

Emilios Solomou

Emilios Solomou was born in 1971 in Nicosia and he grew up in his native village, Potami. He studied History and Archaeology at the University of Athens. He also studied Journalism in Cyprus and he worked as a journalist for a daily newspaper for some years. He is now a teacher of Greek and History in a public high school. He is a member of the editorial board of the literary magazine *Anef* and he has served as a member of the executive board of the Union of Cyprus Writers.

For the novel *An axe in your hands*, 2007, he was awarded the Cyprus State Prize for Literature. The book was also published in Bulgaria. Many of his short-stories were published in literary magazines and some were translated in English, Bulgarian, Polish and Turkish.

His novel *Like a Sparrow, quickly you passed...* was published in Bulgaria (*Plamak Publishing House, Sofia, 2013*).

His novel "Diary of an Infidelity" (Psichogios Publications, Athens 2012) awarded the E.U. Prize for Literature (2013). So far the book has been published in Poland (Ksiaskowe Klimaty, 2015), Germany (Griechenland Zeitung, 2015), FYROM (Publisher, 2016), Albania (Botimet Toena, 2015) and Serbia (Heliks, 2017). Soon it will be published in Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary and Bulgaria.

In October 2015 his new novel "Hatred is half of revenge" was released in Athens (Psichogios Publications). Rights were sold in Poland and Albania.

Interview for "Lente" magazine/Poland

1. **Dear Emilios, we are meeting here on the pages of "Lente" magazine. Its title, as you know, has two basic meanings: "slow" in Latin" and "lense" in Italian and Spanish.**

While reading your book published by Książkowe Klimaty, I could not resist the impression that the Lente concept fills it up from within. Not only does your story focus, like a lense, on difficult human emotions, but also has this hypnotizing, slow atmosphere for which, among other factors, it became famous.

How is it to write a "slow" - let's call it like this for the sake of our interview! - book in a world that is constantly rushing? In a world where you are no exception - working, raising a family, commuting to another city on an everyday basis?

It is true, we get the impression that the story in the novel is a slow moving story. Sometimes we have the feeling that time does not move at all. If we are happy, time runs too fast, if we are sad it slows down. But on the other hand, if we live in agony, it looks like somebody has pressed the pause button. This is what the protagonist is experiences. The main character, professor of archaeology G. Ducarelis, returns to the tiny island Koufonisi, twenty years after the excavation that made him famous. There he unearthed the remains of a young woman, pregnant, probably murdered 5000 years ago. Now he is there again to dig into his inner soul. His wife disappeared leaving no message. So this is the line on which the novel is walking on. Here time is identified with soul and what is happening inside. Most of the story actually happens through Ducarelis' eyes and mind: memory, time, decay. What is happening is moving too slow. Actually, this is done on purpose as I intended to connect time with human nature. No matter how many years have passed, human nature remains the same from prehistoric era to modern times. The novel is structured as an archaeological stratigraphy. From the prehistoric era-Cycladic civilization- to the recent past and present. In short, I wanted to show that human nature remains unchanged, dark and bright, Dionysian and Apollonian at the same time.

It is my opinion that the writer has to act like a biologist in his lab, always having his characters under the lens of a microscope to examine their psychological situation but also, within the frame of a wide angle lens, to define their place in the world. But coming back to this hypnotizing, slow atmosphere, as you noticed, indeed it stands contrary to the world around us that is constantly rushing and time always speeds up. I guess this is the way I try to regain my personal stability, this is my last line of defence, actually a retreat. And it is true, in my daily life I always have the feeling that time is running out. Writing "The Diary of an infidelity", in a way I tried to live another life in a different dimension than my reality and the intensive routine. Somehow I wanted to slow down a bit. It was a need I had.

- 2. The Mediterranean seduces us with its charming mixture of old and new, of tradition and freshness and it is no different for its native inhabitants. You, a born Cypriot, decided to study history and archaeology. Was it a choice that you would repeat today? What does this background give you personally and as a writer?**

By studying history and archaeology I had the chance to explore my roots in depth in order to find out who I am, where I stand. I was born and I live in the Eastern Mediterranean, near the Middle East, the birth place of our civilization. In my point of view, Mediterranean is the most interesting part of the planet. Around Mediterranean shores live different people who are still coming and going as in ancient times. Languages, cultures, religions, sounds, colours are all mixed together. It is this diversity that connects us all, the Mediterranean Sea and the invisible links of history. So it is charming and challenging at the same time. I feel lucky to live here and create, to be a part of this world, with such a rich heritage. Our destiny is our geography. So, yes studying history is a choice I do not regret and if I had time, I would like to do something more, I mean studying this unique heritage in length. In the past I was working as a journalist but I gave up journalism to study history and archaeology. I believe this is my destiny. Being familiar with history and archaeology is really an advantage for a writer. Both my recent books "Diary of an infidelity" (2012)- and "Hatred is half of a revenge" (2015) deal with history and archaeology. By giving depth to your stories, dealing with past and present time, you are at the same time going deep into your characters.

- 3. In this issue of "Lente" we talk about different forms of seduction. You, on the other hand, speak a lot about the underestimated seduction of literature today: people read little and poorly, the education system lacks in many ways...**

It is true that one of my biggest concerns is to make people read literature. But there is lack of interest, lack of running programs to promote bibliophilism. I am a teacher and every day I deal with literature and students in a High School. Speaking metaphorically, the way we teach literature is as if we give directions of "How-to-Kill-Literature". Unfortunately, we are forced to teach literature in such a boring, old fashioned and counterproductive way in order to prepare students to give fixed answers during their exams. But this is not literature, it is like mathematics. If we have to analyse poetry or a short story, we begin cutting each text line by line, like butchers, as if it is an anatomy lesson. It is not surprising that students tend to hate literature. They do not enjoy literature at all. But if we want cultivated civilians who care about society, if we actually want to face our problems we need to do something. And literature is one of the keys in order to do that, a step we have to take. Literature is not a priority in my country-and in many other countries as well. But literature is a central parameter in my own life, one of my seductions. I love reading, this is my oxygen, otherwise I would die. Readers will trace references and allusions in my novels regarding some other books or writers.

This is my way to tell them, please go and read this book too, it's great. So, I set a dialogue with them, a bridge to communicate. I was convinced by such references in some of my favourite novels, I searched for them and I have read excellent books. So I trust writers' suggestions maybe more than reviewers' opinion. This way I see literature as an adventure within the adventure of the main narration. I only hope that my readers will share the same view and enjoy their journey.

- 4. Cyprus, the place where Aphrodite was born, is commonly believed to be an island of love and seduction. Could you tell us a little bit about your homeland? What are the most essential characteristics of Cyprus that are important to Emilios Solomou? What would you like the Polish people to know about your island? How does Cyprus seduce its son and inhabitant on an everyday basis?**

My homeland is a crossroad between West and East. And this is visible in our history, monuments, even in nature and people. Because of that, we suffered a lot throughout our history. Many conquerors occupied Cyprus and each one left traces. My country has been an independent state for just 56 years now. We are a new Republic with a weak experience in practising democracy. So, during these past years, we had a lot of troubles, inter communal clashes that led to a coup and finally to the Turkish Invasion that divided Cyprus in two. A lot of people suffered, hundreds of thousands became refugees and we still have many missing people. But today, discussions are going on to find a common accepted solution and unify the island.

The visitors, especially those from northern Europe, will be seduced by the good weather conditions all year round. Wherever they go they will find traces of history, archaeological sites from prehistoric to the English colonization and the recent past. Ancient Greek cities, Phoenician presence, French gothic and Venetian buildings, Ottoman mosques and more. The conquerors were numerous (also Assyrians, Egyptians, Persians, Knights Crusaders and English). That is what makes Cyprus a unique, an attractive place, ready to seduce any visitor. But still, if history, archaeology, this multicultural past and presence as well as mythology are not enough, the visitor will be also seduced by the beautiful nature up on the mountains, the picturesque traditional villages and friendly hospitable people. Nice beaches will compensate the most demanding visitors. Wherever the visitor is the distance to the mountains or to the sea is less than an hour by car. The most striking feature is that during winter someone might experience skiing on Troodos slopes and an hour later he could go swimming-the water is not so cold and many locals and foreigners are winter swimmers. Recently some friends from Poland visited Cyprus. And I am pleased to say that they have fallen in love with the place.

- 5. "The diary of an infidelity" has a strong title, but, in my humble opinion, more than a book about infidelity, it is a book about self-destruction, memory and time. Is this contrast an intentional one?**

Actually it is not a book about infidelity. Infidelity is just a cause to speak about other things. The title I had in mind while I was writing the novel was “Diary of an excavation”. But it was so “scientific”-archaeological. So I changed the title to “Diary of an infidelity” focusing on the human behaviour and nature. This had an impact on the whole concept. Positive I hope. The starting point is seduction and infidelity, but what is happening in the novel is much more than this. In a way, I wanted to explore the consequences of such a behaviour, self-destruction, memory and time. I like working on different levels each time in my novels. The protagonist is an archaeologist, professor Ducarelis. He is a weak man, somehow a self-destructive person. As I mentioned before, in his youth, while he was excavating a site in Koufonisi, a Cycladic island, he unearthed the prehistoric remains of a young pregnant woman, probably murdered 5000 years ago. During the excavations he cheated on his wife (Maria) with one of his students (Antigone). For a long time he remains uncertain what to decide. He is a hostage of his dilemmas, his wife or the student? If he had the choice he would decide both. We follow his life twenty years later. His present wife, Antigone, disappeared suddenly leaving no message and trace. Ducarelis is back in the island again, almost an elderly person, still in love with Antigone. He wants to fight with his ghosts, his memories, to reconcile with his past, proceeding to another excavation, into his inner soul. At the same time he is in contradiction with the implacable time, that destroys youth, beauty. So, it is more than just a book about infidelity, it is a book about time, decay, memory, love, past and present.

6. You participated in the project called "We share the same sea", where five Cypriot and five Israeli writers were invited to talk about truths of life, about what it is like to grow up in a country where dividing lines define the daily lives of people. Could you tell us a little bit more about this documentary and the emotions that accompanied its production?

I was three years old during the Turkish Invasion. I remember the aeroplanes flying over our houses and my family running to hide under the olive trees. And the nights while we were sleeping outside in the fields because we were afraid of the air strikes. And one night, covered by the darkness, we got on a truck and left our village heading to the mountains. These are traumatic memories that will escort me throughout my life. They are part of my childhood and at the same time important experiences for a writer.

Experiencing war scenes, explosions, fights, having our love ones killed or missing (I have a first cousin who was a missing person until recently, after so many decades his bones were found in a mass grave in the occupied areas) is something that we share in common with our colleagues from Israel- and of course Palestine. We face more or less the same traumas or dilemmas in our present and in our past as well. Do we have to reconcile with the “enemy”? Do we want to live together in a peaceful land? What are the red lines in order to find a common language and solve once and for all our problems? What about the fanatics from both sides? And what literature has to do with all that? Literature is the common language, the medicine to have the patient recovered, the means to heal our pain and wounds, to

preserve the memories and remember. Most importantly, to remain humans after all. Literature captures the atmosphere and the deepest meanings sometimes in a unique way and maybe in a much more effective way than history does. Literature and writers in Cyprus, Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots, opened the way long before the politicians. They launched meetings and talks soon after the 1974 war. So, we participated in this documentary film which was sponsored by the Embassy of Israel in Cyprus (Producers: Eleni Xenou and Christoforos Rodites) and discussed issues regarding all these universal concerns. It was really a remarkable experience. The film was shown on Cyprus Public TV recently and in public screening in some towns in crowded places. The most important fact for me is that in literature there are no countries, borders and nationalities, only one common land and humans after all.

- 7. I was absolutely stunned by the beauty of your prose, which happens quite rarely when I read translations and not the original versions of novels. What is your take on the art of translation? How confident are you in the actual possibility of translating a work that is filled with words of passion, internal conflicts, love and pain?**

I strongly believe that translating is really a hard hard job to do. Sometimes it is much more intensive and difficult to translate than writing the original text. A translator not only has to be very keen on his/her work and gifted but also be very capable of getting into the writers mind and soul, to capture the feeling and remain within the writer's concept and personal style. It is not an easy effort. Because a translator has to be a writer at the same time. Translators are the invisible heroes behind the whole project. They are the mediators between the writer and the foreign readers. That's why they are so important and they deserve any recognition they can get. Unfortunately sometimes their work is underestimated and it is not recognised as it should. Personally I love to work with them as I was taught through my recent experience. I consider myself very lucky sitting and working together with one of the best translators, Ewa Szyler who loved the story and showed respect to my text. I feel blessed and I am happy because this collaboration seems that is going to be continued in another project. I understand that my novel "Diary of an infidelity" is not so easy to be translated. All these different levels, in time, history, or in space, the internal conflicts, as you noticed, and the style of language, a poetic language, need a lot of work. And often with a sense of humour I apologize to Ewa Szyler for being too difficult in my novel. She captured the heard, the core of my novel. What else should I ask from a translator?

- 8. Love and seduction is one of the most central cores of literature and art and I am sure that Cypriot literature is no exception. Do you recall a book published in Cyprus in the last few years that had a particularly interesting, surprising or innovative take on these themes?**

There is a book that comes into my mind, the novel "Eastern Mediterranean" by Ivi Meleagrou, probably the best novel ever written by a Cypriot. The book was published in Athens during the sixties-not very recent actually, but it is worth reading. The story is placed in Nicosia and has to do with the intercommunal

clashes between Greek and Turkish Cypriots at least in its background. Everything is happening through the eyes of a young woman, while an “illegal” love affair is going on. The whole atmosphere seduces the reader in a magical, unique way. The writer is too bold while handling her thematics and characters. The passion is flourishing in the place where the paradise is about to be lost at the end. It is amazing how she foresees the tragedy that is coming. In my eyes it is a classic story of love and seduction in many different forms. That’s why it is worth reading. It is written in such a modern way more than 50 years ago. It was really a surprise when I read that book. But it is not a surprise at all that in recent years the book is getting a recognition from abroad and therefore some translations.

9. Let me close this interview with a metaphorical question asked with a wink. What or who will seduce Emilios Solomou this coming summer?

I hope I will be seduced by a fairy coming out of the books I am going to read. I am impatient for the summer. I need some rest and energy. I missed walks in the forest and fishing. I will spend some of my holidays in Athens, maybe in Crete and perhaps I will travel somewhere in Europe. I want to live that lazy summer nights reading in my yard under the sky. Hoping that during one of these nights a fairy will eventually appear. Of course I will have to work on the final draft of my short stories collection and probably on an old novella. But most importantly, I want to live the real life, not just through the eyes of my novel characters. But then again, I am not sure!