Tasos Leivaditis’s *The Blind Man with the Lamp*, translated and introduced by N.N. Trakakis, is a self-contained universe of the history and tone of modern Greek post-war poetics. Sampling the work of a poet whose first collection was a voice given to the ones exiled in the island of Makronesos (*Μάχη στην άκρη της Νύχτας: Το Χρονικό της Μακρονήσου / Battle at the Edge of the Night*, 1952), the collection, originally published in Greek in 1983, is a precious addition to the arguably short list of work by Greek poets available in the English language. Leivaditis’s title brings to mind Diogenes of Sinope walking about in full daylight with a lamp looking for an honest man but also the alertness of the blind who, having honed their senses to compensate for their situation, become telling poetic symbols for a kind of Tiresias’s seeing blindness. From the onset, then, one is expecting a collection of poems about the never-ending search for whatever it is that makes us human, a poignant theme as much as it is diachronic.

‘Leivaditis is, I suspect, quickly assimilated into the poetry of the post-war generation, thus effectively silencing the profound ways in which his writing grapples with but also transcends the struggles and concerns of a particular epoch’ (p. ix): the book starts with an elegantly written and very informative introduction to the life and work of Tasos Leivaditis (1922–1988) but also to the cultural and political context surrounding his work. This is invaluable for readers who know little of post-war Greek poetry as it aids the placement of Leivaditis’s work at the moment of its creation and hence allows one to comprehend the significance of the main images and symbols the poet uses.

Prior to submerging oneself to Leivaditis’s poetic universe, the reader learns what it could have meant to grow up in post-1922 Athens; what influences were imported from beyond national borders (surrealism and communism); how the generation of the 1930s played a crucial role in invigorating Greek literature and balancing out the disillusionment of the 1920s, at which point in his life Leivaditis enrolled in the youth wing of the communist resistance movement during World War II; and how in the aftermath of the Civil War leftist artists such as Yannis Ritsos, Aris Alexandrou and Manos Katrakis were arrested and exiled to camps. Leivaditis published his first poem at the beginning of the Civil War in the winter of 1946–47 while his first poetry collections in 1952 followed his release from detention (for over three years in various islands) and coincided with the beginning of another eleven years of right-wing rule in Greece under General Papagos’s party. In the introduction to the volume, we find the following lines which transfer the torment of one of Leivaditis’s first collections built upon his memories of exile:

*Brother are you here?*
*I can’t see you in the dark*
*and this corporal*
*he is late*
*what time is it?*
*I’m cold.\*\*
*I’m cold too*
*light up a match*
*what time is it?*
how are we to believe again in the world?
what time is it?
[...]

What time is it in the dark?
what time is it in the rain?
what time is it today on all the earth?
What time is it?

(from Battle at the Edge of the Night, 1952, italics in the volume)

Trakakis takes the reader through all of Leivaditis’s collections, leading them to the 1983 The Blind Man with the Lamp, all the while explaining the various periods the poet lived through from the socialist realism of his early days, which reflected the traumas of war, to the economic and social construction of post-war life and the rise of the ‘poetry of defeat’, which expressed the alienation, despair and loss of daily affairs and intimate relationships (pp. xviii-xx). This phase was, in turn, abruptly interrupted by the military junta (1967-1974) in the post-1972 years (marked by the publication of Night Visitor), when the poet grappled with the threat of nihilism. At this point in the introduction, Trakakis nods at his audience with a few lines of Leivaditis’s prose-poem ‘Lamp’ (1979), which is strategically placed early on in the volume to make the words ‘time’, ‘others’, ‘home’ and ‘oblivion’ echo so that readers open up to some of the poet’s main themes and symbols:

Each time I begin to speak, I know that I’ll say nothing:
words will betray me, time will bypass me, the others will
stand indifferent outside the house. Until, finally, I will
be nothing other than someone who, holding a lamp,
would go from room to room
lighting the oblivion.

In addition, the translator provides a more detailed introduction to the world of the 1983 collection at hand and its four sections, namely, ‘Laurels for the Defeated’ (36 short prose-poems), ‘Conversations’ (12 prayer-like poems addressed to the Lord), ‘Brother Jesus’ (4 brief passages reminiscent of the Gospels), and ‘Up All Night’ (44 prose-poems):

The Blind Man with the Lamp gives powerful voice to the elegiac remembrance of the past and the concomitant desire for something wholly (and holy) Other. Memories of the battles and personalities of bygone days, imbued with feelings of loss and mourning, are portrayed so intimately that we almost believe that they are our very own. (p. xxv)

The collection is a pleasure to read both in the original Greek and, now, in this fine and carefully drafted English translation. Poet and critic Gerasimos Lykiardopoulos has written that poetry is not translated, it is just written and re-written while recent T.S. Eliot prize winner David
Harsent talked of his translations of several of Yannis Ritsos’s poems as ‘adaptation or hommage’. In a similar vein, the translator’s feat is that he has produced a body of translations that flow in the target language and are a hommage to the Greek poet’s work. As a final note, here is the volume’s final poem (which also gives a sense of the translator’s use of hyphens to counteract the poet’s ‘paratactic manner of writing’ and ‘sparse use of periods within each poem’, p. xxviii):

I couldn’t remember how I got here, in this room with the blinding light – I was sitting at a table, and opposite me was my fellow card player, a man unknown to me – we’d been playing for hours, perhaps even years – the pack of cards: worn out, ominous – not a cent of my money was left – ‘I raise you my past!’ I shouted – the other’s eyelids were lowered murderously – he dealt the cards – I lost – ‘I raise you all my future days!’ I howled –

and then I noticed that I was not all alone on a deserted building lot, and in the distance the city lay destroyed - from what? and I, who was I? where was I going? – ‘Sweet mother of Christ,’ I whispered, ‘at last all is finished.

Now I can start over again.’

(‘Lethal Game’)

Δεν μπορούσα να θυμηθώ πώς βρέθηκα εδώ, σ’ αυτή την κάμαρα με το εκτυφλωτικό φως, καθόμουν μπροστά σ’ ένα τραπέζι, απέναντι ο συμπαίκτης άγνωστος, θα παίζαμε ώρες, ίσως και χρόνια, η τράπουλα φθαρμένη, δυσοίωνη, δε μου ’μενε δεκάρα, «παίζω το παρελθόν μου» φώναξα, τα βλέφαρα του άλλου χαμήλωσαν δολοφονικά, μοίρασε χαρτιά, έχασα, «παίζω όλες τις μελλοντικές μου μέρες» ούρλιαξα –

και τότε είδα ότι βρισκόμουν ολομόναχος σ’ ένα έρημο οικόπεδο, η πόλη μακριά καταστραμμένη, από τι; κι εγώ ποιος ήμουν; πού πήγαινα; «γλυκιά μητέρα του Χριστού, ψιθύρισα – επιτέλους όλα τέλειωσαν.

Τώρα μπορώ να ξαναρχίσω».

(«Θανάσιμο Παιχνίδι»)

Konstantina Georganta