

An Interview with Andreas Karavis aboard his Caique

with Anna Zoumi, Elladas Magazine, Summer 1999, Volume 2

Translated from the Greek and Commentary by [David Solway](#) (August 2024)



Somewhere In Lipsi Island (Nikos Gyftakis, 2020)

Andreas Karavis is among Greece's most acclaimed and admired poets, often referred to in the critical literature as "the fisherman poet." He lives on the small Aegean island of Lipsi, where he divides his time between fishing and writing. His major work, *The Dream Masters (Oneirou Kyriarchi)*, appeared in 1999 (Ikaria Press, Athens) and can be found in an omnibus volume [*Saracen Island*](#), which I translated during my five-year sojourn on the Greek islands. Andreas Karavis and Anna Zoumi married one year after the interview.

Anna Zoumi: Let me begin by thanking you for consenting to this interview. It is a rare pleasure.

Andreas Karavis: The pleasure is mine because it is rare.

A.Z. You are known affectionately by several epithets as “the fisherman poet,” “the solitary one,” and “the hermit of Greek poetry,” a dedicated cultivator of solitude. Do you not at times feel lonely and marginalized? I might add that it seems most appropriate to be speaking with you on your caique. It is the symbol of your isolation, is it not?

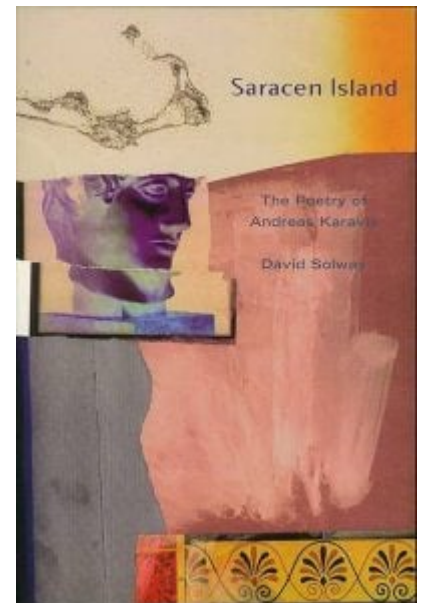
A.K. Not at all. In fact, I feel blessed with a rich companionship. Wherever I am the great Greek poets are with me and I hear their voices constantly. I am involved in a perpetual conversation with them. And I do not avoid the common people whom I meet almost daily in the marketplace, the kafeneion, the harbor, the taverna, when I am, as the famous people like to say, “in residence.”

A.Z. Still, you are very difficult to track down. Few people have ever heard of Lipsi.

A.K. I wish to choose the terms of my engagement with others. I have nothing against conviviality, but I cannot abide the constant company of others, the demands of sociability, the evasions of a fabricated discourse. I have two refuges: my caique and my poetry. Possibly they are the same. In any case, you are now familiar with both.

A.Z. You say “evasions.” Could you elaborate?

A.K. You have read my poetry with attention and sympathy, so you understand my lifelong conviction that what we once called the “self,” the center of genuine, personal and reflective response to the grandeur and complexity of existence, is the greatest casualty of the age we live in. It has practically ceased to exist in any significant way. The self has been infiltrated by a political and economic and neoscholastic and technocratic language that is dangerously abstract. We think in terms of slogans, generalities, clichés, words bound up like grains of rice in vine leaves and deposited in cans for popular consumption. And we seek distraction to avoid recognizing the loss we have suffered. Even war has become a way of avoiding issues—the ultimate form of entertainment. I decided as a young man that my task was to rediscover the single and unified core of our sense of being in this world, the pit at the center of the cherry, through an honest and rigorously purged language that is our own. And by trying to revive the miraculous awareness of the sheer, almost aggressive beauty of things: the wind, the sea, the chorus of voices we hear in the wine, the elemental force of a woman’s loveliness. To be spare and lavish at the same time, strong enough to resist evaporation and despair but also strong enough to live abundantly. This is what I call the Cycladic self. My project is to restore the Cycladic self to its place of eminence in a flat and impoverished world.



A.Z. For someone whose reticence has become legendary, you are more than forthcoming.

A.K. I have agreed to this interview. To shirk my responsibility would put me in bad faith, would it not?

A.Z. Let me change the subject for a moment. Lili Zographou. There has been much speculation about your relationship with this formidable woman and writer. Would you care to comment?

A.K. No.

A.Z. Now you are less than forthcoming.

A.K. Not that I wish to be, but this subject is taboo. I have a responsibility here as well.

A.Z.I understand. But you are surely aware that your readers are interested in your thoughts about the poetic muse, your poem on Hecate, the dedication of *The Dream Masters* to your mother Eleni, the female presence in "On Karpathos," and so on. So the question would be, if I may rephrase it, is Lili an allegorical figure for you, a fusion of Hecate and Eleni, the muse at once both dark and light, stormy and calming, destructive and floral?

A.K. That is a very cunning way to reformulate the question. Lili Zographou was an extraordinary woman, all things to all men and no one thing to any. That is all I am permitted to say.

A.Z. There is also a rumor that you were briefly involved with the Turkish poet, Nesmine Rifat, known in her country as much for her beauty as for her writings. And that your sonnet, "Elegy: The Garden," was composed for her. Is there any truth to this?

A.K. You seem most interested in my supposedly romantic involvements. I am not a movie star, so why should your readers care? You should remember that I was and still am a member of the Symparenekromeni, the fellow-ship of buried lives.

A.Z. Even so, you must realize that you are now a

celebrity. And people do like to know these things. Besides, given the tension between Greece and Turkey, such a liaison may be regarded either as treasonable or as a review of future harmony. There is a dimension here that transcends the personal.

A.K. Nothing transcends the personal. My relationships, such as they are, have always been nonpolitical. Do you think it would make any difference to me if my cat Argos boasted of Turkish or even American ancestry? And he is a far more important person than the present Prime Minister of Greece, or the previous one, for that matter. With me everything is personal: the political, the romantic, the so-called collective, the divine, the demonic. Everything. I will say no more about this.

A.Z. Melina Mercouri?

A.K. Who is Melina Mercouri?

A.Z. Fair enough. I will drop the subject. Who are the dream masters?

A.K. Fair enough. They define the rules of the game and so necessarily escape definition, since definition is by definition rule-bound. Sometimes I think of them as fallen and displaced gods who revenge their refugee status by the practice of indifference. More often, I regard them as the corrupt archontic powers who govern the actual dream of life and whom most of us try to escape only in dreams—dreams as the only way out of the dream, you see. But flight is always temporary. So there is nothing left for us to do but to stay residually awake while remaining snared in the coils of the dream.

You are certainly aware of that paradoxical condition of knowing you are dreaming while continuing to suffer the delusion which the dream represents. Of being awake in the middle of your sleep, the experience of nocturnal

consciousness. It is what the ancients called the *nekyia*, the visit to the underworld, and what I understand as the sense of being haunted by the real, for which we must learn the difficult art of, let's say, reflexive hospitality. This is where poetry comes in. It is the only defense against the gnostic overlord. Poetry is the center of consciousness in the dream from which we cannot awaken.

A.Z. That is a very bleak vision. How do you propose to resist hopelessness, the feeling of desolation? What procedures can you recommend?

A.K. The self is the only method.

A.Z. Yet many thinkers today argue that the self is nothing but a fiction, an effect of extraneous forces or a mere artifact of language.

A.K. This is precisely what the dream masters wish us to think. The self is our last resource. Our only resource. Everything in the world today conspires to our dispossession, to strip us of our patrimony as human beings, to replace the self with a prosthetic illusion. But the self, the core of wakefulness at the heart of sleep, is the only thing in the world which is not a fiction. And the mother tongue of the self is poetry.

A.Z. Poetry.

A.K. Yes, poetry. By which I don't mean the false poetry of confession and unintelligible indulgence and theoretical programs that corresponds to the prosthetic self and which is everywhere drowning out the word echoing in the depth of our souls. I mean the poetry which refuses all deception, the language that the cosmocrators cannot abide.

A.Z. Who were your teachers, your poetic mentors, if I can put it that way?

A.K. Angelos Sikelianos was my great preceptor. From him I learned to seek the precise resonance of the word, not simply its denotative and syllabic qualities. And my grandfather Andreas, who lives within me like the son I never had. He was so much himself that even his memory is more substantial than any god you might happen to meet at the crossroads of miracle and chance. From him I learned to seek the precise resonance of the immutable self, not simply its social and cosmetic features. And I would be remiss not to mention Nikos Gatsos, whose long poem Amorgos, where we hear “a distant bell dabbling the sky with bluing/Like the voice of a small gong traveling the constellations” and listen to shepherds “with reeds of linden serenely singing their morning songs,” is unique in the language. Indeed, his language is the purest and most evocative of all Greek poets.

A.Z. I notice you are fond of the word “resonance.” Can you explain what it means for you? Precisely?

A.K. That, too, is a fair question. When I was a child I had a collection of music boxes, about a dozen, which I used to play and listen to religiously. Sometimes I would wind up one after another in succession to try to distinguish their various melodies, to render cosmos from chaos, to hear each melody in its original purity. As I gradually developed the ability to separate concord from discord, I also discovered to my great surprise that all these melodies were mysteriously bound and implicated with one another, like the instruments in an orchestra, so that even if I listened to only one music box, I could hear all the others. By separating the one from the many, I learned that the many was also one. You see, all single things find their essence in relation to a larger whole which in turn, if that which is single remains open to itself and to the world around it, may return home to its embodiment. The word is in the language but the entire language is also in

the word. In the same way, the individual is in the Creation but the Creation is also in the individual—were we only aware of it, could we only awaken from the sleep which consumes us. This mutual relation between the one and the many which I found in the little world of the music boxes is what I mean by “resonance.” Precisely.

A.Z. And you put that childhood discipline, that little music box world, to work in your poetry?

A.K. That is possible, even probable. I loved the simplicity of the actual refrains and musical beats, which I sometimes still hear when I place my stethoscope over the heart of a poem to make sure it is healthy. Also, when I apply myself to a poem, I try to wind up as many different—how shall I put it?—to wind up as many reverberations or overtones of meaning and implication as I can while clinging to an underlying simplicity of word and cadence.

A.Z. Where are those music boxes now?

A.K. On my mantelpiece. I would not part with them. Occasionally I bring one or two with me when I go out on *Aspasia*.

A.Z. But not today, I see.

A.K. I have you.

A.Z. You are kind. May I ask you, out of curiosity, why you named your caique *Aspasia*?

A.K. There are many reasons. I will say only that she has been my most influential mistress. And she is beautiful, no? *Aspasia*, of course, was the intellectual paramour of Pericles.

A.Z. Do you then identify with Pericles?

A.K. Not at all. I like the sound of the name *Aspasia* and I admire the woman. Would there were more like her. Pericles was able to navigate the treacherous seas of Athenian politics as well as he did owing in good measure to her affection and intelligence.

A.Z. Andreas Karavis, thank you once again for your time and generosity of spirit.

A.K. Please don't mention it, Anna. By the way, I know a delightful little taverna on the coast around the next headland. They make a wonderful pikelia and their barreled retsina is to live for. Would you care to join me?

A.Z. It would be a pleasure.

Karavis still fishes occasionally, if only for the table. He does not write much poetry any longer, devoting his time to a semi-political treatise on the decline of contemporary Greece since joining the European Union. He regards the transition of the drachma to the euro as a signal act of a demonic exchange, of the surrender of the country's history and traditions to a foreign enemy, of allowing its soul to be colonized by the spirit of rootless internationalism and what he calls "theo-amnesia." "What we bought with the drachma," he says, "we sold with the euro. Our soul." And again: "First it was the Panzer, now it's the Mercedes." We have maintained a friendship over the years and continue to correspond.

[Table of Contents](#)

David Solway's latest book is [Crossing the Jordan: On Judaism, Islam, and the West](#) (NER Press). His previous book is [Notes from a Derelict Culture](#), Black House Publishing, 2019, London.

A CD of his original songs, [*Partial to Cain*](#), appeared in 2019.

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