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A humble handshake

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AFFIRMATION. Selected poems 1986-2006. By Haris Vlavianos. Translated by Mina Karavanta 100pp. Dedalus. Paperback, Pounds 7.95. 978 1 904556 65 7

Although a new edition of Cavafy seems to appear annually, the gap between English and Greek poetry has widened in the last thirty years, as fewer English-language poets have supported contemporary Greek poetry through translation or criticism. We can equate this widening with Modernism and postmodernism's differing interests in what used to be called cosmopolitanism, the language of which was historically French. Modern Greek poets have always leaned heavily on French models, never quite stylish enough on these shores to ensure that English-language poets might take interest. Haris Vlavianos, however, studied at Oxford, has translated Wallace Stevens, John Ashbery, Geoffrey Hill and Michael Longley, among others, into Greek, and has made a genuine attempt to engage the poetics of the contemporary Anglo-American tradition in the Greek language using a landscape that owes little to the mythic worlds of his Modernist precursors, George Seferis and Odysseus Elytis. The appearance of this Selected Poems goes some way towards suggesting that his engagement is worthwhile and fascinating, and some terrific poetry is the result.

Vlavianos invokes Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams early on in the book, and his poems seem to fit comfortably between Stevens's metaphysics and Williams's plum-eating; that is, grand thoughts between simple, shared gestures:

Let's sing the throbbing bodies while gazing out to the deep sea's
brimming tranquillity let's sing the fading éclat let's sing There is a
self-consciousness to these lines, particularly in their call to song, but
at the same time the invitation avoids the irony of much postmodern
verse, opting instead for a genuine recourse to poetry. And that is
where Vlavianos's great strength lies, in his genuineness. His
gestures - a recurring trope in the poems in this volume - are
open-ended, but welcoming: the poet playing host to his images and
resounding from them, something he owns up to in these lines from
"Autumnal Refrain":

A simple, natural gesture might be the first step, the beginning of a
new attempt.

The poems, then, initiate from a friendly exchange, a handshake
between reader and writer, a mundane gesture in both the everyday
sense and the worldly one. This brings a tone of humility to the book,
particularly the poems from Vlavianos's 1996 collection, *Adieu*,
dealing with the breakdown of relationships:

The rustling of leaves (the turning of the page) brings you back to the
place you have chosen for this refined ritual:

walnut sideboards, Tiffany lights, Victorian desks . . .

. . . The vase is full of chrysanthemums.

This enlightening gesture has no end.

Williams is in these lines again, his "no ideas but in things" brought to a further conclusion: no ideas but in the things that reach you, whoever you may be. So that the image is not simply an image, but neither is it symbolic: a vase full of flowers means something and nothing, is equally sentimental and cold in its relevance. For Vlavianos, it is the gesture, the appearance of the thing before poet and reader, that is endless, and not the thing itself, giving one the impression that he longs through these gestures for a more personal connection. The contradictory impossibility of that is a natural starting point in his poetics.

Affirmation is Vlavianos's second book published in the United Kingdom and serves as a broader introduction to his work than David Connolly's translation (1998) of *Adieu*. The translator, Mina Karavanta, works very literally with the Greek texts, and for the most part she brings Haris Vlavianos's generous poetics to a clear, revealing poem in its own right. Though a publication history should have been included, and perhaps a note from Karavanta on what she hoped to achieve in her translations, the book is a valuable addition to, and updating of, the poetic dialogue between English and Modern Greek.

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