

The Achieved Body (An Outlook on the Poetry of Vassilis Michaelides)

Costas Vassileiou *

RÉSUMÉ

Le poète Kostas Vassiliou, qui au cours des dernières années écrit de façon plus systématique de la poésie en dialecte chypriote, essaie de mettre en valeur les meilleurs moments de la poésie de Vassilis Michaelides. Avec des images poétiques il essaie de mettre en évidence les neuf meilleurs poèmes du poète, écrits presque entièrement en dialecte chypriote, et n'hésite pas de placer à côté des poèmes les plus reconnus le poème intitulé «Amoloïtos» (L'indiscret) ou le satirique «Romios» (Le Grec).

ABSTRACT

The poet Kostas Vasileiou, who has more systematically written poetry in the Cypriot dialect in recent years, tries to highlight the best moments of Vassilis Michaelides's poetry, namely his nine best poems, written entirely in the Cypriot dialect, and doesn't hesitate to place next to the best known ones the poem entitled «Amoloïtos» (The Unspoken) and the satirical "Romios" (The Greek).

If someone asked me to choose the nine best poems by Vassilis Michaelides, I would tell them that this would not be right as we should accept a poet, as well as any man or woman, in their entirety with their virtues and faults. After all, the best elements cannot be conceived without the worst and vice versa.

However, if one insisted on the nine best (and later we will see about the rest), I would have no trouble suggesting the following in chronological order:

1. «Mia epistoli is kypriakin dialektion» [A letter in the Cypriot dialect] (1881, March)
2. «I Kypros pros tous legontas oti den einai elliniki» [Cyprus to those who say it is not Greek] (1881, June)

* Philologist, poet

3. «Amoloitos» [The Unspoken] (1880-1884)
4. «Anerada» [The Nereid] (1893)
5. «I Ennati Iouliou 1821» [The 9th July 1821] (1893-1895)
6. «Chiotissa» [Woman of Chios] (1893-1895)
7. «Romios kai Tzion Poullis, Tzionis kai Kakoullis» [The Greek and Tzion Poullis, Tzionis and Kakoullis] (1903)
8. «Constantinos» (1914)
9. «To oroman tou Romiou» [The Greek's dream] (1917)

I would merely ask them, why choose nine and not ten to round it up; and they would reply, first that no number is more “rounded-up” than nine, either multiplied by three or added up (3x3 or 3+3+3) and secondly that we only need nine in order to assemble the collected body of his poetry. Let us now begin from the limbs.

For the feet we need two robust poems, equal and identical, to make up a pair that can safely carry the weight of a human body. I can think of nothing more appropriate than “Constantinos” and “The Greek's dream”, two of his latest poems which in their maturity and robustness leaning on the perfection of popular songs, reveal a man who knows where he set off from, the course he is about to cover and where he will end up; a man who walks the ground well grounded – on the language, the sensitivities, the yearning and the dreams of his people.

*Constantinos woke up late at night,
and saw the destitute land, his mother in tears.
“Where am I, mother?” he said, “Where is our church?”
“Where are our houses, our ancestral possessions?”
“They took them, my son, the graceless Tatars
And who braver than you can claim it back?
The whole world is waiting, looking at you
Your fast horse is already saddled.
With God's help put on your uniform,
Cross yourself thrice and tighten your sword”. (“Constantinos”)*

For the hands we need to choose another pair, and the only remaining pair is the “Letter” and “Cyprus”, two of his youth poems written in the same year and the same frame of mind (even though one is satirical and the other patriotic). They are equally lengthy, loose in their structure and therefore

flexible and versatile, suggesting two immense, tireless hands, agile and dexterous, able to create both an icon and an ecclesiastical wood-craft with the same ease, embrace either a log or a body, lift a boulder, prune either a tree or the sky; a “devilish” poet, aptly characterized by his friend St. Hourmouzios “who while walking the earth, lets his mind stroll high up in the skies” (*Salpingx*, 14.3.1884).

*As I was saying, this earth compared to everything else
is like, how can I put it, a grain of sand.
Amidst the sky it resembles a spark,
going round and round to bring us the year and the month.
On her back she holds us with her magnetism
and so we travel with her to the skies
In her whole journey she spins faster and faster
just like the yarn in the spinning wheel.
Round and round she goes and if ever she halts
who knows where the hell she'll throw us.
All of us, tall and short, poor and wealthy,
beggars and lords, rich and glorious
kings and ministers, if that day ever comes,
we'll all be reduced to kites in the wind. (“A letter in the Cypriot dialect”)*

For the chest, the central torso in general, no poem is more appropriate than the “Ninth July”, the most virile and manliest amongst his poems that provides a wide bosom, solid and warm. Here, not only Cyprus but the tortured Greek race or *Romiosiny* may safely lay its head and receive a tender caress on the hair in the comforting sound of these words: “let no harm come to you”.

*“The race of the Greeks was born when the world was born;
No one has ever been able to root it up?
God shelters it from the heights: it cannot die.
Not till the whole world ends will the Greek race vanish!”¹*

The “Woman of Chios”, the most malleable poem by Vassilis Michaelides boasts an ethereal, almost fleshless language, transparent style and a well-rounded metric system that allow the poem to take off and fly in the sphere of music and pure poetic energy. For all these reasons we cannot but place it in the position of the face. Just as in the human body the face requires its Creator’s greatest pliable dexterity in order to assemble all the elements (eyes,

lips, cheeks etc) that reflect the personality of a human being, thus “The Woman of Chios” is the mirror of Vassilis Michaelides’ poetic personality.

*The old beggar-woman left the house
And the Bey came in with a Turkish woman,
A black-eyed girl with a pale, gaunt face
And a body like a cypress tree.
When he saw his own beloved mistress
Down on her knees and with tear-filled eyes,
He said: “What is it, my Gioulsapa?”
You’re crying again my Morning-rose.
In all the time that you have been with me,
You’ve never shown a drop of gaiety.*

For the end, we kept the three poems that correspond to the three more pertinent body parts that define, contain and regulate a psychosomatic personality: the sex or “nature” (instinct), the heart (emotions) and the head (reason) – the platonic chariot with the two horses and the charioteer who directs them (the pathos, the thymos, the logos).

In the place of the sex I would definitely plant “The Unspoken”, not least with the ostentatious intention to show the size of his poetry but in a simple, natural and effortless manner pertinent to an ancient statue –covertly, too. I would adopt the same manly coyness with which, while describing the most spicy issue, the sexual act, the poet avoids all “harsh” words and artistically replaces them with other poetically articulated ones (i.e. unspoken, saddlebag, cave).

*If it weren't for me, how would you ever see this life?
Only I know what I've been through for you to live.
I would wake and get up like an angry lion
walking about bareheaded, carrying my saddlebag
caring none for verdict neither kingdom
but only shoved my face and spat inside the cave;
a cave with its mouth covered up in hair
and I would leave my saddlebag hanging on the outside.*

The place of the heart – the throne hall and the throne itself rightfully belongs to the “Nereid”. Not only the woman that sealed and broke the poet’s heart but the “Nereid” as a poem of incomparable beauty and crimson, tightly-knit vigor (like a rose or a pomegranate) that releases the

poet from his passions, rejuvenates him and activates the erotic root that feeds his human and poetic attitude:

*Later we came to a mountain
That reached, like Paradise,
Straight up to heaven.
On its heights we wept
Together, and laughed
In the pungent musk.*

*“If you are brave”, she said,
“And this life is to your liking,
Stay here alone with me” –
And she burst into laughter.
All at once I felt that my heart
Was about to break.*

*She spoke and she vanished,
Lost from my sight
Like a passing wind.
Then my heart cracked
And my mind stood still; since then
I have turned to stone”.*

Last, in the place of the head, *reductio ad absurdum* there is no other option but “Romios”. Let us not rush into talking about hydrocephaly in a Praxitelian body even though this poem is the lengthiest (641 verses) and the most “fluid” one – the most voluble, the most inartistic, the one most attacked by the critics. In contrast, written during his peak period (1893-1903) when he also wrote his greatest dialectal poems, “Romios” is so revolutionary in terms of its meaning and composition that even today, a hundred years later, we are having trouble grasping it. First because it shows a muscular mind that does not rest on its laurels but keeps on speculating and renewing, seeking new ways of expression in line with the new realities, his own or his country’s – a filtering mind. Secondly because, as the title suggests (“Romios”), it is a Greek mind that rises from the things to the idea: the result may be an immense fresco of the English rule – a “world of Cyprus” (just as the “Ninth July” and the “Woman of Chios” are frescos of the Turkish rule) but it eventually becomes condensed in a Gospel, an Arc of the Greek race:

*God will provide! Countless villains conquered our land.
None of them stayed then, and none of them will stay now-
These too will come and go.*

And finally because as an artistic composition of antithetical elements (i.e. the Panhellenic vernacular and the Cypriot dialect, satirical versus dramatic tone, theatrical versus poetic genre), through an inspired and innovative architectural structure, this is the most daring experiment ever to appear in the modern Cypriot Poetry. Its national and poetic value can only be measured against classical pieces i.e. a Homeric rhapsody, a Platonic Dialogue, a Roman *kontakion* (short prayer).

*Suddenly they see
two ladies of high standing approaching.
well-dressed, young
as beautiful as angels...
Then they asked Kakoullis: "Please, tell us,
are we talking to an Italian or a Greek?"
And while their flaming look sets the poor man afire,
"To a Greek!" he responds.
"We're sorry! From a distance we thought,
I that you're a Greek and she that you're Italian,
so there goes our secret.
I won the bet and I am very happy indeed.
Please tell us, which is your birthplace?
"I come from Cyprus, born in Limassol.
Myself too, ladies, when first I saw you
I thought that you were nymphs who escaped from Parnassus".
"You are so flattering!"
"I speak the honest truth, you have to believe me!"*

Not bad, I would say, we've managed the nine best. But let us not forget my early promise: "...and later we will see about the rest". I was referring to poems written in the local idiom such as *Tokoglyphia* [Usury], *Tyrinades* [Fasting Period], *O geros tis Parekkliasis* [The Old Man of Parekkklisia] and some epigrammatic ones: *En'angaliaso ton Theon* [I will embrace God], *Thee mou tziai na pethana...* [God, I wish I died] that may not reach the elevated standing of the nine chosen but remain nonetheless smaller fragments of the same diamond rock. These, they would say, we would put in his pockets, like

nuts, for him to treat children. How about the multitude of his poems written in the Panhellenic language? Poems like *To cigaron* [The cigarette], *To thavma tou Agiou Georgiou* [The miracle of Saint George], *Spoudaia Anakalypsis* [Great Discovery], *Ta proxenia tis Aphroditis* [Aphrodite's Matchmaking] and *O Diavolos* [The Devil] (as a whole and in many of its parts) cannot be easily erased. These, he would say, we shall put in his goatskin bag, for him to offer people in fairs.

NOTES

1. Translator's Note: The excerpts from the poems "Ninth July", "Woman of Chios" and "Nereid" are taken from a translation by Athan Anagnostopoulos, adapted by Kinereth Gensler and Ruth Whitman. *Poems of Cyprus* to the form in which they appear within this essay (Nicosia: The Printing Office of the Republic of Cyprus, 1970). The rest of the excerpts are translated by Despina Pirketti for the purposes of this essay.