

Ἀχαιῶν ἀκτὴ [Shore of the Achaeans] by KYRIAKOS CHARALAMBIDES. Nicosia: 1977. 110 pp. np.

Greek writers often seize upon their country's disasters and the profound human misery accompanying them as fuel for their loftiest flights. While scarcely a consolation for the crimes committed in Cyprus by "Greeks" and foreigners, a sparkling poetic voice has risen, in accordance with that tradition, to lament the island's suffering. I refer to Kyriakos Charalambides's collection of poems entitled *Shore of the Achaeans* (*Acheon Akte*), one of the more significant achievements of the youngest generation of Greek poets. Its rhythm is swift and captivating; its style terse and almost classical, with frequent unusual and powerful combinations of words. Charalambides's poetry testifies to the vitality of the civilization of Cyprus and to the resilient spirit of its martyred people that has already become manifest in many other ways.

Shore is a poem of historical memory and historical consciousness. It is permeated by a deep awareness of the distinguished

place of Cyprus in Greek history and the difficulties that its geographic position at the crossroads of warring civilizations created for its people. Moving on three different planes of unequal emphasis, the poem attempts an intuitive grasp of the present disaster through an evocation of an illustrious historical journey. sometimes locking step with the

First of all, there is, of course, the past. Cyprus was one of the birthplaces claimed for Aphrodite, and the goddess of love is omnipresent in Charalambides's verses, sometimes locking step with the Virgin Mary, that other great mother-figure that has dominated the consciousness of the Greek people. But Cyprus was also the Greeks' eastern paradise, the island of the blessed, on the shores of which the dead disembarked after a long sea journey. On Cyprus they would spend an eternity of beauty and happiness. The precise spot where the blessed Achaeans stepped off their boats was the northern shore around Kyrenia—and it was there that, centuries later, the brutal invader first set foot on the island. Around this shocking juxtaposi-

tion of bright and eternal myth and the darkness of the present, Charalambides structures the dramatic tension of his poetry:

Three thousand and fifteen years
ago you were
beautiful, blessed, invincible,
virginal like Kypria that gave birth
to the desire for things better.

Now your soul
chains Mr. Sky and places bandages
on terrified trees and empty birds.

("Epinesos")

The ideal past is, thus, a bridge to a shattered present. In a poem written in May 1974, the poet had a premonition of the catastrophe that was about to befall his martyred land. As another poem ("Shore of the Achaeans") notes, it was a catastrophe that was aided by the spite, stupidity, irresponsibility, and thoughtlessness of those in charge of the destinies of Hellenism in the period leading to the explosion. Charalambides condemns the traitors with restrained but deep-cutting tones ("Magic Image"). In any case, no matter who the culprit was, the present moment is one of utter destruction. The greater part of this collection is devoted to a description of the situation in which the civilization an entire people had been building for centuries is threatened with extinction. One fundamental theme pervades the poems dedicated to the present—Death appearing in a thousand disguises. The landscape Charalambides paints is dominated by mutilated bodies, broken stones, broken images, broken dreams. His is a cry of revulsion and despair, a protest

against an injustice of great historical dimensions. If this situation is not rectified, then, the poet says, quoting Archbishop Makarios, the message is that only violence wins out in the end in this world ("The Hoof of Logos"). A sample of the black and oppressive atmosphere, contrasted sharply with the bright beauty of the land, is found in "Motherland's Dissection":

My motherland, startled deer,
incredibly pale.

Envy fell on your head,
your soul has withered; ugly scream.
Under the wheels of treachery
your blood stooped fleeing, worldly.

Is there a way out of this disaster? Charalambides is so emotionally involved grappling with the dismembered present, that it is not surprising that the dimension of the future remains weaker and uncultivated. In the history of Cyprus it seems that the only constant is that the "future" has always been worse than the "present." Charalambides certainly concentrates most of his energy on nursing the wounds of today. However, there are indications that he is also looking ahead, albeit with an understandable hesitation and ambivalence.

Two distinct attitudes emerge. One is uttered by Rimako, that oracular presence in the poems who reminds us of the "*manteis kakon*" in ancient tragedy. He says that when the immediacy of the pain is past, we will learn to live with our mutilated being, continuing to exist in an ordinary way as if nothing had happened, or at least

nothing that can be set aright again. This prophecy is frightful because it contains a great deal of truth. Would it be unfair to suggest that it represents an attitude of indifference adopted by many Greeks today? Whatever its objective justification, it contains an element of selfishness that cannot be wished away.

Another vision also informs *Shore*, and this one is affirmed in more ringing tones. It is the vision

of freedom triumphant, the rebirth of beautiful and fulfilled life out of the devastation of the present. This is the idealistic, the noble view that the world was made for liberty and justice, and therefore those that thrive on oppression and evil are bound to meet their inescapable doom. This is the dominant sentiment in Charalambides's heart. We can only hope he is correct.

—*Pericles S. Vallianos*

