

*Diamanda Galás is an icon in the international avant-garde of musical performance. From her Mass devoted to AIDS, entitled "Plague Mass" to the historically oriented "Defixiones,"<sup>1</sup> she has pushed the emotional and aesthetic envelope of her art. One of the most potent aspects of Galás's oeuvre is its resolutely intercultural and multilingual quality. Renowned for combining operatic techniques with those of the Greek women's lament called moirologi, she is best known for what might be termed an aesthetics of outrage. Impassioned by this sentiment and her political positions, she deploys the vocal strategies of the limit developed within these very different traditions.*

*Born in San Diego to immigrant parents, Galás grew up speaking English but was always conscious that, for the immigrant, a new land is also a new language. She speaks of the Greek American as a solitary figure, citing the idea of rembetika (the Greek rembetis is a person who stands alone) as the paradigmatic instance of that solitude<sup>2</sup>. Such an idea is absolutely central to Galás's notion of the avant garde — being "on the front line" of everything, and constantly having to translate oneself into new situations.*

*Galás learned the mythology so prevalent in her work from her father who, though he started out as a musician, became a professor of Greek mythology and literature. From him, she also learned of Socrates, a love of Artemis and what she calls an Anatolian capacity to become invisible in order to survive. From her mother, she inherited a link to Mani in the Peloponnese, the home of women's lament and strict, ruthless discipline.*

*In a recent interview with Karen van Dyck, Galás relates these complex histories to her own work, discussing in particular the problems of translation that occupy her.*

<sup>1</sup> *Defixiones, Will and Testament* premiered on September 11, 1999 at the Gravensteen Castle in Ghent, Belgium. It includes in its song cycle, music set to a variety of texts, among them that of Armenian poet-soldier, Siamanto, the Belgian/French poet, Henri Michaux, the Syrian/Lebanese poet, Adonis, the *rembetika* songs of Papaioannou, the Anatolian Greek Amanedhes, and the blues music of American musicians, Blind Willie Johnson and Son House.

<sup>2</sup> *Rembetika* is an underground urban song tradition whose content deals with hashish dens, jails and broken hearts. These songs are sung accompanied by the bouzouki and its smaller cousin, the baglamas. *Rembetika* became popular in Greece with the population exchange of 1922 and the influx of Anatolian Greeks from Asia Minor who settled in Piraeus, Athen's port.



**G:** *Defixiones* is both a performance piece and lieder. It is voice and piano work generally using the texts of writers and composers I consider to be blood brothers. This would include people like Nerval, Baudelaire, Michaux and Passolini. It would also include some of the *rembetika* songs (although they aren't really lieder). Also the Papaioannou (which Sotiria Bellou would sing), "Anoikse" [Open up] and "San pethano" [When I die] because they are such strong works. And then I include other things I find I am working on: "Myris," Cavafy's poem. And also Ritsos's poem, "Our Old Men." I am also working with Paul Celan though I am not even sure this will be a part of *Defixiones*—because the situation with Asia Minor and the Greeks, the Syrians, and the Armenians needs to be dealt with separately. It is a situation that so few people know about. I think it needs special attention.

**VD:** Is the main theme of *Defixiones* this issue of how the Greeks and Armenians were driven out of Asia Minor in 1915 and 1922?

**G:** I would say that that is the deepest part of my soul.

**VD:** What about the range of venues in which you perform, from the intimate darkness of Joe's Pub in New York City to Carnegie Hall, the Tel Aviv Opera and the Barbican in London.

**G:** The big places make you strong as a performer. I associate those big spaces with Greek tragic performance. To play in such places, the idea has to be larger than life. It has to be an idea that more than 50 people would be interested in. This immediately takes what I am doing out of the performance art context, which I think of as small and specialized.

**VD:** So you are doing a sort of double translation. First of all, you are translating various texts into your musical performance and then you are translating that performance into all sorts of different spaces?

**G:** That's right. I see it as giving these poets the operatic audience that they deserve. The kind of work they do in their writing is so operatic, liturgical. It's about their life, as therapists are wont to say, but their perception of life is not the parlor room perception of

life. They see themselves as mediums for so many other things. So I think it is important to take this work that has such an operatic, Greek tragic theater quality and to introduce it into grand spaces as well as intimate ones.

I relate this larger-than-life aspect of their work to the kind of distancing I do with my voice. I was so shocked when I found out that Michaux had the same idea about the voice. For him the voice was a kind of hammer.

**VD:** Could you explain what you mean about the voice? Are you referring to the way in which the voice, which we usually view as such an intimate, subjective thing, can be turned into a powerful distancing tool, a way of protecting oneself?

**G:** Yes, an actual shield. I think that the subjective and the objective are simultaneous. If you use the voice the way a Pavarotti uses the voice or tragic actors do or Callas or shamans, as breath which is transformative of the community and the individual, you must use it in this diaphragmatic way which at the same time makes the diaphragm almost impenetrable. Martial artists have told me that the way I prepare when I am singing is the way they prepare to be hit. The same moment of extroverting the sound from the body, that same moment you are also in a position of defense.

**VD:** You mention Michaux as one writer who discusses this. It is also part of the Greek literary and oral tradition. Certainly the *moirologi* lament tradition you draw on is full of references to how one can turn a weakness into a defense, a loss into a gain. I am thinking of another poem by the Greek poet Ritsos, his famous lament, *Epitaphios*, which is all about a mother who is mourning the death of her son in a tobacco strike in Thessaloniki. At one moment Ritsos, speaking in the voice of this mother, describes how the sob in her throat becomes so visceral that it becomes the noose that she will use to hang her son's murderer. It's the voice actually becoming the weapon.

**G:** The reason I keep thinking of the Greek and the avant-garde together is that old joke they used to make: if you have three Greeks together, you have three different political parties. This, for me, is the antithesis of the mob mentality. The Greek tradition is to be



Any translation is always second in relation to the original, and the translator as such is lost from the very beginning. He is per definition underpaid, he is per definition overworked, he is per definition the one history will not really retain as an equal...

Paul de Man

jealous of one's own family, is to plot the destruction of one's own family, to insist on being alone at all cost, on dominating everything at all cost to the point where you are fighting with your own brother.

VD: It's interesting to hear you say this since the emphasis especially by anthropologists who study Greece is always on kinship, sticking up for one's people, community, the lack of a word for privacy in Greek, etc.

G: Yeah, but that's the least interesting part of Greek society.

VD: And I think with regard to the present moment your alternative definition of the Greek as loner helps me grasp why there are so many Americans of Greek descent or with some relation to Greece who are doing cutting edge work in the arts, who are "standing alone." I am thinking of the poets Olga Broumas and Eleni Sikelianos, the novelist Irini Spanidou, the puppeteer Theodora Skipitares, or someone like the poet Anne Carson who isn't Greek but reworks the ancient Greek tradition in ways that remind me of your post-modern approach.

There is something about the distance from the homeland that is liberating and makes the standing-alone aspect of Greek culture more feasible. You once told me how claustrophobic it felt to be a woman in Greece, but how, here in America, the Greek American woman could find huge expanses of space. Perhaps immigration or the experience of immigration in one's family brings this out?

Certainly, if you talk to Greek poets and artists they for the most part downplay the avant-garde aspect of their work. *Protoporia*, the Greek word for avant-garde, is even more identified with the political sense than the English word. If one talks of a writer as *protoporiakos* one very likely means that his or her politics are radical, on the Left, communist. It's not about aesthetics. If I point out a particularly innovative passage of a poem to a poet they will say, "No, no, no, I am just carrying on the tradition of our greatest poets, elaborating on what they have already done. This is not new. This is not original."

G: Yeah, but by my standards, by American standards, that emphasis on tradition and repetition is certainly avant-garde. Because this is a country that has no history. Everyone forgets. No, they can't even forget because they have no history. Compared to Europe or

Asia, except of course for the indigenous people here.

**VD:** But it is particular things about Greek culture and history and language that intrigue you and that you want to use, right? I am thinking about *Malediction and Prayer* when you sing the Xarkakos song "*Kaigomai Kaigomai*." The Greek song is in the middle of many other songs from many other languages on the CD. On the one hand, you seem to be opening up the American scene to all these other languages. And this is not a culture that prides itself on knowing other languages. But, on the other hand, you seem to be particularly interested in the Greek piece.

**G:** Yeah, there's something very different when I sing that song. Even when I first sang it and it wasn't correct as far as the language was concerned. That is one of my great pathologies. My accent in Greek is wonderful, but my vocabulary is non-existent – "Den einai tipote, tipote, tipote" (It's nothing, nothing, nothing). It's truly incredible. I went up to Mani with my mother and her relatives and they were so excited because they heard I was singing *moirologia* and they expected that I would be able to carry on a very fluent conversation with them and they couldn't understand that I couldn't. They thought it was very strange that I couldn't.

**VD:** You actually feel like you have a very intimate relationship with the Greek language, but it's just that you don't have the living-in-the-language experience.

**G:** Talk about exile! In America you feel like a Greek and in Greece you feel like an American. The closest culture that would represent the feeling I have of being both American and Greek would have to be Mexican (laughing). In a sense the Spanish, Arab background of Mexico is closest to the interface that I experience.

**VD:** The hybridity is already there in the Mexican culture. Whereas with the hyphenated identities like Greek-American identity, one is always having to choose one or the other.

In all the tongues you sing, there is an incredible distortion of the language. Certainly with the languages that I know I can hear a bending of the vowels, whether it is "electric chaaaaaaaaair" in English or "Fotiaaaaaaa" in Greek. Can you describe what you are





doing when you distort a language? Are you pressing one language onto another? Or is it more about making room in the language of the text for the kind of musical sound you want? When you sing in Greek, does it feel different than when you sing in other languages? When you distort Italian, French, Armenian, or Turkish, is it a similar process?

**G:** That's really interesting because it is something I haven't ever thought about. You have to remember that I sang wordlessly for years and years and years, in an improvisational way. People would say "Oh, she's speaking in tongues." When I finally started to use words, and then only occasionally, they would be like blasts or stretched-out words. For me to use a word, I have to think of it as almost a nuclear particle. By the time I got to actually singing songs I was a person who had used words in a completely different way than most singers. So then in the songs every word counted. There are singers who also approach singing this way — jazz singers.

**VD:** What are you doing to these words?

**G:** I am getting into the meat of the word. "Fotia" -- what does "fotia" mean? Fire, right? So I am singing about the desperation that such an image evokes. I think that for me when I am singing in Greek it becomes this very religious thing.

**VD:** So for you the word itself is performative. Like a spell.

**G:** Right. I wonder if Greek had been my first language whether I would have been able to use it in the same way. French fans have told me that they like the way I use French because it is very different from the way they are able to use their own language.

**VD:** So is there anything different, more emotional about the Greek language for you?

**G:** Definitely, the Greek language is for me a singing language. My father, when he was in a good mood, would sing. And if he was in a bad mood, he would scream. And if he was silent, he would say, "You people think I am going to go outside and blow my head off." Then he

would ride around the block and come back and continue dinner as if nothing had happened.

**VD:** So the Greek language for you was very vocal — singing, screaming, threatening.

**G:** It was always very vocal and very emotional.

**VD:** It is interesting. There is something about the way that song “Kaigomai, kaigomai” is more emotional than the other on that CD. And yet you still manage to do the distancing thing with your voice. How does that work? It’s as though sentimentality is unacceptable.

**G:** You are right. I used to see my brother do it. He would do monologues. As soon as anything would reach a level of pathos, he would immediately say something extremely ironic. He would say, “If you think I am a fool, let me show you something else.”

I am not sentimental. Sentimentality is what I consider to be the distinguishing characteristic of performance art and I always say, “Hey, I can’t be a performance artist. I come from the Greek tradition. Performance art has its roots in the Anglo-Saxon tradition. It has nothing to do with what I do. It’s performed in art galleries.” I’m putting this on the record because I’ve had that term associated with my name and I don’t know what they are talking about.

**VD:** The problem with performance art as a description of your work is that the proportions are too small?

**G:** Yeah, when Callas sings at the theater of Delphi to 3,000 people un-amplified, how can we be talking about the same experience as what happens in an art gallery?

**VD:** What I am hearing is that when you say, “No, I am not a performance artist, no, I am not a singer, but more an auteur in the cinematographic sense....”

**G:** What would you say in Greek or Turkish for the word song? I say lieder because most people understand what the lieder tradition is. In Greek it would be *tragoudi*, right?



What can be said in one language cannot be said in another, and the totality of what can and can't be said varies necessarily with each language and with the connections between these languages.

gilles deleuze and felix guattari

**VD:** And *tragoudi* in Greek is great because it has all the ancient etymological connection with tragedy.

**G:** In operatic performance, words are used as the springboard often for long coloratura passages. Opera singers will say one word and it will last over sixteen bars. They are using the word as the emotion. This is also related to how I use words.

**VD:** I wanted to return to some of the pieces you were describing, *Defixiones* and *Plague Mass* and to ask you what exactly you were translating. How do you take a word or a phrase or an emotion that is encapsulated in a text or in a historical event and use it as the genesis for a whole work?

**G:** The word has to be of importance, a voltage control. If I say a word into the mike, it signals a remodulation of the voice which is then repeated a hundred times in a particular way etc. etc. It's really a translation. This is true in *Defixiones*, but in *Plague Mass* it is not so much about certain words. There I used a lot of songs — many words in each song. In this case, I approach words as an actor would... more interpretively. I think of technique as the process of being able to translate whatever it is that you have to say in the most accurate terms.

**VD:** You've talked in other places about the importance of the *bel canto* technique to your formation as a singer, what about the *rembetika* tradition of your father's people in Anatolia and the *moirologi* of your mother's people in Mani? What exactly are these Greek techniques? To what extent can a form or a technique be Greek? We often hear how content is ethnically driven -- that a novel or a poem or a film is *about* growing up Greek American, etc. — but form is not thought of in this way. Your work makes me wonder whether we shouldn't think more about form in this way.

**G:** I think that when I am doing the Rembetiko song "Kaigomai, kaigomai" I feel most myself. I enter a corridor where I am at home. It's like where the blood lies. It's a really weird thing. In the most simple terms, it is like finally being able to speak your own language. Now I know this doesn't make sense intellectually since those traditions were a generation or two removed. But let's say that a person has a particular physiognomy and that this had something to do with that culture's predisposition to a certain kind of speech, guttural or otherwise. I like to think that singing those particular words would

have, unbeknownst to her, a physical resonance. A lot of people say that Greek opera singers have a particularly Greek sound and that this is based on the shape of their skull. Perhaps that is wishful thinking. I don't really care if it is true or not. I feel it.

But don't think that I am investigating what is most Greek, and then focusing on that, because it's not like that. I've been doing this Greek stuff for too long for it to be an idea. I think it's more about me being the incarnation of my father. Why do so many daughters feel this way? Our poor mothers are left out for so many years. I am finally trying to be more like my mother. But I have always felt that I was my father. I look in the mirror and there I am — a girl — and I think, how did this happen? I see the excess of my father who in a good mood would sing in my face, all over me —no distance— he would not leave me alone. That love and excess of the language...

**VD:** Which is what *Rembetika* is all about. But there is also your mother's tradition, the *moirologio*...

**G:** ...the disciplinarian side.

**VD:** But technically, what is it that you got from that side? With regard to improvisation, say, being able to come up with different ways of talking about the dead. And then the wailing, the idea of voice as crying...

**G:** I did not know a thing about the *moirologio* or the Maniates when I started my own wailing. It was only later that everyone started making these analogies. "So have you studied this?" people would ask. I'd say, "Where am I going to study this?" There's very little recorded material. You have to be an anthropologist like Nadia Serematakis and go up into the villages.

**VD:** I am getting the sense that there are very different ways that these techniques inform your own technique — sometimes it is serious study, other times it is simply exposure...

**G:** Or coffee table discipline... show and tell. Like when the Greek father wants to tell you that you are eating too fast. He doesn't say anything, but he takes his fork, places it slowly in his mouth, chews, lowers his fork, and you know exactly what he means.





Everything you do is observed in that culture. There is no sense of space. You learn everything at close quarters. And when you finally break out, you take with you what you've learned, the technique, but you also have done something totally risky that requires extreme force – rigor and risk. You can't get out any other way, not through politeness, not through begging.

*Karen van Dyck is Associate Professor of Modern Greek Language and Literature and Director of the Program in Hellenic Studies at Columbia University. Her publications include *Kassandra and the Censors: Greek Poetry since 1967* (Cornell, 1998) and *The Rehearsal of Misunderstanding: Three Collections by Contemporary Greek Women Poets* (Wesleyan, 1998, bilingual edition)*