

An Untimely Poetry: The Call of Haris Vlavianos' *Angel of History*

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In "On the uses and disadvantages of history for life", Nietzsche teaches us that to live historically through and through is not to live at all if living historically means remembering the knowledge and action that combat the superfluous to salvage and nurture the necessary. To live historically is to really abandon the memory of the becoming, the flux, the linear and progressive development of coming into being; it is to forget history as the logical synthesis of highly selected moments, which safeguard the *Aufhebung* of the grand historical narratives that in their turn provide an accommodating and appeasing interpretation of each moment, each rupture and each catastrophe. In these "grand narratives", remembering is protected from being traumatized from excess, what Nietzsche calls the superfluous, that is, from the everyday, the margins and the silences, from what the grand narratives of history banish to the footnote text. This repressive gesture, however, does not completely heal the open scars that the banished and the omitted leave on the textual surface of history; these scars often become the seams that are burst by the deluging wave of the non-accommodated footnotes, silences and margins that haunt history's grand narratives.

The forgotten, therefore, becomes the specter that haunts the remembering of what history proper teaches as the necessary and illuminates the process of remembering as a process that remembers to forget history's *other*, that is, what contests and possibly fulminates the narratives that secure and privilege a specific identity: the identity of a nation, a community, a people, a religion, a race. How, then, can we live historically and remember against this obliterating and assimilating remembering? Especially now, with the world's entrance into the 21st century that testifies to the culmination of an imperialist *logos*, which has led to an upsurge of refugees, exiles, outcasts, homeless and unwanted peoples, this question of how we, a people, a community, a nation, a religion, a race, are to remember what is forgotten and forget the remembering of the necessary to contemplate what has been labeled as the superfluous, that is, the spectral and haunting excess, is a compelling one. Nietzsche's response to this ever-emerging haunting is his "untimely meditation" that stands *apart* from his time to "look afresh at

something of which our time [his time, that is] is rightly proud—its cultivation of history—as being injurious to it, a defect and a deficiency in it” (Nietzsche 60).

This paper follows the Nietzschean path to explore and discuss Haris Vlavianos’ poetry, with a particular focus on *The Angel of History*, as an “untimely poetry” that is blessed by the superfluous, the marginal, the footnote and the everyday and seeks, through the banality and often grim penumbra of the superfluous, the luminous excess that the grand narratives of modern Greek poetry have often sacrificed at the altar of the necessary, that is, the modern. This is not to say that the poetry of Cavafy, Seferis, Elytis and Ritsos, to mention a few of the many distinguished and worldwide known Greek poets, does not stoop to the margin to speak its profound darkness and its excessive light; Cavafy’s *Krymena Poiemata*, Elytis’ *Ta Elegeia tes Oxopetras*, Ritsos’ *Sonata sto Selenofos* and Seferis’ *Mithistorima* are few of the many examples. Nor is this paper an effort to compare their poetry with the poetry of Vlavianos. What I am proposing to do is to excavate Vlavianos’ poetry as a poetry that completely and utterly demythologizes the modern and unconceals the nightmares of its dreams by speaking the silence of the margin in scenes of death and life and visions of truth and darkness without restoring them in a picture that renders them sensible and, thus, comprehensible. In other words, Vlavianos does not provide his poems with a *telos*, an accommodating and soothing end that appropriates the detail and its silence after using them to weave his poetic images. What each poem from this collection leaves behind is a pause that functions like a crack from which the next poem leaps without, however, securing a continuum, which would consolidate a linear historical narration. On the contrary, Vlavianos’ poetry and, in particular, *The Angel of History* are a testimony to the moment and its ruptures as they are portrayed in defiance of the causal and the whole; it is a surge of dissimilarities that stage the moment in its present for there is no past, that is, no solid background that contains and explains the *now*. At a moment when Greece seeks its nationhood and is called forth to redefine its identity in the context of a Western European community that is growing with global aspirations, Modern Greek poetry, too, is caught in the vortex of these changes and tries to redefine a voice that speaks these changes and the consequent omissions and repression. What Vlavianos’ poetry represents is his and, to an extent, his generation’s preoccupation with history not as a totalitarian power, “whose force that directs it serves itself” (Nietzsche 67), but as a rupture that injures the hypertrophied virtues of the Greek national and poetic structures. Hence, it is an “untimely poetry” for it acts counter to our time and on our time hopefully for the benefit of telling and retelling its stories, visions and scenes with the utmost and most painstaking sincerity in its effort to see through the curtain of the stage and beyond the “masquerade” of the history that veils the untrue to project it as the essential, and distorts the true to reduce it to the place of the footnote of the historical text.

The Angel of History¹

“...all the poets are made of negations...countervailed by a decisive affirmation.
An affirmation, not a compromise...” (Seferis, *Language in our Poetry*)

“History can wait”, the poet says at the end of “The Angel of History” that crowns the homonymous collection. The poem ends with the comfort of self-imposed darkness at midday and the fleeting security of the starched, white sheets that will harbor the *lethe* of the voyeurs of this poem. This withdrawal, however, is not an evasion of the impossible question that the poet posits in the central section of his poem. It is rather a fugacious turning from the Herculean task of responding to a question without an answer.

However, what is the question and why is the response so impossible?

Still: if indeed “blessed is the man”
who “does not denigrate, depreciate, denunciate”
“does not rationalize, retreat, equivocate”
who knows
that “egomania is not a duty”
who’s in favor of “difference, query, tolerance”
who “does not acquiesce, does not adjust”,
then who truly among us is the one
who can say,
or rather cry, so that everyone will hear him,
(even those inside your yuppie windmill)
“yes, I am that man,
I am the chosen one
who has come not to bring Peace,
but the Sword”.
Who? (52-3)

The hypothetical beginning of the question demands stillness, almost a silence, which prepares the serpentine question to spring like a cobra that wakes up from its slumber ready to attack the invader, that is, the reader who obediently follows the hypothetical structure of the question with the anticipation of an answer that will strengthen the rational character of the hypothesis and reassure the reader of the existence of “difference, query, tolerance” and the unaccommodating individuals who will sacrifice themselves at the altar of these values. However, the emphatic tone of the question that ponders on the existence of such a Jesus-like individual, who, awake from the *lethe* of an egomaniac, “comes with the Sword” to question and to disturb, is turned into a hyperbole when the second section of the poem is juxtaposed with the first, which depicts the place and time of the question. The opening scene of the poem, with *those* who “know when the crucial moment comes/how to fix their gaze/on life’s image”, depicts

a world where these individuals' "penetrating, ecstatic gaze" inquires the banal, the trivial, the superficial: "a shiny, color snapshot...beside the –click– beers, cigarettes, lighter/beside the –click– sun oils, lotions, mobile phone" (51). The paradox of a *fixed gaze* on life's images that are trite and transitory, snapshots of glossy and material moments, clouds the scene of the two lovers almost visible behind the bougainvillea in the background and overwhelmed by the presence of a windmill turned into a fashionable summer resort for yuppies.

This glossiness, then, that reveals the present as the present of a *yuppie windmill*, which actually is a superficial and material present, is the background of the question that crowns the poem and, thus, makes it sound rhetorically sarcastic. For how at the peak of this comfortable and ever sleeping, languid noon that elucidates the present and the world as glossy and fake, a man "with a Sword" and the task of crying out the truth can ever be found? When the yuppie windmill can overshadow even the lovemaking of the lovers, remote and almost invisible as they may be? Hence, even before the poet responds with a "no one" to the *who* that his question posits, the negation haunts the question whose stage—time and space—makes it an impossible one. However, the impossibility of the question does not render it pointless. The withdrawal of the two lovers behind the blinds that hide the glaring light of the noon cannot efface the world that the poetic question reveals. For even if the poet's *persona*, like another Prufrock, decides to retreat with his lover, his reader, his self, to the comfort of the starched sheets and *lethargy/lethe* of the noon, the question is neither rationalized nor equivocated but firmly posited to haunt the soothing moment craved at the end of the poem so much so that the evasion of the question can only be fleeting, can only be artificial. After all, the blinds cannot completely stop the sunrays from slipping through and the sheets cannot be cool and starched for long. The world that the question discloses and its impossible response are the overwhelming light that the blinds can only temporarily shut out. Indeed "history can wait" for nothing in the world of the poem can stop the return of Eurydice to Hades, not even Orpheus' mellifluous music.

Yet, what is the ruthless history that the lovers of the poem try to temporarily shun off from their love shrine? Is the absence of the "hero with the sword" lamented as a symptom of the loss of values, the loss of the heroic and the presence of material decadence, is the only "real" world revealed by the intense gaze of those who look at life in the form of snapshots? In other words, does Vlavianos, following the path of the poetry of the 30's, write the pain for the loss of an ideal that could rise among the ruin and like another Christ lead the world to light and truth? As it has already been noted, in the second section the poem turns against itself with an enigmatic smile that becomes a sarcastic roar; the labyrinthine hypothesis of the question—"If indeed...does not adjust"—complicated by the listing qualifications of the "blessed man", already connotes the impossibility of ever finding such a man "among us", as if it would ever be easy to find a second Christ among the mortals. Instead of lamenting this impossibility as a loss, which would further illuminate the opening of the poem as a scene of decay

that is to be mourned by the poet, the poet endows his poem with the charisma of an enigmatic smile, like the *meidiama* on the *kore's* face, turned to or rather *at* the accentuated difference between the decayed gloss of the first section and the failed quest for the “hero with the sword” in the second section. With this *meidiama* on their face, the two lovers withdraw from the nugatory quest obeying the call of the endless sea and the scorching sun and the poet ends the poem with the celebration of this temporary withdrawal behind the blinds, an image that completely abstains from the worlds and their respective value-systems of the two preceding sections.

What this poem testifies to is the poet's own withdrawal and *meidiama* at the ideological dimensions of the generation of the 30's and its impact on Modern Greek poetry. Undoubtedly, this generation with leading figures such as George Seferis, Odysseus Elytis and Yiannis Ritsos bequeathed their indelible mark to the poets to come. However, this generation was the product of a *problematic*; emerging in the vortex of the foreign influences on the Greek literary production in general and the country's political quest of its *Hellenikoteta* (*Greekness*), they had to oppose the ethnocentric character of that quest, which culminated with Metaxa's dictatorship in the 30's and Papadopoulos' military coup and consequent junta in the 70's, and simultaneously become the “responsible laborers of the Greek *logos*...with the claim for a national identity, defending themselves against the dangers that they had consciously created” (Vitti 190). This “quest of *Hellenikoteta* (*Greekness*)” (Vitti 191) that aimed at a Greek *Hellenism* rather than a European one — mainly constituted by the European and foreign influences — is absent in the poetry of Haris Vlavianos. The crossroads between the West and the East that made Seferis wonder what “remains to be kept if we are to deny ourselves” (Seferis 175) is now swiftly incorporated as an integral part of the wealth of images in Vlavianos' poetry. If there is a quest, it does not bear the ideological weight and occasional moralistic tone of the generation of the 30's, nor does it posit the question of the *Hellenikoteta* of poetry. For Vlavianos does not set his task as a poet as the task of the individual and distinct voice that will “overpower the language” he has inherited in order to “make it speak in the highest possible volume” (Seferis 173). What concern him as a poet are the question of *Hellenikoteta* in poetry and the question of poetry per se. Nor, as a response, does his poetry become the stage of a cosmopolitan scene that shifts from Brazil to Italy to England to Greece and the unidentified space of the confessional and the personal in order to escape the gravity of this *Hellenikoteta* that has marked the poetic quest of the generation of the 30's. Although the scene of his poetry is indeed delineated by non-Hellenocentric images, which traverse the well-known borders of the drawings of the Greek landscape, and is often informed by images of foreign metropolises and countries², the foreign in his poetry is in the experience of the familiar and not in the portrayal of its stage. For that reason, the term “cosmopolitan” is a reductive way of looking at what Vlavianos' “international staging” of his scenes exposes and a simplistic explanation of his poetry as a cosmopolitan response to the Hellenocentric ima-

gery of the generation of the 30's, represented by poets who, at any rate, were very "cosmopolitan" and international themselves in the influences that they received and bestowed.

Hence, in *Mikres Cyclades* [Lesser Cyclades], the poet voices the impossibility of a return to the *topos* of the generation of the 30's where the disintegration of values, the loss of the heroic, the absence of the mythical in the modern world of chaos are lamented:

We cannot return
to this land
for the land is no longer ours.
And poetry
(*la poesia cara*)
no matter how many loud-roaring seas it invents
how many suitors (*n'est pas?*) it wipes out
lacks the power to reconcile
people with their past. (70)

His indirect, or rather ironic reference, to Seferis' *Argonaftes* in the second line of this poem, is not a direct attack against Seferis' attachment to this mythical *topos* that is "no longer ours" but an inquiring *meidiama* at the image of the "loud-roaring seas" inducing the nostalgic retrieval of the space of the Aegean Sea as what Seferis calls a "kind of island temperament...a voyage to all directions" that leaves behind the "dusted streets and the little rooms" or what Elytis names a "sea physiognomy of Greece" (in Vitti 202). To this pelagic dimension of the Greek spirit that became one of the most representative characteristics of the generation of the 30's, as Vitti points out (202-3), Vlavianos turns to find not what it aspires to, a sea-breezed experience of the Aegean Sea as Greece's window to the world, but what it leaves behind, that is, the "dusted streets and the little rooms". In *Lesser Cyclades*, therefore, the irretrievable voyage, in which the wanderer would encounter "the petrified head of Argos" that "would be a fine epilogue/to our purposeless and weary wanderings" is brought to the end of a "memorable metamorphosis" served with the "appropriate coffee" by the "Ovid of the next door pension (*Rooms—on—the sea*)" (70). This dissolution of the mythical in the everyday is not, however, a simplistic de-constructive effort that aims at reducing the vortex of the mythical imaginary to the everyday to ridicule the former. For such an effort would completely devastate the poem itself and destroy the superfluous and the everyday to its ashes, a gesture that would be even more destructive than the abandonment of the everyday and its "dusted streets" induced by the "pelagic dimension" of the 30's. On the contrary, Vlavianos' poetic gesture recognizes that the two cannot be reconciled, especially as the *topos* of the reconciliation is absent, and that the dream qualities of a *Hellenikoteta* inherent in the pelagic dimension cannot be salvaged in the tourist-like orientation of the Aegean wanderer, who marvels at Greeks at the end of the poem with the simplistic and patronizing exclamation, "I say, you

Greeks are wonderful chaps". The dream of the Odyssean journey is gone forever. But it is not lost. It becomes the haunting and irreconcilable force in the ripples of the Aegean waters that brush off against Ovid's pension and its rooms on the sea, a force that does not close off the possibilities of the enclosure of the Aegean *pelagos* that opens the scene of the everyday left behind in the "dusted streets and little rooms". These Cyclades, therefore, are *lesser* but not in importance as it is the "little" in the everyday that invokes the haunting of the *topos* that "no longer is" and cohabits with it in an incommensurable relationship.

The superfluous, then, to repeat this Nietzschean term, is portrayed as the *land* that is ours, the land of the present that retroactively haunts the past, in which it was accommodated as a footnote or abandoned for the pursuit of the "fine epilogue" that can no longer be possible. In the writing of *Hellenikoteta*, it means that Vlavianos abandons the historical writing that solidifies the dreamed identity in a poetic discourse that can celebrate it so that it can be legitimized by it, and breaks that vicious circle at a moment when the concept of *Hellenikoteta* is being questioned on all levels. More specifically, he writes a kind of poetry that interrogates identity—and not simply the Hellenic identity of the Greek poetry—in poetry to contemplate the poetic and not to refashion it according to the imperatives of an *Hellenikoteta*, which is being sought after at a moment when the Greek Nation's dream appears to be shaken by its participation in the European and Global politics. The recent debates about the Nation's testimonial gesture of its religious identity on the new identity cards—debates that excited the passions and fears of losing not the Christian Orthodox religion but the attachment to one of the most prevalent national signifiers—reveal the contemporary preoccupation with the *Hellenikoteta* of the Greek nation as a European nation in becoming and member of the global community to be. The retrieval of the quest of *Hellenikoteta* as inscribed in the poetry of the 30's would be no more than a nostalgic lament that would sound like a cacophony in the context of a Greek *now* woven of changes and revelations about its identity that unconceal the writing of the dream upon which the Greek national identity has for so long relied. In that sense, Vlavianos' poetry undoes the works of the interpretation of the "dream" of this *Hellenikoteta* that appears to have been the desired object of the poetry of the 30's "to put into question [our] unaccountable present while giving a form to [our] intangible past" (Gourgouris 8). For, as Gourgouris suggests in *Dream Nation*, if the writing of the nation is "both historical and speculative, both empirical and sophistic" (8) involving the doing and undoing of its "dream state with its interpretation" (1), then Vlavianos proposes a poetry that, like Penelope, weaves and unweaves the "dream state" and opens its interpretation to the cosmopolitan travels of his poetic images traversing the borders of the Aegean enclosure from Greece, to Brazil, to Italy, through the experiences of life, beauty, love and death.

The Poems on Poetry

“History can wait” and gives its place to an enigmatic, poetic *topos* that emerges out of an incongruous sequence of images that creatively reconfigure themselves to reveal moments—each moment being a performance of life and poetry. Hence, “the exquisite poem of the genuine” leaps from the “ruin”, the “crack”, the “absence” (“Autumnal Refrain” 9). Poetry, then, becomes the inscription of images captured at a moment of their happening:

Lack of imagination?
 This too no doubt will have to be invented;
 and the stage set up
 as the instructions on the paper stipulate.
 The stone house has to stay.
 The arch in the front room
 (your priceless, precious past) especially this.
 And the old lintel with the mermaid.
 And the fig tree in the garden, and the oleanders,
 and the dry stone wall, everything has to remain.
 Everything.
 That the ruin, the crack, the absence may be revealed.
 That the endeavor, the failure, the work may be appraised.
 The autumnal wind
 that gave body to these words,
 fiercely erasing their metaphysical gleam,
 knows well the secret they conceal.
 As do you
 who stoop to pick up a dead leaf from the doorstep.
 The leaf of reality.
 The exquisite poem of the genuine. (“Autumnal Refrain”, 9-10)

The drawing of the stage on paper, that is, the writing of the poem on the “white shore” of the text, is the happening of the images at the moment of their conception. Imagery and the poetic discourse share an indissoluble relationship that does not hierarchize or prioritize language over the image and vice versa. Conversely, they are born together, simultaneously, to contemplate the action of the happening and capture its most essential and fleeting moment, that is, to capture the *now* of the action that the words unconceal. This *now*, the blowing of the “autumnal wind”, the “stooping” to the “dead leaf”, is the *topos* that all the preceding images weave together, a *topos* that is as temporary and powerful as the images themselves. The end of the poem marks the end of that *topos* that does not precede the occurrence of action and can thus not contain it or account for it by providing it with a discourse that rationalizes it. The “metaphysical gleam” of the words—the infrastructure of the *topos*—is ferociously blown

away by the wind that contains their secret, their essence not to be explored outside the happening, the occurrence of the moment. The “dead leaf” on the doorstep—unlike Whitman’s “leaf of grass”, a microcosm that immediately unconceals the cosmic web of life—is a macrocosmic essence in and of its own, a powerful image of life at the same time that it bears the signs of death, an image that reflects the cosmic *in* the little, the invisible, the withered away and gone with the wind, an image that is the “exquisite poem” itself. In other words, the poem does not consist of *it* and other images but is *it*; it *is* the evanescent moment of the end of the aerial dance of the “dead leaf” on the doorstep of reality, the arrest of the stasis of an uncontrollable and errant movement.

This *now* that this poem celebrates—aware of its always already death for “history can wait” but it cannot stop—is not only the historical *now* of an interrogated *Hellenikoteta* in poetry or a contemporary Greek reality in its everydayness but the exploration of the *now* in and of poetry as it bears poetry and is born out of it. Hence, in the *Sonnet*, poetry is decomposed, undressed of all its “superfluous” elements and left with some “disrupted phrases and words”, which are nevertheless real for the poet, albeit incomprehensible to his lover and the others, to sing the nightmare of life—for how can life be sung otherwise, the poet wonders—revealing a poetic *topos* that is empty of meaning for it pursues the deviant and wayward truth “vanished behind the hills” and still present in its wake (20). In this pursuit, Vlavianos encounters his lover, poetry, again, when, in *Facing the World’s Starry Screen*, each poem is contemplated as a new and self-created *cosmos* with its own laws not regulated by some kind of predetermined plan, like the one of a metaphysical discourse, a *cosmos* that is “the result of/the here and now,/of our fluid, our true conscience” (66). He calls that poetry an

horizontal poetry that contemplates in depth
the question of surface,
in a language that is simple, natural
—disarmed, more accurately—
stripped of the (Seferian-Elytian) laurels
and gleaming insignia. (66)

The celebration of this *contemplative poetry* abandons the folklore and archaeological banners of the “metaphysical gleam” of the most worldwide known *Hellenikoteta*—an *Hellenikoteta* quested by the generation of the 30’s—that has unfortunately been reduced to the object of a tourist consumption, which has disseminated this *Hellenikoteta* for marketing purposes with the result of turning it into a *fetish*, an exotic object that the passerby tourist will buy as a memento of Greece. This “colonization of the ideal”—Greece’s “paradigmatic colonialist condition *in* the colonialist imaginary” (Gourgouris 6)—reifies the being of the “ideal”, the being of the “dream”, thus turning the being of *Hellenikoteta*, whatever that may signify nowadays, into a “heroic phantom” (Vlavianos 67)

obsequious to an ancestry-adoring ritual that overwhelms and drowns its present moment, its *now*, in the sea of “colorful rugs and rare vases”. However, the *now* of beings-in-the world and not “heroic phantoms”, the *now* of a community of the present is called forth to build on this present, no matter how inglorious and plain it may seem to be. On that *now*, poetry is not the vehicle of the construction, its metaphysical tool that will endow this *now* with a “gleaming” essence, but an integral part of this contemplative process. It is the body of the process itself, aware of the “limits and content of reality”, ready to live their ephemeral life and suffer their rapid death. In that sense, it is a poetry not afraid to live its own death the very moment an image is born in beauty and decay for what this poetry “leaves behind” is not a treasure of ancestry but the experience of the *now*, of the moment, a moment that finds Greece and its *Hellenikoteta* torn between its glorious and haunting past and a mirrored-in-that-past present, distorted by a glossy glory “no longer ours”, no longer here and no longer needed.

What becomes of poetry then in Vlavianos’ poetry? At the end of his collection, *The Angel of History*, he responds: “the thinking of emotion and the feeling of thought” (116). In “After The End of Beauty”, a poem written after the *Angel of History*, the images of beauty are the moments of lovemaking, thinking and poetry; the gaze at the lover’s face is as lasting as the poem’s attachment to its images, to itself, and as swift as the turning of the poem to its other, to the other image, like “love that returns to its source/briefly prolonging/the specific dream” (“After the End of Beauty”, I). If beauty is cursed not to last long, what is left behind for the gaze to rest firmly upon is the present, a present that is always already not there, unavailable at the moment when it is quested, ahead of the *logos* that describes it and behind the thinking that portrays it. Poetry then is the in-between *logos* and thought, an integral part of the ephemeral and the eternal, bound to the body of language and its mortality and supplemented by the spirit of thinking. The poem is the grounding in the light that emanates from this in-between, a crack that speaks the silence of the blank that the images of endlessness (Section III), chivalric love (Section IV), forgetfulness and abandonment to the “other” outside the self (Section V) and weariness of words and awareness of their limits (Section VI) leave behind upon their departure and their ongoing substitution in the constellation of the imagery of the poem. The blank space left behind upon the departure of the images is never really filled as no image is ever-present, powerful enough to overwhelm the body of the poem, but bound to the same mortality that the body of the poem is.

That blank space then is the textual space of silence:

The silence of words;
the only possibility of silence.
Crack
in nature’s unnatural beautification.
The poem as a denial of the poetic

— as its embrace, that is.
 (Like fruit
 that ripens in the dark
 or a secret that furtively reveals its cards
 as the affair is consummated
 in her perplexed, perplexing tender, gaze). (90)

After the exhaustion of the gaze and the exhaustion of the words, silence, the language of whiteness, the white margins that the poetic text cannot inscribe, the “roses amidst white stones” under the full-moon sky and the soft snow (“Silence”, in *The Angel of History*, 95), become the language of the poem and their perpetual source of energy that releases the poem within the poem, the image within the image. Silence is, in other words, the language of poetry’s self-making process, always already inherent in the outside of the said of the poetic text, an outside that stands a/part from the poem and is the “margin of the page” nullified but not erased by the presence of the poetic voice (“Silence” 99). Silence then is not the “other” of language but language’s *otherness*, which becomes the *topos* of the “other”, the estranged, the unfamiliar, the darkness beyond the penumbra of the poetic light. The poem is the “denial of the poetic” for it estranges itself from its light to experience its darkness, a darkness that unveils truth, what Vlavianos’ poetry experiments on not by exploring the metaphysics of truth but by deconstructing it to experience the unveiling of truth in the poetic together with the unveiling of the poetic in truth. Having questioned the *topos* of poetry as he inherits it from a tradition of poetry that precedes him—if we are not to completely discount Seferis and Eliot’s argument about tradition as a “foundered memory” (Seferis 177) that confers the benefits of learning—he does not question it to become the poet of doubt; and he does not deconstruct it to simply write the undoing of it and consequently the interpretation of the nation’s dream in it but to quest and taste and savor the experience of poetry anew.

Poetry and Truth

“Sad, really sad, is another thing. It is when some grand ships sail by with their coral jewels and their ivory masts, with big waving white and red flags...visions that are soon forgotten. For as effulgent as their vision was, as swift its oblivion is”

(C.P. Cavafy, The Ships).

While Vlavianos’ poems become the Cavafian ships that dangerously cross the waters of imagination to reach the white shores of the paper, they do not bear the banners of ostentatious truths and ivory messages that will soon be forgotten after they grandly sail off the port, for “as effulgent as their vision was, as swift its oblivion is” (Cavafy 117). On the contrary, in the poems discussed in this paper and, generally, in most of his poetry, the “other”, the “different”, the strange, interferes with the familiar and the ostentatious as a sudden presence.

It embodies all these that the familiar—often mocked as the “metaphysical gleam” or the secured-in-its-discourse text in the form of an image that is already withered at the moment of its consolidation despite the appearance of its solidity—ferociously denies in protecting itself from change, namely, truth, time and death as a lived and integral experience of life. His poetic images are reconstellated without obeying the pattern of a teleological narration; the end of every poem is the end of a moment intensely described for its own sake and not to praise a glorious, glowing message. Thus, every image is the portrait of a moment that simultaneously reveals and conceals its essence.

If the story of every poem is true, it is not because the images constitute a *whole*, that is, a catholic *entity* but because the scattered images/moments unconceal a fragmented speech that covets the truth by allowing its silence to speak after as well as within the written, the exposed, the said:

A man locked in a labyrinth never looks for the truth
but only for his Ariadne.
Truth is not an unveiling which destroys the secret;
it is the revelation which does it justice.
Our experience remains the captive of a knowledge
that is no longer our experience;
our knowledge is embarrassed by an experience
that has not yet become knowledge.
We must weave new poetic paths
questing the potential spaces of a truth
that would be neither true nor false;
for a truth that would be
implausible
improbable
incredible
thereby making error (pathos)
the thread of our life. (“The Veil”, unpublished)

Seeking Ariadne and not truth, as the poet claims, happens to be the carving of the path questing truth, a happening that is as accidental as death and life. For truth is not the depiction of a reality to be discovered and empirically studied—as the Latin word for “truth”, *veritas*, may suggest with *ver* referring to the *real*, that is, a fully manifested and visually experienced present; it is the evanescence of the real in its most revelatory and cryptic forms, a withdrawal from the world of sight into the world of *lethe*, a movement showing that “the open is by no means first and only a result or consequence of disclosure but is itself the ground and the essential beginning of unconcealedness” (Heidegger 143). In “The Veil”, Vlavianos discusses the concept of *aletheia* (truth) in similar terms with Heidegger’s discussion of *aletheia* as an essentially “ambiguous disclosure in that it expresses a two-fold with an intrinsic unity: on the one hand, as *disclosu-*

re it is the removal of concealment and precisely a removal first of the withdrawing concealment (*lethe*) and then also of distortion and displacement (*pseudos*); on the other hand, however, as *disclosure* it is a sheltering enclosure, i.e., an assuming and preserving in unconcealedness" (Heidegger 133). Hence, Vlavianos employs the metaphor of the veil as a symbol of captivity woven out of the parallel between man's captivity in the labyrinth of death and one's captivity in the limits of one's experience superseded by "a knowledge" that exceeds the limits of the experience and holds it bound to that which is *not* rather than simply relying on what it *is*, that is, on what the experience reveals in its happening. However, even that overwhelming knowledge of the *not* of the experience – that is, what the said and felt of the experience simultaneously excludes and banishes to silence – is in its turn superseded by the coming experience that is yet to become knowledge. This vicious circle of knowing and not knowing at the same time is disrupted by the *not* of the knowledge, that is, what is omitted, forgotten, often repressed in silence in the process of feeling and knowing. The "potential space" of a truth, therefore, appears to reside in the ellipsis of this vicious circle, an ellipsis that emerges out of the haunting of the "other" of experience, of the silenced, the forgotten, and the repressed. In that sense, *aletheia* (truth) is "improbable, impossible, incredible" re-constellating the negative prefix *un* (not) in the affirmed "probable", "possible" and "credible", that is, a constant play between *disclosure* and *disclosure*, to invoke Heidegger's definition again.

The poet closes his writing and *lethe* returns to haunt the poem as the writing of silence speaking all this that the writing has excluded in the manifestation of its presence. Every poem springing from that silence is not a return to the same but a discovery of the "other", that which was *not* said, *not* presented, *not* addressed but which is ever-present and is haunting the portrait of what is affirmed, portrayed and spoken to. Thus, every end of the poem and its *lethe*, its necessary forgetting of the "other", is the *lethe* of *aletheia* (truth). It is the *lethe* that unexpectedly, unforeseeably, stumbles on the forgotten – love, life and death – and threatens the very existence of the poem, whose balance is shaken by its very margins until something is instantaneously revealed at the end of the poem that is a potentially new beginning, "the potential space of truth".

The being of every poem in Vlavianos' poetry is the being of what it excludes and forgets. At a moment when, standing at the threshold of the 21st century and its "global dream", Greece is re-thinking its identity politics, Vlavianos contemplates poetry as the "other" in the text, its said and its affirmed. What is new in this poetry is not a "new dream", a new *Hellenikoteta*, a new poetic *logos* that will salvage and portray a new identity; it is the exploration of a *topos* that is strange and familiar, accidentally unconcealed to be forgotten again without being erased, for it is a poetic *topos* that stands apart from all "metaphysical" and "gleaming" definitions. The strange, hence, never conciliates with the familiar; something explodes in the heart of every poem to reveal this elusive and unspeakable "other" while history waits to be told again and again and again.

Notes

1. All consequent translations of Haris Vlavianos' poems discussed in this paper are based on David Connolly's translation.
2. To mention just a few: "Brasil", "Pentimento" from *Adieu*, "Sleeping in Beauty", "Tate Gallery" from *The Angel of History* and "Cidade Maravilhosa", "Anglais Mort A Bellagio" from an unpublished collection.

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