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Book Reviews

Andreas Karkavitsas. 2021. Translated by Johanna Hanink. *The Archeologist and Selected Sea Stories*. United States: Penguin Random House. Pp 220. Paperback. (ISBN 9780143136248) \$17.00.

It is a pleasure to see a selection from the works of Andreas Karkavitsas (1866-1922) assume a place in the international fiction series of a prestigious publishing house. First published in Greek in 1904 and translated for the first time into English by Johanna Hanink in this edition, its 128-page count disposes it to be called a novella. The portmanteau description on the back cover describes it as “An allegory of Greek nationalism stylized as a folktale,” while Karkavitsas himself, with the two epigraphs that preface his narrative, casts it in the epic tradition. The first, from an anonymous medieval Greek poem, is Iliadic in nature, yet its immediate reference is the Fall of Constantinople. The second, evoking the textile technologies of *The Odyssey*, is a rhyme that traditionally prefaced the recitation of a folktale: “Twirled crimson thread / Whirled on a wheel / Now kick to make it spin / So our tale may begin. / A good evening to you” (p. 7). The narrative continues to showcase its own hybridity by challenging the reader to engage their own positionality regarding its narrative configuration: “Is it truth I’m telling, or fairytale? Take it as you please” (pg. 8). Such generous options inevitably elude generic classification—the apt achievement of a person, like Karkavitsas, of such diverse professional profile: army doctor and author, prominent intellectual and language activist, naturalist, and pedagogue.

In Chapter One we meet two brothers: Aristodemus, the archeologist of the title, representing the “tyranny of classicism,” and the younger Dimitrakis, who rejects books and study in favor of the natural world. Chapter Two introduces Elpida, Dimitrakis’ refuge and the emissary of Karkavitsas’ voice within the text, which is ultimately didactic within its frame of entertainment. This triad of characters serves the valence of dualities present in the allegory, the potential of which for reductivity is depicted in the cover art of this edition: East/West, past glories/future potential, youth/age, black (figure)/red (figure), foreigners/“natives,” *katharevousa*/demotic. The figures represented are Aristodemus/the Archeologist and Dimitrakis. Elpida’s figural absence is perhaps present in the tree that shatters and exposes this rigid vessel and represents the organicism of the folk tradition, existing beyond the repetitive holding patterns of these cultural and geopolitical categories. Its colors homogenize with the ultimate palimpsest, the backdrop of the natural environment, and seem thereby to potentiate the disruptive palette of the figure who freely steps out into it. In the story *within* the covers, this is the plane tree dynamited to uncover potential antiquities, while being itself the very proclamation of the continuity of Greek life from its appearance in Plato’s *Phaidros* (230 b-c) to its presence in every village in Greece today. It is also an embodiment of Elpida’s metaphor for continuity as the trunk of a tree that bridges the roots of the past and the leaves of the future (p. 71). As such, it is the book’s main character.

As an invested outsider who is by no means expert in the history and geopolitics underlying the “allegory of Greek nationalism,” I found instruction whilst being pleasantly entertained by their fairytale-like transparencies. Without appreciation of the balance, and the elegant power of fairytale as a speech act, the allegory seems mere caricature, as indeed it was received by contemporary critics. One feels that the work was hardly addressed to them, but envisaged as a kind of primer for the Greek people, now an autonomous state in its infancy. Independence may have been declared on March 25th, 1821, but, as with a child, it takes time to learn to live it: “it says something to my ridiculed people... Over here—I believe you know this—it is not yet time for carefree song. We also need to instruct” (Karkavitsas’ comment to Karl Dieterich, May 21st, 1905). Karkavitsas is much concerned with continuity of tradition and consistently reanimates classical “tropes” as vehicles for instruction in more proximate traditions and history. The “ekphrasis” of Elpida’s embroidery in Chapter Four goes back as far as Homer. It is a lesson both for Dimitrakis and for readers looking over his

shoulders. Yet he understands well the need to entertain while delivering instruction, and, subsequent to the publication of *The Archeologist*, wrote five primers for schoolchildren. For all his readers, it is Karkavitsas' position on "The Language Question," where he chose to write in Demotic Greek rather than in *katharevousa*, a form stylized upon features of Ancient Greek, that is the core of his *curriculum*. "He married his medium to his message," as Hanink succinctly puts it (Introduction, xlvii). And to Aristodemus/the Archeologist is given the intermittent opportunity to voice, by way of contrast, the other side of the debate—and most appropriately, since one meaning of "arkhaiologos" (archeologist) is precisely "a person who speaks in an old-fashioned way." One such occurs with the funeral oration he declaims over his dead mother (p. 97-98). Hanink well captures the grandiosity of this Periclean extravaganza by opting for translation into the English of the King James Bible.

The Archeologist ends, having taught us so much along the way about Greek folk traditions, with the fairytale marriage of Elpida and Dimitrakis. Yet Karkavitsas pulls yet one more tradition, one more genre, out of his hat. For those disposed to entertainment, what began as fairytale ends, in Chapter Nine, in farce, in pantomime: "The Archeologist died—and they buried him[!]. And they all lived happily ever after" (p. 134). Behind this final chapter, for which those preceding have set the stage, lies the shadow-puppet theatre tradition of Karagiosis—an art form arising in the gap between peoples divided in the Fall of Constantinople, the decisive event referenced in the first of the two epigraphs to the book. Here, the veil of illusion between characters and the shadow-idea they "represent" in the allegorical "code" is at its most osmotic. Karkavitsas manipulates his puppets by a tactful artistry of voice and character, which once again belies received opinion that Karkavitsas worked in every literary genre except drama.

Turning now to the *Sea Stories*, published five years earlier than *The Archeologist*, in 1899, we see that Karkavitsas is always writing to the imaginative faculty, whether that of children or childlike readers. It is worth pointing out that the full title of the collection from which these four stories are selected is *Words from the Prow: Sea Stories*. This is not so much the naïve promise to deliver words "from the horse's mouth," as it were, as a signal of adherence, at the level of genre-appropriate form, to the Homeric model of self-narration. Hanink (Introduction, xxxix) does not consider this aspect of Karkavitsas' writing in the *Sea Stories*. It comprises not only vocabulary choice but also Karkavitsas' concern to situate it within its own literary tradition in a reception that carries it forward alive. *Sich verändert erhielt*: it holds fast in those very ways in which it is up-dated. But it *does* hold fast, by means of the formal choices which guarantee recognition of provenance. The avatar for these voices is Odysseus himself, whose adventures *told in his own words*, are a mix of fairy-tale and actual reports brought back by the earliest Ionian sailors from explorations to the Black Sea and Gulf of Sidra. Karkavitsas actually did spend time, in his professional career as an army doctor, at the prow of ships, talking to sailors taking rest there, and on Hydra researching the lives of sponge-divers. It is no accident that these places prove the very ones in the stories before us. That is, the tradition *empirically*, as well as literarily, perpetuates. Just because Karkavitsas "claim[s] in the preface to the first of the published stories that he had often been moved by the sailors' "simple [or simply put?] words" (Introduction, xxxix), this does not preclude their being "colorful," "transnational," and "transcultural." Odysseus himself and his crew picked up some *recherché* vocabulary, if Homer is anything to go by.

The *Sea Stories* are that quintessentially Greek mixture of empirical accuracy and its imaginative embellishment. This mix never—unlike empires and their *linguae francae*—fell from favor. The tongue-in-cheek "True Stories" of Lucian of Samosata (2nd century C. E.) belong in the same tradition as those of Karkavitsas. An old-timer on Krete once told me that Kretans still heard sirens singing out at sea up until the arrival of television on the island. Today we all too easily leave little to the imagination. In Karkavitsas, the only screen on board is the open sea and sky. It is the perfect canvas for his ecstatic, cosmic, and naturalist sensibility. In *The Gorgon*, for example, his description of an epiphany of the sister of Alexander the Great is perhaps the imaginative understanding of an electrical storm at sea.

Of the ship-captain in the story *Doomed* we hear: “Sea, sky, land, stars, clouds, the sun’s rising and setting kept no secret from him. They spoke to his soul” (p. 143).

Another story, *The Sponge Divers*, complements *The Archeologist* in two respects. First, it concerns raising things from the depths, whether marbles or the sponges that once again highlight the naturalist dimensions of Karkavitsas’ writing. Second, the story tells of two brothers, who end as unwitting competitors over the harvesting of a highly-prized sponge. It is a mistaken identity on the seafloor that leads to fratricide, a plot which follows the conventions of a Greek tragedy. Before the tragic events unfold, Karkavitsas exercises his talent for naturalist description. His portrait of “the deep” (p. 161) anticipates our later access to these regions on television and YouTube. The preponderance of directional adverbs, adjectives, metaphors, and similes convey the darting visual excitement of the “χιλιόμορφο κόσμος” (“thousand-formed / kaleidoscopic world”) (p. 161) existing in these dark and murky depths (Karkavitsas 1925, 64). The grammatical density and agglomerative capacity of Greek to form compound adjectives creates momentum and fuels enrapturement at this “κῆπο ὄνειροφανταστό” (“dream garden”) (p.161) (Karkavitsas 1925, 64). The unpacking of such potential into English is a challenge for the translator. In this particular section, where we hear so directly the ecstatic voice characteristic of Karkavitsas’ naturalistic mode, I could have wished to see more risks taken to enliven the flattening effect of reliable prose translation—perhaps even by the orthography of exclamation appropriate to this “θαύμα ἰδέσθαι” (“wonder to behold”), another classical trope frequently encountered in epic. Having been “dressed” for his descent in underwater diving apparatus (the skaphander, introduced in the 1860s), the diver, too, will have his costume on the sea floor—in his own turn a wonder for the sea creatures to behold! A surreal flash of humor before tragedy unfolds, complete with decoy.

The descriptive aside concludes abruptly by rounding upon itself with the announcement that the diver, intent upon his work, sees none of the above. Artistry returns the story to its empirical dimension as social documentary of a working tradition and the perils entailed therein. As Salvador Dalí was to discover in 1936, when he donned the skaphander in a gimmick to take his audience at the first surrealist exhibition on English soil on a deep-sea dive into the sub-conscious of the human mind and almost suffocated, on dry land!

What relevance do Karkavitsas’ works hold for those trained in classical Greek? K. P. Kavafy wrote, “Δὲν εἶμαι Ἕλληνας. Εἶμαι Ἑλληνικός” (“I am not a Greek. I am Greek”)—by which I take him to mean that Greekness is not a single embodiment but an indeterminate plurality. I count myself fortunate that my relationship with the modernities of “Greekness” preceded my training in its classical forms. The former has always provided spiritual nourishment; the latter would have been all too often a set of grammar rules and regulations had I not felt that onward thrust into time that was its life. When we arbitrarily cut off the flow of receptions and conceptions of “Greekness,” we are at risk of our own misconceptions. This brings disastrous consequences—for example, stripping the vibrant colors from looted marbles we want to be white, unchanging, Olympian. The very way that Aristodemus is compelled to show himself “the moment he saw the foreigners”: “His eyes had no tears, and his face showed no emotion” (p. 98). How else do we become aware of our own positionality if not by encountering texts that challenge it and its effects?

Karkavitsas has given his own text a cameo appearance within itself when the narrator says of *The Enduring and Unchanged Eumorphopoulos Spirit*, the tome of Alamanos, one of Aristodemus’ three scholarly companions, that “it wasn’t so much a book as a mirror” (p. 122). Who will look into *The Archeologist* and see their own reflection? Should we not take advantage of both Karkavitsas’ and his translator’s exemplary efforts to model “for an international readership... a perspective on the classical legacy of the sort that has rarely crossed the language barrier from (Modern) Greek into English” (Introduction, xxxvii)? Karkavitsas’ voice has a place in the study of language, Classical Reception, Greek Folklore, Greek and Balkan history, Women’s studies, the history of foreign “schools” of archeology on Greek soil, and the ethics of conservation and acquisition of antiquities.

His works are appropriate for undergraduate and lay readers, as well as for experts.

Karkavitsas, and this translation, with its hugely supportive notes and background material, are treasures. Penguin Random House and Johanna Hanink are to be congratulated upon raising them to the surface. They warrant attention.

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Luis Alfaro. Rosa Andújar, ed. *The Greek Trilogy of Luis Alfaro: Electricidad; Oedipus El Rey; Mojada*. London: Methuen Drama, 2021. Pp. 296. Paper (ISBN 978-1-3501-5540-4) \$34.95.

Luis Alfaro's work has long been a fixture of queer and Latinx theatre, and the L.A.-based Chicano artist's recent turn toward Greek tragedy as scaffolding for his storytelling has garnered attention from classicists as well. Classicists' eager reception of Alfaro is part of a growing interest in the adaptation of Greco-Roman antiquity in Latinx and Latin American drama, as evinced by recent work including Carrete (2021), Barrenechea (2016), Nikoloutsos (2010), and two SCS 2022 talks by Kim and Cruz. One obstacle facing those interested in working on these plays is that the scripts are, for the most part, unpublished—although this is not the case for Alfaro's earlier works, many of which have been published in anthologies of queer and Latinx drama such as *O Solo Homo* (1998) and *Out of the Fringe* (2000). Andújar's edition of Alfaro's Greek Trilogy meets a real need for the primary texts, and provides useful introductory essays geared towards a wide audience, including scholars in fields other than classics and general readers. The volume is a solid base upon which scholars can familiarize themselves with Alfaro's work in preparation for teaching, research, and for enjoying future performances of the plays.

Andújar's edition of the Greek Trilogy of Luis Alfaro begins with a broad introduction (pp. 1-19) which contextualizes the plays in three areas: within the rest of Alfaro's oeuvre, within the history of Chicanx and Latinx theater, and within a tradition of Greek tragic adaptations. The "Further Reading" section offers additional guidance in all three areas. The plays are then presented in the order of their creation; each is printed with an accompanying introduction which describes the history of adaptation from the ancient Greek source text and offers a primer of what to expect from the script itself and the themes that Alfaro draws out, complete with robust citations. Information about the original production also appears with each play. A full production history (pp. 238-265) presents the results of painstaking work on the part of Andújar: it includes URLs for reviews of each production and lists of each production's creative team. This is valuable information for those who wish to undertake serious study of Alfaro's plays. For instance, the creative team for the the 2007 production of *Electricidad* at the San Pedro Playhouse in San Antonio, TX includes both a graffiti artist and a tattoo designer. Such details hint at the additional layers of artistry invested in the production of Alfaro's plays—details which cannot be captured by the scripts alone.