VINICIO CAPOSSELA

From Tefteri: A Settling of Scores

(non-fiction)

Translated from the Italian by Elettra Pauletto
The word “crisis” comes from the Greek *kríno*, which means to separate, sort, divide. Crisis is a concept that lends itself well to *rebetiko*—a type of music born of separation—and to Greece, from which Europe is pulling away, driven by the disdain that lies at the root of all rejection.

People often speak of Greece with language that evokes tragedy, which, as a genre, was invented there. The word “tragedy” comes from the Greek *tragudi*, or song, and at its root is *tragos*, which means goat. *Tragodia*, song of the goat. Once the cultural mother of Europe, Greece has become a scapegoat for her sins. Europa, daughter to a king of Crete, seduced by Zeus. Europa of the “wide eyes,” land of the west, ever facing the setting sun.

Since ancient times, Greek creations have been permeated with a sense of universality. Taken together, this body of work tells the story of man, the *anthropos*. And it tells the story of man and destiny, of what is happening to Westerners in this moment of “crisis,” of choices.

Let’s travel there, a small tool in hand—a thyrsus, perhaps—and accompanied by music born of catastrophe. Greeks still use the word *Katastrofis* to describe the Greco-Turkish war of 1922, the destruction of Smyrna, and the exodus of the Greeks from Asia Minor. These million and a half refugees were the ones who, following the treaty of Lausanne, returned destitute to a motherland that no longer wanted them; brought back with them the music and customs of other places; and gathered in suburban neighborhoods, changing the social fabric of 1920s Athens (then dubbed the “Paris of the Eastern Mediterranean” by the young Greek state, which wanted to westernize Greek culture). Thus *rebetiko* is urban music meant for enclosed spaces, to foster introspection—unlike *dimotiki*, the mother of all Greek folk music, which is meant to be played outdoors during grand celebrations. But while *dimotiki* belongs to the people of the geographic region each song represents, *rebetiko* belongs to everyone. It is boundless. It is music for exiles everywhere. It has spread throughout the country, heedless of location, of social standing and of the cultural orientation of those who practice it. Born of division, it unites.

People say that during the brutal civil war, combatants would suspend hostilities and join in whenever someone started singing “*Ximeoni ke vradiazi*” — a great song by Giannis Papaioannou. This song broke the
remarkable record of selling more discs than there were gramophones in all of Greece. Some even bought copies just to hang as art, next to photos of loved ones.

But Rebetes don’t like to mingle or serve as anyone else’s mouthpiece. Rebetiko is a lamentation that demands to be sung together but danced alone. It belongs to everyone, but speaks to the individual. Its sonority comes from the Orient, from Café Aman and Byzantine chant, which—to set itself apart from the Roman Church and its polyphony and harmonic complexity—mastered the art of monophony so well that it created its own unique styles of rhythmic variation and expressive force. It has absorbed many other elements as well, elevating itself to an ethnic pastiche that is more comforting than the notion of purity advanced by government nationalists.

This music still thrives today. Its devotees draw strength from the verses of its songs, which are widely known and shared. It is a soundtrack to the trials of a nation.

When the Greek national soccer team won the 2004 European Championship, members of every Greek community, from Europe to Australia, gathered in bars and haunts to celebrate by dancing the rebetiko, high on happiness and excitement. People tossed napkins into the air by the thousands—a custom that has long since replaced that of shattering plates on the ground. But since then, many traditions, such as Greece’s Santé cigarettes, have gone the way of its shattered plates. Greece has lost its fireflies, as Pasolini once said of a similar period in 1960s Italy. It fell into debt, got hooked on low-interest consumption, and suffered withdrawal when economic realities shifted.

Rebetiko, too, is associated with drug culture. Hundreds of songs are dedicated to hash and hookahs. There are tragudis that contemplate the Great Beyond and its disenchanted atheism, and where Rebetes beg Charon to bring hash to their friends who’ve ended up on the other side of the river Styx.

Charon: he who ferries through Hades.

“Charon went out to collect the people . . .”

Charon, ever-present in rebetiko songs, represents suffering incarnate. He is the personification of death. We translate the Ancient Greek name as Charon, but we mean Charos, death in person.

You meet him the way you might meet someone on the street. You call him by name. You sleep next to him. Just as in that story by Ka-
zantzakis: weary from its journey, death goes to rest beside Odysseus, and, drifting off alongside him, as it sleeps it has a nightmare: it dreams of life. A society’s authenticity can be measured by how it confronts death. Before Charos we’re all equal, we’re naked... 

Charos ferries souls because he lives at a border crossing, the one between existence and nonexistence.

Rebetiko, as Manolis Papos once said, also means to pick a side. This side of the river. That side of the neighborhood.

There again is kríno, from which derives the word “crisis.” To choose. To sort. Rebetiko music always tunes into crises because it forces us to choose. To clearly differentiate between who we like, who we want to hang out with, and who matters little to us. To clearly choose what we’re made of.

I sought out Papos myself one day. Every night, he plays in a show called “Amán amín,” but on Fridays, around two o’clock, he joins the rest of his group on stage at the Klimatariá Tavern. The musicians traditionally sit in chairs, like in the great film by Costas Ferris, Rembetiko (1983), where musicians sit still and play as the story of the town unfurls.

At Klimatariá, too, musicians sit in a row, arranged before the tavern’s dining tables. They play the same instruments they always have. Guitar, bouzouki and the baglamas.

On the occasion of my visit, the soccer player Dimitris Papadopoulos drank retsina and poured forth his experience of the past three years.

“The middle class is disappearing. The poor were living like shit before, too, and now it’s worse than ever. But it’s the middle class that’s falling behind to the point of extinction. In Greece, 85% of the population owns their own home. It’s how we do things, our mentality: we work our whole lives, and own our own homes, and don’t waste money on renting. It’s the same in Italy. Now, all the new taxes are property taxes. They tacked on a property tax and combined it with the electric bills. If you don’t pay the tax, they cut off your electricity. That’s illegal. Electricity, like water, is a public commodity—you can’t take it away just because I didn’t pay my property tax. But that’s what they did. And then they took the money from that tax and put it in a Swiss bank. This is forcing people to sell their homes and rent for the rest of their lives.”

“But what can we do?” I asked.

Dimitris laughed derisively. Sitting at his usual table at the Klima-
tarià, he began to speak with animation in his beautiful Greek-inflected Italian.

As he spoke, the musicians played a Tsifteteli, an oriental rhythm. Two women rose and started to dance in front of the orchestra. This is the kind of music that inspires belly dancing. Its lyrics usually evoke exotic dreams, like the mangas: dreams of living like a lord, or pasha. Women. Smoking. Carpets. Dreams of the Orient. Spices. The Harem—this is how the Rebetes had their fun. Tsifteteli! But then, suddenly, a Zeitbekiko started up, and things took a turn for the worse. “This road led me back to your house and your shuttered window. In the space between us, I feel more keenly the weight of its lock. I stand before it, in front of your garden, shedding tears . . .”

“And what’s this part about?” I asked.

“Horse race betting. I’m owning up to having lost money. I’m performing a mirolòi, a funeral pyre, the lament for the money I lost at the races.”

The Ancient Greeks believed that in order to mourn, one must become one with the corpse, which is why they lay in the dust, in the quiet that surrounded the dead. Dimitris was doing it for the money he lost—he lay down beside it and sang.

That’s part of the old school of thinking, from the wrong side of the tracks. Then came the Kolonaki school of thought, from the eponymous upscale neighborhood, and gave rise to the archondorebetiko, the aristocratic rebetiko. This is what we see in nightclubs and lounges, along with the four-course Bouzouki popularized by Manolis Chiotis, which has had a westernizing influence on rebetiko. And then came Keti Dali, the godmother of skiladiko. Skiladiko, or music of the dogs. A Skilú is a woman who sings skiladiko, and Keti Dali was the first and most authentic of these. When she did it, in the sixties, it was pretty. What came after that wasn’t pretty, it was the butchering of Greek music.

Bouzoukia venues, where skiladiko is performed, were once like a stage. Going to a show was like going to a place where everyone was equal. It was like in soccer: the ball doesn’t care who you are. Everyone merged together. Conventions were lost and all became equal. Songs entered our souls and made us all feel the same things whether we were rich or poor, in the same way that sickness and death treat everyone equally. It was like a drug flowing through you, apathetic to its vessel. Bouzoukia. Skiladiko. The stage. The tavern. Environments that shattered differences and social statuses. It was like a Carnival (carnem levare
means to remove the flesh, even in Greek), a celebration of the world inverted.

Maybe it’s called Skiladiko because it draws out our inner animal. First, it’s the whisky, then the music, and then we start to toss flowers or plates into the air, one after the other. We place no limits on ourselves. We bark and that same animal emerges, impelling us to sing at the top of our lungs, all together, songs with obscene lyrics. All anyone has to do to understand is look at the stage at six in the morning. It’s like the barbarians have arrived.

Confronting death is like performing a skiladiko, or being on stage. We don’t have a choice anymore, we can no longer hide behind that grand life accomplishment we always thought we’d achieve. Our instincts take over . . . people are no longer divided between the great and small. If the earth is above us, all of humanity rises with it. If the earth is below, all of humanity falls.

Rebetiko, too, has a tradition of shattering plates, but only as a way to vent pain. Its songs permeate our bodies and conquer them so that they no longer belong to us, but to pain. And pain can cause us to lose control of our actions. It is life that touches death.

Some believe the name bouzouki comes from the Turkish word bozuk, which means “mistake,” because harmonizing it often caused the music to go off-key. Bozuk: the Mistake. Maybe because it’s an instrument that’s prone to error.

A whole song on waiting for a letter to come by mail: “I Await a Letter.” Then, a love song: “My Love Will Heal You.”

“If a woman said that to you, wouldn’t you go crazy? Aren’t we all just waiting for the day when someone will say that to us?” sighed Dimitris wistfully.

Then, another Tsifteteli. Two women rose from their tables and began to unravel harmoniously into oriental movements.

“Two men could never dance like that, they’d lose their identity.”

The two women moved their bodies with abandon, struggling to keep themselves from spilling out of their silk blouses and tight skirts. They weren’t young.

“Look at them. Some might say they’re ugly. Yet, look how beautiful they are,” said Dimitris, pouring himself a drink.

“There’s no such thing as an ugly woman, only men who don’t drink.”

“What do the lyrics say?”
“It says: ‘What do you care if I drink? What do you care if I smoke? What do you care if I’m the biggest whore in Babylon?’”

The music weighed in once more: “What did I do to you, my dear, to make you go away and leave me here alone? Who can be more important than me? Do you want to drive me crazy? You’re throwing me away like garbage. You’ll be sorry one day. You’ll come crawling back. You don’t care about me . . .”

The music suddenly stopped. This is how it goes with these songs. The music breaks off and the story ends. Just when we were starting to get used to it, it’s over. Without frills. Definitively. Just like in life. No great speeches or long goodbyes. Just the end.

*Bouzouki* severs stories like a blade. This happens often with the music of pain. It is music that rises from below, like the fog of humanity, born of its sewers. Pain is a presence, carried like a ball and chain. It is both suffering and punishment, the penalty paid for living. Even when they’re upbeat, songs about pain still express it, because they know how thin the line is between euphoria and death. The people who know pain have long carried melancholy in their souls. These are people who have founded civilizations, traversed oceans, taken over the world and then lost it. Italians, Greeks, Portuguese, people who were forced into nostalgia by history itself. Just as with the Jews, their destiny is to be always and everywhere unappreciated. And so, too, with the gypsies, who more than anyone else indulge their suffering, so as not to leave anything behind.

“*Rebetes.* Who were the *rebetes*? Those who dedicated their lives to this music. It was a way of life. On the fringes of industry, pop, trends. People who didn’t care about getting rich.

“The Greek word for ‘work’ is *dulia.* Slavery. The idea of laziness as a vice has only recently come about. It once meant ‘the free man’s time.’

“The *rebettes* were simple people, with fewer problems. They weren’t social climbers—they sought their pleasures elsewhere.

“To practice *rebetiko* today is a way of avoiding the clubbing scene, the social mechanisms that lie behind it, and the commercials about the latest trends. It’s to stay at home, in one’s element, with music that speaks to you, and not to someone you don’t even know.

“Music can be a form of identity. But be careful: there are those who seek identity through music, and those who seek it through history. That’s when the trouble begins. Nationalism for example. Against immigration, against the Germans. And the far-right is rising. Dangerously.
Nationalism. Ethnic purity. *Megali Idea*. We know it well. The Turks weren’t the only butchers in history.

“*Rebetiko* came from forced change. Smyrna was once a prosperous and beautiful city, but its wealthy citizens ended up destitute in the suburbs of Athens. Our national hero, Kolokotronis, apparently couldn’t even speak Greek, because he was Romanian. Greece is the biggest police state in the West. The one with the least amount of sovereignty. Ever since the first loan arrived from England, after our independence in 1821, we’ve been blackmailed. Ours was the first European country to resist this. But then came the Civil War, and outsiders have been pulling the strings ever since.

“But this is the first time that Greece, which has always been ten, twenty years behind, has found itself ahead of the others. It’s an experiment. The Italians are a people that tolerates. You tolerated Fascism, Berlusconi. Greeks are less tolerant. They’re more rebellious, more insurrectionist. There’s a thread that unites us, even if the overused expression, “*una fatsa, una ratsa*” (“one face, one race”), isn’t exactly true. But Greek debt isn’t all that important—percentage-wise, we’re a small country. Ten million people. Proportionally, it can’t be that big of a problem. The fact is that we’re lab rats in an experiment to see how banks take power. How they can take people’s savings directly from the banks. We’re one step ahead, but from ahead, you can look back. So look at us. Look ahead. Can the same mechanism not also apply to you? To everyone else?”

And with that, the conversation died down. The musicians sitting in chairs, arranged in a line like a platoon, sang the last song, one by Tsitsanis.

Composers are cited in *rebetiko* performances as Old Testament prophets are cited in church. Each composer’s style is recognizable, just like in classical music. They belong to the myth of Creation. *Rebetiko* lives on because it is still performed. Its songs persevere because they belong to everyone, though new ones are no longer written. Maybe too much has changed. Men have changed. Maybe the next *rebetiko* will be written by an Albanian, a Pakistani, a newly arrived immigrant. *Rebetiko* is there for the taking, and its composers are legion. The golden age. And so it lives on, emanating from the mouths of men and instruments. It lives on while Papos, dressed in mourning and wearing an impassive expression, accompanies a singer through a song about an orphan: *Taksena cheria ine macheria*.
It says: “The hands of others, on my body, are like knives when they’re not family. Those who promised me my life held no soul in their lungs. The touch of strangers, on my body, are like knives . . .”

She sings for everyone.