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## **OUR SPRING 2016 FEATURE**

### **DIMITRIS LYACOS**

Dimitris Lyacos (b. 1966) is a contemporary Greek poet and playwright. He is the author of the *Poena Damni* trilogy. Renowned for its genre-defying form and the avant-garde combination of themes from literary tradition with elements from ritual, religion, philosophy and anthropology, Lyacos's work reexamines grand narratives in the context of some of the enduring motifs of the Western Canon. *Poena Damni*, is arranged around a cluster of concepts including the scapegoat, the quest, the return of the dead, redemption, physical suffering, and mental illness. Lyacos's characters are always at a distance from society as fugitives, like the narrator of *Z213: Exit*, outcasts in a dystopian hinterland like the characters in *With the people from the bridge*, or marooned, like the protagonist of *The First Death* whose struggle for survival unfolds on a desert-like island. Classified as postmodern and cross-genre, *Poena Damni* is referred to as one of the salient examples of the fragmentation technique — despite, however, its postmodern affinities, it is also construed in line with the High Modernist tradition setting aside the postmodern playfulness for a serious and earnest handling of the subject. Lyacos was born and raised in Athens where he studied Law. From 1988-1991 he lived in Venice, then moved to London, studied philosophy at University College London and stayed there for thirteen years. He currently shares his time between Berlin and Athens. In 1984, he set about writing the first installment of what would later become the *Poena Damni* trilogy. The work, in its current form, developed as a work in progress over the course of thirty years with subsequent editions and excerpts appearing in journals around the world, as well as in dialogue with a diverse range of sister projects it inspired — drama, contemporary dance, video and sculpture installations, photography, opera and contemporary music. So far the trilogy has been translated into six major languages and is extensively performed across Europe and the United States. In its unique style that conflates poetry with prose and resisting classification, *Poena Damni* is one of the leading examples of contemporary writing coming from Europe and the most recent Greek literary work that has achieved international reputation. Lyacos is an Honorary Fellow at the International Writing Program, University of Iowa. A second edition of *Z213: Exit* will appear in a revised English translation in the autumn of 2016.



photograph by Thomas Langdon

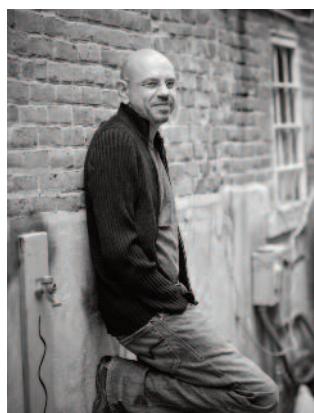
PBR: *Thank you for taking the time out of your busy routines to talk with us and share a bit of your work with our readership. Why not start by asking you about your childhood and what it has meant for your work?*

DL: I would like to thank you as well. *The Bitter Oleander* is a great journal and I hope I will live up to the expectations of your readers. Regarding your question about childhood, I must say that I have been thinking about it lately, even before you asked, because of an incident that happened about a fortnight ago: one evening a very close friend of mine came with his wife to visit me; in a turn of our conversation they commented on a recent interview of mine they had read at the *Writing Disorder Magazine*, a few weeks before; my answer to the question about childhood had left them cold, they said. Their own impression was that I had a very interesting childhood, far more interesting than my answer about it; it looked like they were disappointed somehow, that, literally, I had not put myself fully into this. They spoke about my family's house surrounded by our garden – the very garden we were having drinks that night – about my now deceased, four unmarried aunts, who were always there for me – and they were literally always there, hardly ever leaving the premises! – they hinted at shreds of stories which according to them I should have shared with readers. I was listening to them, perplexed; for a moment, they had become so passionate about it, it looked as if they were talking about their childhood, not mine; and they seemed to enjoy a privileged view on something which, was indeed a part of my life. In fact, under the observer's perspective, they probably had a privileged, bird's eye view on it; this may be more than I can ever have. I am the emanation of my own childhood but this is much more complex than stories, or depictions of facts about time and place. Yes, I grew up in Athens, in a neighbourhood called Ilion. Yes, I was born in 1966 and grew up in the early seventies. Yes, children were roaming the streets then much more than they do now, riding their bicycles and playing soccer. Yes, we were watching our Greek junta episodes on our black and white TV screens; but what was it like? What was it like? There is a classic, by now paper of one of your major philosophers, Thomas Nagel, famously called: What is it like to be a bat? I think it makes some sense to mention it here; childhood is one of those clusters of mental –as well as physical – states which I think is almost pointless to share: even if you could know what it would be for you to have such and such experiences as recounted, you could never know what is (what's more: was!) for me to have those experiences: a human being is not just the sum of its parts. In that sense, I wouldn't be able to clarify my childhood to you; I can speak about facts but those you find in history books, and if someone thinks his personal facts of life are worth

sharing, he goes on and writes a memoir. I don't, at least for now. What I know and can say though, and which I am sure you might also want to say about your own childhood, (and which is something I am reminded again now as I watch my daughter growing up) is that childhood is the period in life in which the sense of death is not wired into our navigation system and this is why we can play for real.

**PBR:** *Was there a moment when your writing began to act as the continuation of this reality you define so well?*

**DL:** I don't think this kind of "reality" existed back then. This is a "reality" I can only observe from my current position. Things have probably happened the other way around: "reality" has been a continuation of writing. My writing, as you might expect, during thirty-years of "practice" has naturally taken a course that I could not have anticipated. The content of my work as such, has come about through a slow, gradual process that has now become the trilogy in its present state. Now, to go back to your question, if you want to consider writing as the continuation of reality, you cannot mean the "content," the work produced; you probably mean the act of writing. There you are bound to get a trivial answer: Yes, my writing came as a response to what was perceived as "reality" by me at any given moment in time, and it has found its way on paper. You can say that, either "reality" was extended on paper, or, if you like, that there was a trace that "reality" left on paper; there was no particular moment, however, in which that started to happen. The act of writing connects to the world in an obvious way, it is a relief, in the case of some people the act is regularly repeated, thereby providing sustained relief. I am sorry if I speak a little like an amateur physician here but this is how, I think, the image of a writer is born, as well as his myth of himself. I would like to add though, that in general, all creative endeavors are responses to "reality", and any "reality" is good enough for this. It does not have to be the realization of a higher order, or, some kind of exceptional calling, to set such a process in motion. Literature is a response within the realm of language, another language game, Wittgenstein might tell you that it has special value, in so far as any sincere response has its special value, within our world. But it does not have to be literature, it may be anything, it may be chess, boxing, singing, storytelling, or car racing.



photograph by Thomas Langdon

**PBR:** *I was trying to see if you thought writing was an extension of that childhood where death is perhaps not as much a consideration as it is when we grow older and require a place of refuge. Maybe by using the term "relief" we are both discussing the same thing.*

**DL:** It is great you mention this, in fact I think I should say here that my use of “relief” was intentional, as it was also intentional to put the word “reality” between quotes. We could simply say, of course, that our creative endeavors are places to hide from the “reality” of death which from some point on becomes a backdrop affecting our course in life. I intentionally avoided, however, the use of the term because I did not want to restrict creative acts to the role of response to death in the narrow sense of the word. Moreover, I have put the word reality between quotes here because of its semantic vagueness. For the purpose of our discussion, we can say that death is contained in the “real”, the “real” here being what is wholly outside language and linguistic signification. Allow me to play along with Lacan a little: we are forever severed from the Real by our entrance into language. We insulate ourselves within language and the Real only gets to us, surprises us, through the gaps, it oozes through the seams. One of our meetings with it is, indeed, death, but since we have locked ourselves inside since childhood, since language, any appearance of the Real will be traumatic. There literature plays an ambivalent role, it purports to approach the Real keeping itself, however, firmly within its own medium – language and symbolic order. In the most recent review of *With the people from the bridge* which came from Mexico City, I was happy that reference was made to a scene from the opening part of the book which no other reviewer had previously deemed important to refer to: there is a point where one among “the people” setting up the makeshift performance before the “play” begins, *opens the Bible, tears pages from there and goes and glues them on the wall to the right, one beside the other.* I am not in the mind of my characters, but this person might be doing this for the protection of the “inmates” — a kind of metaphysical insulation as it were, the Bible being your best bet against any attack, any “evil”. However, by doing this he is also isolating himself and his “people” from what “exists” outside, he is using the symbolic (language, the text) against the Real that lurks out there. And what if the “evil” and the “real” were inherently related somehow? Of course, his is a hopeless task, the Real will find its way in one way or the other.

**PBR:** *Since our readers may be unfamiliar with your trilogy Poena Damni (Z213: EXIT, With the people from the bridge, The First Death), now translated in six languages, perhaps you can discuss the various paths along which this trilogy led you to its completion.*

DL: For thirty years I have been going back and forth writing, rewriting and editing what is an ensemble of no more than two hundred pages — sometimes I think that if there were a Nobel prize for editing I would certainly make the shortlist. Anyway, it all started as a poetry collection I had published when I was eighteen followed by another one, three years later, which resembled more like a poem with dramatic aspirations. Some of the major themes of the trilogy in its current version date back to this period, and in the course of the work's development I have used those books as raw material for what later became the *Poena Damni* trilogy. The crucial moment for me was the publication in Greek of *The First Death* in 1996. It was then that for the first time I was deluded into thinking the project was over, *The First Death* being the third book of the sequence so far. Almost immediately after I had published it, however, the previous book, by the title of *Nyctivoe*, seemed to me, and in an increasingly conspicuous way, deeply flawed; so I set out to rewrite it. It was completed and published in the year 2001, under the same title, and a two volume Greek version and German translation was launched in Frankfurt, in the context of the Book Fair. Once more, at this point I thought I had completed the project but shortly afterwards, I realized the first book was flawed as well and put that on target. I had no qualms about starting again —in any sentimental sort of way, that being my first ever book publication— and *Z213: EXIT*, the opening book of the trilogy narratively speaking, was out in 2009 in Greek. That should have done the job, but I was back into thinking, again, that the second version of *Nyctivoe* was still not good enough, albeit, without any doubt, more satisfactory than the first version: even if I had failed better with it, I had nonetheless failed. So I gave it another go and the new book appeared, under a new title, *With the people from the bridge*, first in the English translation, in October 2014. The Greek original still awaits publication and it is interesting, I think, that although I write in Greek, and will continue to do so, my books have started to appear in English first; of course, I now feel farther away from the Greek “theatre of literary operations” than I have ever felt before. At any rate, for now, it looks like the trilogy is standing firm on its feet and, judging also from the critical reception so far, in the present state it seems to have reached a point of stability. But I will still go on checking for its half-life and see whether it might still decay.

PBR: You say the first versions of *Nyctivoe*, which is the second book in the *Poena Damni* trilogy including the one that five years later became *With the people from the bridge*, seemed “deeply flawed” to you. Was that flaw a matter of realizing your perception needed to be changed or was it simply the way you needed to express it?

DL: What, I am sure, comes across from my characterization of the *Nyctivoe* versions as “flawed”, is the preoccupation that readers may find some interest in those; I would be much happier if they are simply ignored. I could have kept them, of course, in my drawer and destroyed them after the publication of *With the people from the bridge*, as I always do with manuscripts and old versions; instead, I published too early, did that twice, and not only in Greek, so I suppose the situation is now out of control, even though there are very few copies left and, luckily for me, they largely go unnoticed.



Dimitris Lyacos with a rug beater,  
oil painting on prepared wooden panel  
by Yiannis Melanitis

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on the expiation of your literary sins and try to be saved. It was in that context, that I decided to “repossess” the text and start with it anew. To my mind, it was worth the effort because there was some kind of “essence” – forgive me for using the term – in the first place, a kind of “Platonic” light flashing in the dark, or an Aristotelian final cause, leading the way; on top of that there were also some building blocks that had stayed in place after the earthquake. I worked from there to resolve the rest. During the process, work and research both paid their dues, and I realized that some, – some, not all – of the problems stemmed from looking in “the wrong place” or being naïf about the depth of the subject. This subject or, cluster of subjects, if you like – love-to-death, the myth of the revenant, the relationship of the living and the dead - permeate a great part of western literary tradition; unfortunately though, most of the time, this tradition comes to meet us in the guise of an impoverished two-dimensional fictional narrative obsessively originating in one single book – Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*; a very good book, perhaps, in its own right; if one wants to explore deeper, however, one has to simply go beyond that, as well as Gothic literature in general. It became obvious to me, from a point onwards, that I had to work harder and delve deeper in order to get to the core of my subject.

**PBR:** *Please tell us about the role that music, performance, theater and video have had on your work and whether these activities are somehow at play when you’re actually writing.*

**DL:** Taking off from the cue of “at play” and your reference to music, what first comes to mind, in a sort of a stream-of-consciousness-like way, is that I never play music when I work, in fact I avoid places where music might be heard (whereas noise doesn’t disturb me at all) and I do the same when I read a literary text. I suppose, when I write, there may be some inner ear listening to the “music inside” or, some kind of private oscillation taking place and whose state is disturbed by the contrary “outer” music. I am not very keen on metaphors if I have a literal way of expressing myself – and that includes my work – but the whole thing probably starts from some power applied that has the effect of taking me on some kind of state of forced vibration. I have no other way but to approach the experience metaphorically here; the whole thing seems like a kind of sub-music, music not yet being born and perhaps like a precursor of dance as well. In that sense, music, or something like a proto-musical experience that consequently leads to rhythms simpler or more complex, is at the base of writing, or you can say that both music and writing emanate, from a common source. Now, if in your question, about the role of music or the arts, you mean some kind of quasi-ekphrastic process whereby my work could be an extension of other works in different media, works I have

at some point come across and felt connected to, then my answer would be: yes and no. Yes, because I keep a constant connection to all other arts; a work that agrees with me enters “the system” and might come out the other end - transformed and unrecognizable or, in some cases even, completely unchanged. In this latter case, you can say that I have stolen something. Have I? Thank God T.S. Eliot has made stealing a criterion of poetic maturity long ago so we are fine with the moral aspect of that kind of theft, but I would beg to partially differ with him there. It is not necessary that “the good poet” makes his theft utterly different to that from which it is torn as Eliot goes on to say; of course, he wants the “good poet” to be unlike the rest and this is obviously a sine qua non of his modernist agenda; a work, however, does not always have to be an instance in the course of a literary life of anxiety during which we must try to stand out; sometimes we should be allowed to acknowledge and copy “the truth”, if this is what we feel it is, without being reprimanded. Why? Simply because we want to share something with others as much as we want to be part of it. On that account, if I find “truth” in the work of somebody else, be it drama, or video art, a film or a painting, I will have no qualms, I will copy – copy, not steal. The problem is, of course, that we are not part of a “Byzantine art” tradition nowadays, the cult of the individual, as Durkheim has said long ago, reigns, and we all want to be different and appreciated for our uniqueness. As I remember I had said a few years ago, in a reading at the Iowa University, addressing myself to my fellow international writers that were part of the public, we always want to be the bride in every wedding and the corpse in every funeral. We all want to be in the center but you cannot be in the center on your own; you are part of something and this is what counts more. And our work is part of something bigger as well. I wonder sometimes, when I am asked about the theatrical aspects of my work, or when I am invited to lecture in a cinema, rather than a literature department, whether I am also in the quest of an encompassing state for the arts, a state preceding fragmentation into separate forms. I feel it very strongly sometimes: when I am reading Homer I am not sure I am reading poetry; when I admire a work of cave art, I think this is much more than painting; and when I read a tragedy I am not sure whether this is theater, in the “spectacle” sense of the term; I am tempted to say that an all-encompassing ritual feeds these forms and each one of us performs his own part there; that includes the spectator - qua copyist - who is the inalienable soil of the “performance”, the ritual. What’s more, he is the one who carries the proceedings over to you, like it happens in *With the people from the bridge* as well.

**PBR:** *Are there any personal requirements like silence that help facilitate your writing process ?*

DL: I have no methodology when I sit down to write, there is no private temple and ritual involved. And I would beg not to be misunderstood here: I have not alluded to silence as a prerequisite for writing, I simply said that I do not like to be around music and I have used a metaphor from physics to say that any kind of external harmony or rhythm that would go against my “private oscillation experience”, would be an adverse condition for me. Silence is fine, even though it does not really exist, and as I said, I don’t mind noise, I don’t mind anharmonicity, I don’t mind chaos. I don’t see silence under a positive light really – I mean real, literal silence. If you look at some instance of silence as it appears in the trilogy, say for example, the first line of *The First Death*, “...moon silent as pain in the depth of the mind,” I think you will realize that the concept of silence does not exactly play the role of any kind of peace or serenity, inner or outer. Silence can be quite sinister – it can be the moment before the attack. Having said that, of course I want to be concentrated when I am writing, like a captain of a boat will be concentrated when he is sailing. Nevertheless, neither serenity nor peace matter here, in fact, a captain is a captain in all weather conditions. Now, if you want to talk about the boat, to make an allusion to the place or room, the physical standards or requirements I am surrounded by, then, I must say, this boat travels with me and goes where I am going: it is no other than the symbolic, language itself, although not exactly the natural linguistic medium, like English or Greek, but the apparatus that has modeled experience, the order of culture, the memplexes, the whole construct in general, “the boat given” to sail with in the first place and with which you familiarize yourself as you go along. While you do, you adjust it to your needs inasmuch as you adapt to it yourself. As one matures with it, one becomes more able to make the necessary repairs and add a few improvements on the way. This is the only space, this is your kind of boat, when it comes to writing. You are inside there all the time, you will be there for life, there is no other, this space goes wherever you go. And you are responsible for it: when something breaks down or fails to work, you have to fix it from the inside, you have to substitute a rotten plank with another from a different part of the boat, you might find some driftwood around if you get lucky, but in most cases you will



photograph by Thomas Langdon

work with what you have already. And, let us not forget, you are doing all that out in the open sea, this process of gradual reconstruction takes place only there. There is no dock available for repairs, until the end of the journey of course, but by that time repairs are unnecessary. And since, during the journey, I have so much to do on that boat, I'm afraid I cannot afford to decorate it. I will do the job, in whatever part of it the job needs to be done. As far as personal requirements are concerned I would rather have some of those when I relax a little from work. When I do, however, I think again of the boat, of the incessant reconstruction, I feel it looks now very different from what it did when I started and, I am inclined to ask a question myself: is this the same, or is it a different boat now? But there is hardly any time to answer, as this symbolic shield of a boat could break anytime under the waves of the real.

PBR: *How would you say your trilogy, which in itself is a journey, fits into the verbal reconstruction of that same self, that same boat?*

DL: If you say self, what's more, same self, then you have already offered a positive answer to my question above; according to you then, we are talking about the same boat, the same self. I would like to draw some attention to this point before we continue, because I am not exactly certain if I can speak about the "same self", or personal identity in a straightforward manner, in a manner that presupposes, or infers some kind of essentialist view. In philosophy, Derek Parfit taking up David Wiggins's thought experiment, concludes that, in the hypothetical situation of a person's brain split in two with each hemisphere being subsequently transplanted in two different bodies, one person survives as two, the self is split, the original self survives as two different identities. That reminds me a little of the two "narrators" in *Z213: Exit*, in fact, I would like to say this now because, as far as I remember, no reviewer has ever made any mention of two "narrators," even though the text is presented by way of two disparate fonts and there must be a purpose to that. I don't want to go as far as to say here that we have a case of a split-brain situation in the book, this would be an interpretation and it would be too much for me to write a book and then go on to openly interpret it. What I want to say is that it is obvious that there is no authorial self in *Z213: Exit*, no authorial narration - other than the narration of the journal's author; the same holds for *With the people from the bridge*; *The First Death* is a slightly different case -I will try to say a few things about that later. In nuce, it is important that my own voice is not heard, you can say, if you like, that I am ghostwriting my own books. In *Z213: Exit*, from the very beginning, we are, indeed, dealing with verbal reconstruction and its successive instances, as recorded in the entries of the narrator's (or the narrators') journal. I have evinced in a previous interview that, in this book, it was important

to show the narrative gaps, as well as present some events of the narrator's journey. Unlike a conventional film, though, where cuts represent dead time, I opted for a kind of montage in which a sense of parts omitted is conveyed, a feeling that we may have been missing out on something. Within the sequence, each entry, each take, is notably different from both the previous and the next one and can be envisaged as the next reconstruction of the narrator's voice. Let us not forget here, of course, that, strictly speaking, we are not discussing a reconstruction of the narrative self – reconstruction takes place on the linguistic level only: how a fictional character as such is reconstructed, this is another matter. Moving from *Z213: Exit to With the people from the bridge* one can perceive a significantly different approach. The frame of the spectator's voice comes there first, the "visible" performance is filtered through his account; it is obvious that, willingly or not, he is bound to reshape what happens on stage, what is being said is told as he remembers it – and who knows if there is really a performance going on. On the storyline level, and as the characters of the – real or supposed – performance contribute each their own chunk to the story, in their kind of multiple, or variable, narrations, you can say that the cards are being reshuffled again, that there is no point of balance, you can follow the line yet there is no independent viewpoint to rely on with certainty: on top of that, there is a major blow coming in the end, which I am not sure is constructive, reconstructive, or altogether destructive. If you would like to take the idea of reconstruction further on to *The First Death*, you would encounter a paradox: as far as the subject-matter is concerned we are talking about disintegration, physical and mental – this, however, happens in a purposefully complex idiom. *The First Death* is the most "literary" book of the three, tropes thrive, there is a concatenation of images almost pressed together in each sub-poem. The last part is a quite prominent example of this contrast: the breakdown of language is spoken of, and rhetorical devices abound, until silence is, eventually, reached. It is as if in the end, the poem, the book and the trilogy - like the swine in St Mark's Gospel - are all falling off a cliff.

**PBR:** *What kind of work have you been pouring your energy into these days?*

**DL:** Upon receipt of your question and before I had the time to start pouring some energy into it, during the phase of those vague, preliminary musings before a definite answer is formed, I got the news that my father fell from bed and broke arm and pelvis. I rushed him to the hospital, and I am coming back to this computer a couple of days later, in advance of his operation tomorrow. He is a strong-willed, ninety years old lawyer, certainly one of the oldest practicing lawyers in Athens. In hope that all goes well in the operating theatre. I expect some of my energy, in the near future, to go towards helping him recover, , although, I know

he is too proud and won't ask for much. There is probably nothing new that I am telling you here, we all have had our share of those life twists, life changes its tune in spite of us and we have to follow; we have to go on fighting, there is no other way. For the past months I have been working again with my English translator Shorsha Sullivan on the second editions of *The First Death* and *Z213: Exit*. *The First Death* has been out of print for some years and *Z213: Exit* is down to a very small amount of copies, so we really need to make those books available again. At the same time, I will probably have to work on some new interviews; for the past three weeks I have been focusing on *The Bitter Oleander* one: I have shared my thoughts with you, and your readers will hopefully find an interest in this kind of communication; some may be familiar with my work and others may read this as an interval within the flow of events in their own lives, like a kind of friendly conversation with a stranger at the bus stop. I like that too. Until two days ago I hoped that this coming month would be an uneventful period, a familiar territory that would give me the opportunity to work in "good weather conditions." It is does not look exactly like that now. As I am writing this, I do not know how the next days are going to be. It has been said and will be said again many times, yet I feel like repeating a version of it , even though it won't sound too original: ahead of the coming disorder we should stay focused on our frail deeds. A good thing about life being inconclusive is that, not knowing what lies ahead, we project ourselves in the future. This comes with enough room for building up hopes and myths, both individual and collective. This is the arsenal that gives us courage during the difficult journey. It's not enough, and cannot counterbalance suffering in the world. Many times it has proven to be inefficient, but I do not know what else is available. Human consciousness is hungry for hope and will consume it in any form, be it science, religion, the anticipation of future happiness, going fishing in the dark. One way or the other we have to convince the human psyche, or brain - if you are a materialist - to want to go forward. This is a moral of our existence: find a reason to carry on. Erase and move forward as Strindberg's Edgar tells us in *The Dance of Death*. And, as we do that, the facts of our life take their place, one after the other, in a biography that may never go into print but will still work its fragmentary ways in which the people that have accompanied us along our journey before it finally bridges over to theirs. And, as we do that, the facts of our life take their place, one after the other, in a biography that may never go into print but will still work its fragmentary ways inside the people that have accompanied us in our journey and then go on to bridge over to more people ahead.

*This interview took place electronically between October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015 and November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015*