

Recensions/Book Reviews

Recent Literary Publications

In recent years more and more literary books by Cypriot writers are being published in Athens, but most of these are still being printed in private publications in Cyprus. It is generally accepted that Cypriot publications struggle to reach Athenian bookshops. Even when they are sent to critics and researchers, they rarely attract interest (perhaps because of their themes or their language, but also since Cypriot writers are far from Athenian literary circles and networks), and even more rarely are they treated objectively, without a deprecating disposition or without friendly compliments.

Out of the literary books by Cypriots that have been published recently in Cyprus or Greece, in my opinion, two poetry collections and seven books with prose (short stories, short or extensive narratives) stand out, written by older or younger writers. This is not a common phenomenon; usually poetry collections abound, whereas production of prose is less frequent. At any rate, the view that is predominant recently, that Cypriot poetry is at a quantitative and qualitative advantage in relation to prose, does not seem to stand.

In poetry, I set apart the poetic collections *Quince apple* (2006) by Kyriacos Charalambides and *The afternoon affliction* (2007) by Lefkios Zafeiriou, both of them printed by Athenian publishing houses. The poetry of Kyr. Charalambides, multifaceted and demanding in its composition, is not at all easily accessible, however much care is taken by the poet to note at the end of the book the sources that apparently function as poetic foundations or to clarify realistic elements. Once more the poet, building on the Kavafean and Seferean historicism, interweaves episodes of (Ancient Greek) myth and the spins of history, with the eternal passions and sufferings of men and with the contemporary political adventures of Cyprus. Persons and events from myth and history, high profile and anonymous creators, places and customs are forged in the firing-kiln of art, to conceive the “quince apple”, the rare fruit with the bitter taste that is an apple of discord and at the same time has erotic overtones. The poet combines the individual with the collective, the national with the ecumenical; he tries to go back to the beginning of things and to light them up from incredible viewpoints. It certainly requires great effort on the part of the informed reader to penetrate through the surface of the words and to enter into their deeper layers, or to comprehend and

appreciate the fashioned rhetorical methods, the ironic connotations, the verbal games and in general the heavy armour of his poetry.

The poetry of Lefkios Zafeiriou is certainly more frugal in its rhetoric and more accessible. After many years of poetic silence, L. Zafeiriou has gathered in a single volume his recent poems, which are roughly divided into two unities: in the first section are found poems in which portraits of famous poets and artists are sketched; Byron, Rimbaud, Van Gogh, Mazileskos, Solomos, Kalvos, Karyotakis. In the faces of these “damned” or exiled and isolated creators, that have attracted the attention of the young poet, one can identify elements of the sensitive soul of the latter, who pays tribute to his literary predecessors. The second section comprises mainly poems that are connected to the political situation in Cyprus and specifically the poet’s experiences as an educator in Rizokarpasso High School, in the occupied area of Cyprus. In these texts are outlined sensitive images from the wounded body of Cyprus, from abandoned monuments and exhausted people, who have clung on in the marchlands of Karpasia. Since the homeland remains “crippled in bandages”, such notable political poetry cannot fail to be written.

Three earlier writers, Christakis Georgiou, Panos Ioannides and Yiannis Katsouris, who were once part of the magazine team *Cypriot Chronicles* (Lefkosia, 1960-1972), published prose during 2006, in Cyprus. All three of them initially dealt with short story writing, and later on wrote more extensive narratives, novels and fiction, without neglecting the short story. Christakis Georgiou collected older and recent short stories in a volume entitled *Rescue operation*. The two youthful narratives that precede transport us to different times, ones of pure idealism and erotic awakenings. The other five narratives that are certainly more mature, and derive their subject matter from crimes and misdemeanours that took place in contemporary Cyprus: murders, rape, smuggling, illegal erotic affairs and convicts flood these texts, like his previous prose (e.g., the short story *Hours*, 1950). Using his intimate narrative techniques (dragging narrative, flashbacks, persistent introspection of marginal characters and stereotypical expressions), Chr. Georgiou spotlights with realistic power, mainly negative views of life in contemporary Cyprus: rape, crimes of passion and illegal affairs that lead to murder and suicides, prisoners and drug addicts that are self-analysed and bring to the surface their turbulent souls, affairs and conflicts between Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots, violent acts of drunk soldiers at the British bases in Dhekelia, night life in touristic Agia Napa etc. These short stories will remain, I believe, an interesting and persuasive literary testimony of our time.

Several years after the publication of his last novel, Panos Ioannides circulated the extensive and distinctive narrative (“like a novel”) entitled *The Devas* which means the guardian angels of animals. In this well-written narrative, the author narrates with humour and imagination stories about animals and animal lovers. He does not hide the fact that he draws from biographical material, and actually from his familial environment. The prose writer manages to persuade and move the reader, demonstrating that animals have souls, feel pain and have feelings like people. The goat called Ariadne, the female hedgehog called Bouli, the two swallows, the cats called Phanoula, Tess and Biafra, the dogs named Toby and Rex, play the lead in touching or comical stories next to the children of the family, that are transformed into “devas”, and with their behaviour influence even adults who do not like animals. In certain parts of the text appear some interesting elements from Cypriot human-geography. Finally, this noteworthy narrative is an ode to animal-loving and will potentially win over more animal lovers.

Yiannis Katsouris also exploits effectively the potential of satire, humour and parody in his two short stories that make up the volume *The porno-shepherds and The honest stick*. The two extended short stories are interconnected. From a certain viewpoint they could be considered a tribute to two significant literary predecessors; the poet Vassilis Michaelides and the storyteller Alexandros Papadiamantis. The difference being that the young prose writer is conversing subversively with the wonderful poem “Anerada” by V. Michaelides and with the rural world of A. Papadiamantis. Yiannis Katsouris manages to set up two spirited and hilarious short stories, with a flowing and lively narrative. Literary tradition is only the pretext to pull the strings of history and to face with a subversive attitude, superstitions and sanctimonies of a constrained traditional world, the eternal political conflict between the Right and the Left and other everyday themes in Cyprus around 1940.

The remaining four books of prose, by George Charitonides, Niki Marangou, Chrystalla Koulermou and Antonis Georgiou, are directly or indirectly connected, more or less, with the political problem in Cyprus, which remains divided since 1974, when Turkish troops occupied the northern part of the island. The prickly short story *With a passport and a one day visa* (Athens 2006) by G. Charitonides has earned very positive reviews in both Greece and Cyprus. The experiential material has again here, as in his first narrative, the dominant part: in 37 numbered narratives—miniatures the writer crystallises the emotions that he felt (nostalgia, denial, disappointment, resentment, anger) while passing through the roadblock

“with a passport and a one day visa” to visit the motherland, the town of Lapithos, the broader region of Kyrenia and from there to Ammochostos and the Mesaoria and Karpasia areas. The short story is a constant to and fro between the past and present, between life in Lapithos pre-1974, the fertile paradise of childhood and the teenage years, and the painful reality imposed by the military force of Attila’s hordes. Without big words and sentimentalities, the narration of G. Charitonides in this frugal and concise prickly narrative of around eighty pages, is effective. The writer manages to convey the emotion and the heartbreak, memorialising with the unadorned art of words familiar evils, the open and inflamed wound of Cyprus.

The novel by Chrystalla Koulermou *The inheritors of the winds* (Larnaka 2006) takes place in pre-war Ammochostos, in the years around 1970, depicting carefree images of daily life from the viewpoint of the future drama. Simultaneously, the political topics of the time are highlighted: the disappointment from the Zurich and London Conventions, the revival of the “enosis” (union with Greece) demand of the Greek-Cypriots and the strengthening of partition policy among the Turkish-Cypriots, the demonstrations by the schoolchildren that are divided into supporters of Makarios and of Grivas, the extremist actions of EOKA B’, etc. It is not difficult for one to ascertain that the place, the characters and the events have a historical origin; and that the prose writer prefers to stick close to her experiential material, without exaggerating or distorting it dramatically by story making. At the centre of the narrative is Ammochostos, the birthplace, the city by the sea that has charmed and moved our own people and strangers. This well-written narrative is read with great interest, and at its best moments, with emotion.

In the most recent publication entitled *Nicossienses* (Lefkosia 2007), are found a short story by Niki Marangou about Lefkosia, written in Greek and translated into English and Turkish, and the black and white photographs of Arunas Balténas, with snapshots from traditional and neglected neighbourhoods in the divided Lefkosia within-the-walls. Niki Marangou has the narrative gift. She sketches with sparing strokes the place and its people, she lays down memories and experiences from her childhood and teenage years, she outlines the carefree daily life in the once united Lefkosia, that now remains wounded, divided by the green line, with roadblocks, guard-houses, dead end streets and deserted quarters. The monumental church of Saint Sophia and the imam’s voice, the other old churches and the Frankish, Turkish and other monuments, the tall palm trees, the colourful

festival of the street markets and the shops, the mixing of Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots – such snapshots make up the narrative, animated with the sensitivity and the pictorial dexterity of the prose writer.

Antonis Georgiou has made a respectable first showing in prose with the collection of short stories entitled *Sweet bloody life* (Athens 2006). A basic characteristic of A. Georgiou's narrative art is the constant self-analysis. Mainly women but men also, are constantly self-analysed and resort to uncontrollable monologues to externalise their torment, since they need to tell their story. Of course this gift for narrative ease and dexterity should be looked after and controlled, so it does not lead to mannerisms and easy solutions. In several instances the individual stories of the narrative characters are linked to the Cypriot political framework, to the collective problems and suffering of Cyprus (anti-British struggle, inter-community conflict, coup d'état and the Turkish invasion with their consequences). The writer does not hesitate to daringly present estranged and broken down interpersonal relationships, secret desires, sexual fantasies and illegal love affairs. One of the best short stories in the volume is "The humble house of Michael Chr. Kkasialos", in which the traditional painter summarises in a dream his life, his visual works and the end of his life, in August 1974, ten days after being brutally beaten by the Attila's soldiers.

It can be seen from these brief presentations, I believe, that not only poets but also prose writers flourish in Cyprus.

Lefteris Papaleontiou

Yiannis Katsouris, *Theatre in Cyprus*, Nicosia 2005

Yiannis Katsouris is a prominent literary figure whose activity covers almost all forms of literary discourse. He first appeared on the Cypriot literary scene as a short story writer in 1966 when he published his first volume of short stories under the title *Three Hours*. This was followed by two more volumes: *Point of Stability* (1973) and *Give Us this Day* (1979). The last two volumes won him the State Prize for Prose. Apart from short stories his prose work includes two novels, *Stylianou Anabasis* (1990) and *My Most Innocent Uncle Michael* (2001), and two volumes containing two novellas each, *Jim Lontos and Paraschos Boras* (1997) and the *Pimps* (2007). He has written several other short stories and narrations which over the years have seen publication in literary journals but not in a volume yet.

Katsouris, however, has not restricted his literary interests to fiction alone. He has also published criticism and literary studies on a number of Cypriot writers and the theatre. His lively interest in the theatre has remained steady and continuous throughout his literary career. Apart from historical studies on the theatre he has written one-act plays for the radio and a highly successful series of scripts entitled *Bread and Spectacle* for television which eloquently depict the story of the theatre in Cyprus. This interest culminated in the publication of a history of Cypriot theatre under the title *Theatre in Cyprus*. It is an extensive work published in 2005 in two volumes. The first volume (371 pp) covers the period between 1860 and 1939 and the second (383 pp) the period between 1939 and 1959.

The history of Cypriot theatre is a field of study that does not seem to have received much attention from the Cypriot cultural community. If we go back to the not so distant past we shall see that apart from Katsouris some others wrote essays and short studies on specific aspects of the topic, but the first systematic attempt at a comprehensive study of the history of Cypriot theatre was made by M.P. Moustieris who in 1988 published a book bearing the title *A Chronological History of the Cypriot Theatre from Antiquity to 1986*.

Katsouris' work covers a much shorter period. As it has already been noted above the two volumes together cover the period between 1860 and 1959, which is the period of British colonial rule in Cyprus. What impresses the reader about this work, from the outset, is its comprehensiveness and the vast amount of research that has gone into achieving it. Katsouris uses the same method of work, with some variations, in both volumes of his history.

For Katsouris one of the functions of history is to provide a record of past events. And this is what he does here. In both volumes he divides his material into units and in each of them he records, in chronological order, all the performances that took place in the urban centres and the suburban and village communities in this one-hundred-year period as well as the companies or groups that staged them, the actors, directors, set designers etc. that took part in them each in his/her own capacity. What transpires from this account is that the story of theatrical activity in Cyprus during those years had two aspects to it: The amateur and the professional. We have the local theatre which up until 1939 was to a great extent an affair of amateurism. It was after 1939 that the first professional groups began forming. The professional performances were provided by the Greek companies which, if we except the periods of the two world wars, visited Cyprus uninterruptedly. In his account he does not fail to include the performances of the children's and school theatre as well as the ones given by Turkish, English, French, Italian and Armenian amateur and professional groups. He also includes details concerning the repertoire which consisted of foreign, Greek and Greek Cypriot plays, the critics and criticism, the audience, the stage spaces, advertisement and promotion, the problems that attended the theatre in its course of development, and the debate on the establishment of a drama school, which came to the foreground from time to time. The details about these matters come at the end of every unit together with commentary and conclusions that give the reader the possibility of viewing the course the theatre was following in perspective.

In this commentary, which is brief but very pertinent, lies another function of history that of explanation of causes and effects which Katsouris seems to endorse. For him the theatre is not an artistic activity that functions outside the socio-political context. So in his brief historical references and commentary he places the theatre within this context which gives him the tools to explain why the theatre in Cyprus took the course of development described in his two volumes. For instance the Greek companies, whose presence on the Cypriot stage was, as noted above, continuous, were almost always well-received not only because there was a need for theatrical entertainment but also because they served the irredentist aspirations of a people under colonial rule. This is true, although for these companies, and Katsouris points this out, the reason was mainly financial. However their frequent presence on the island led to concrete artistic results as regards the local theatre: It helped it upgrade its standards and make the gradual transition from its amateur state to a professional one. The Greek companies, through their performances also

contributed towards audience building. The Left Wing, which was now organising itself on a systematic basis, established, through the workers' syndicates, societies in the towns and in the countryside, which among their other activities included the theatre that came to be known as the "workers' theatre". In their repertoire they took care to choose "serious plays" as they called them, (this was a demand that came from other quarters as well) which meant plays that dealt with social problems. Obviously the Left Wing perceived the potential of the theatre as an educational agent and sought through it to shape the ideological consciousness of its members. As a counter-reaction to this move the Right Wing adopted the same course with its societies and associations. The end result of this was the building of an audience with new tastes and aesthetic criteria and the formation of two professional groups towards the end of World War II that played a catalytic role in the future development of the theatre.

Of course one wishes Katsouris were more analytical and elucidating as regards the historical and socio-political context within which the Cypriot theatre developed as well as some other issues such as for example playwriting and the reasons why it has not developed at the same rate as the stage performance but as he himself rightly acknowledges in his epilogue (Volume II p. 334) his work could not be the last word on the topic; it allows ample room for the future researcher. This objective and critical attitude that he adopts in his treatment of the material he has collected together with the admirable control that he exercises over it add to the effectiveness of the work.

With regard to effectiveness I feel that here I should mention two other elements that add to it: the visual material and the Index with which Katsouris equips his two volumes. The visual material (photographs, extracts from reviews, programmes of performances, advertisements etc.) help the reader achieve a better understanding of the period under consideration while the Index, which is divided into four sections (A. Plays, B. Playwrights, translators, scholars, critics, C. Actors (professional-amateur), D. Companies, amateur groups, schools) enhances the usefulness of the work as a reference book.

In conclusion, I think that with *Theatre in Cyprus* Katsouris has accomplished an outstanding piece of work. He has attempted a journey into the past of Cypriot theatre, explored its multiple aspects with admirable studiousness and thoroughness and has given us a panoramic view of its course of development with clarity and credibility.

Costas Hadjigeorgiou

**Lefteris Papaleontiou: *Aspects of the poetry of Costas Montis*,
Athens, Sokolis, 2006, 213 pages**

Recently Professor Lefteris Papaleontiou of the University of Cyprus has given us a 215 page book, that literally speaking but modestly, is entitled *Aspects of the poetry of Costas Montis* (Athens 2006, Sokolis Publications).

Specifically it contains older published works by him, adapted to the needs of the volume, but also newly published texts, which make up a manual, that, without exaggeration, one could propose as an introduction to the poetry and prose of the very well known, great Cypriot poet whose reputation has reached beyond the Greek borders, Europe.

As much as this plush volume cannot be distinguished by its strict continuation – a logical consequence since it is comprised of isolated, sporadically written pieces and articles – it can be discerned for its consistency. The basic aim of the author is thus served, that is to introduce the uninitiated reader into the literary works of C. Montis, his poetry under the broad artistic definition and additionally, to hint at the knowledgeable reader of his works about layers and situations that are not well-known.

Firstly, we consider the contribution of such compass-books as significant, since they constitute preliminary readings and introductory challenges with literary men and their works, at times when reading it is challenging, since with their interpretive style they open the reader's horizons and aid him into being initiated quickly. This contribution is multiplied if one takes into account the volume of Montis' work, his peripheral coverage (especially for readers of the Greek area) and the necessity of knowing his parameters and themes, that require historical knowledge, which covers long time periods and a variety of crucial events.

To these must be added the isolated position of Cypriot literature, the ignorance of its stylistic and textual relations with the broader Modern Greek one to which it belongs, the need to understand the use of the specific linguistic method and many others.

In addition to these topics, there are others, agonistic, national, patriotic, even contemporary ones, that concern attitudes and behaviours which are ignored by the modern reader, and consequently make the texts of a poet with the range of Montis, challenging. The worst of all is that a very significant piece of work (and one of the top men of literature of Cypriot Hellenism) is not as widely-read as it deserves.

It should be noted that the above do not concern only foreigners or Greeks. They refer also to fellow countrymen of the poet, that to a great extent are ignorant of a deeply Greek, national and greatly human poetry with an existential breadth that transcends historical facts and touches upon the ecumenical demand of recovering the severely offended humanity of our time.

Lefteris Papaleontiou's book, however, fills in these gaps. It covers them in a diverse and gradual way; diverse, in as much as it examines and enlightens several sides of a man of letters that belongs mainly to poetry, but in order to be understood, his journey must be studied as it develops historically; gradual, since the texts that make up the book have a gradational difficulty. There are texts of general interest, which are introductory, or in any case, central texts, as well as specialised texts that are probably addressed to the initiated reader. These latter texts, even if the general subject matter is under control, contribute to the detection of subtle layers of Montis' work that once discovered, grant another dimension and depth, to his entire work; they show its peculiarity and tragedy.

That is why we have talked about a manual, which introduces the poetry and prose of the Cypriot creator. Furthermore, it is an analysis of his poetry, since particularly with the smaller studies in this volume, we observe his developmental progress, his transfer from style to style, his mannerism "moments", which comprise the seeds of his whole poetry, the literary existence of Montis.

Specifically, the first study is a useful introductory text, deliberately of course placed at the start, since it outlines the general biographical and literary material to get to know the poet's life in broad terms, which is indissolubly tied with his work. His complexity is documented and it is explained how he found his way to poetry, through prose and light theatre. Additionally, about the individual parts that we have mentioned before, the stylistic and the descriptive, there is reference here about Montis' preference, the short-versed poem, thus allusive, as well as his ironical intention; the parenthetic-interruptive use, the sources for his texts and his preference for specific poets, such as Cavafis or Karyotakis. The reader is predisposed about the method of theme development and the core element of his themes, his figural choices and the small figures, the effect of historical events that unfolded in Cyprus on his poetry. Moreover, there is material to aid in understanding his prose and references to specific works that are considered significant for his extensive poetry. Finally, this study highlights the linguistic organ that Montis exploits, whose understanding leads to a serious

issue of Cypriot production that is related both with the particularity of Cypriot and its idioms, and its relation to Greek literary production.

We could say that in this section Papaleontiou concentrates and summarises everything that has been said about Montis' literature, so later on he can deal on with its separate philological, lingual or stylistic aspects.

In the second section, therefore, he grapples with a basic ingredient of Montis' poetry, irony, a subject that the writer of the volume has dealt with elsewhere. The emphasis which he gives, we think should be evaluated in general. Not only in Montis' work but in Cypriot literary production in general, particularly after 1974, from which stems a bitter or philosophical or melancholic irony, a consequence of the events and proliferating in other well-known poets, such as Kyr. Charalambides. I shall not refer to the detailed subcategories that are detected in Montis' poetry, but I will emphasize two characteristic forms, the elliptical construction and the counterpoint-juxtaposition of conceptual pairs. It is a fact that works of this kind lead to an in-depth study and interpretation of Montis, while they provide an understanding of the space in which he moves.

The third work of the book concerns the self-referencing of the poet. It holds great interest since beyond the self-critical, self-interpretive and self-historical material, essential in understanding his work, topics are proposed by Montis himself, which are developed and distributed by Papaleontiou, about the relation of poetry and life, veritas and plusquam veritas (truth and hyper-truth). The self-psychographic tone that the writer discovers leads to an idiomorphic self-analysis. They are reading keys that are coded and become easy to use by the reader, thus unlocking Montis' poems. Finally, this piece of work leads to the search for the sources of the Cypriot poet and the quality of his textual material, an issue again that touches upon the sum of Cypriot literary production and the discovering of basic characteristics and preferences.

A similar interpretive value is given to the study entitled "The poet Costas Montis and History". Its undermining and unreliability are issues of his poetry. Again the reader is guided to preceding examples, like the Cavafian one, discovering the roots of the Cypriot region. Again he is driven to observe the peculiar relation of literature and history especially under the specific conditions of the island, a fact that has led many men of letters to view (and see) history with suspicion, or with contempt.

Two studies that follow refer to specific works, to *Letters to Mother* on the one hand, and to the novel *Afentis Battistas etc.*, on the other. They are delicate infiltrations into these texts of Montis, but also exercises on a

specific field, for those who were examined on the first works. For practical applications the text is

comparative-objective, where *Closed doors* “discourse” contrapuntally with *Bitter lemons* by L. Durrell and *Bronze age* by R. Roufos. It is the distinct view from the inside. The viewpoint of the sufferer. This text will also be considered an application of those theoretical thoughts which he has documented in a previous study, about the relation of literature and history. Even so, the appeal is extended, since it concerns the whole personality of Montis, a regulator to a great extent of the literary affairs of Cyprus.

The two last studies examine two other aspects of Montis, a) his preoccupation with the short story (the whole environment brings to mind the great Cypriot prose writer Nicos Nicolaides) and b) his service in the theatre, with the pretext of the magazine ‘*To Theatro*’ (Theatre), which he published in Cyprus during 1944-1945.

In closing, we will recapitulate that this volume does indeed constitute an introduction to Montis’ work, which theoretically and practically initiates the reader to his poetry and prose, which provokes comparisons to the Greek area, which offers material for the recognition of the characteristics of Cypriot literature from 1950 till today, which leaves its Greek character evident and the creation of an idiosyncratic quality, a consequence of the historical events of greater Hellenism, events that the national core is participating in, that is why it is called upon to acknowledge them. Since the failure of systematic integration of Cypriot literary production into Greek literature shows an inexcusable ignorance and most importantly, a missed opportunity for a dynamic revitalization.

Theodosios Pylarinos