

P. Prevelakis, *The Hand of the Slain. Drama in Three Days.* (Τὸ χέρι τοῦ σκοτωμένου. Δράμα σὲ τρεῖς μέρες.) Athens, I Ekdhossis ton Filon, 1971. Pp. 58.

This short play is largely based on an episode in the author's novel trilogy, *The Cretan*. It revolves around a theme which appeals to Prevelakis: the vendetta, a custom which has always been strong in Crete, and survives there to this day. Prevelakis loves to write about a life-and-death struggle, showing a man under sentence of death who expects to be killed from one moment to the next. This gives an elemental quality to the work of this author, who never tires of dealing with the vital problems.

Kostandis returns home from taking part in an unsuccessful rebellion, having been amnestied by the state for killing a gendarme who had ambushed him. In the meantime his wife has become a nun in order to atone for his sin and the victim's wife Maria has sworn to take vengeance with her own hand, since the murderer has not been punished by the law. After she fails to hit him with a shot, Kostandis, astounded at her courage, which contrasts so sharply with his own wife's behaviour, goes to visit Maria to try to come to a reconciliation, not out of cowardice but in order to help her—he, she and her husband are all from the same village and have known each other from childhood. Kostandis is not afraid to go to her house at night unarmed; a true hero, he flouts the vendetta custom in order to act in the most honourable way. Kostandis stays with the widow for some time on two occasions. As he talks to her and even offers to marry her, Maria is torn between her vow of vengeance and Kostandis' charm and bravery. The vow wins her mental battle: after she has admitted her affection for him, she stabs him in the back.

At home, instead of tending his wounds, Kostandis' mother-in-law rounds up the clan to hunt Maria down. While they are out looking for her, Maria enters the room where Kostandis is lying bleeding to death. Now that she has done her duty by her husband, she and Kostandis can marry. But he dies of his wounds just as the villagers return. Since they presume that she has finished him off, they take her out into the street and stone her, at the very moment when her heart has learnt to love and forgive.

Maria, who is the real protagonist of the drama, finds herself in the dilemma of all avengers: if she does not kill Kostandis, she will be haunted by her husband's memory and will be considered a coward, while if she

kills him, she will be put to death in her turn by Kostandis' clan. The gendarme has no male relatives, leaving only his widow to do her duty. Apart from the fact that she is a woman, her situation is further complicated by the fact that she and the "murderer" are neighbours and old acquaintances.

She half-realizes that she is playing a part dictated by society and her upbringing. Kostandis' words make her see the possibility of ceasing to play this rôle that is expected of her and exchanging it for relief, security and happiness by marrying Kostandis. Then the nightmare would end and she would awaken to a new reality.

Kostandis, as a hero, is already an outsider, a lone wolf. He disregards both the danger and the social convention of the vendetta by inviting the would-be avenger to join him on his lonely path, which would entail both of them fleeing from the village, since their conduct would scandalize their less imaginative and more hidebound neighbours. Thus Kostandis, who suggests this solution, and Maria, who wants to accept it, are both tragic heroes, with their heads rising up over those of their fellows.

The fact that Kostandis is an outcast is symbolized by the priest cutting him off from the sacraments and thus setting him outside the fold so that he should not harm the rest of the flock. The priest tries in vain to bring the clans together by preaching love — for there are other murderers too. No one is willing to accept the solution of forgiveness, which is overruled by passion and primitive custom. When he realizes that everyone has rejected him, the priest, in despair, abandons the villagers to their own devices. God and love have been cast aside. Now that there are no more sanctions, blood will continue to flow until there is not a soul left alive.

It is in this chaos of lawlessness that Kostandis chooses the way of love, not, it is true, out of Christian belief, but because he admires the courage and passion of the bereaved woman. Maria's dilemma, then, is between love and duty. It seems to her that Kostandis, instead of embodying love, may be a personification of the devil with his smooth tongue and manly figure. Kostandis' proposition is indeed attractive: but by not accepting it as it stands she is resisting temptation. Her mistake is that she is too courageous instead of passively giving in to the man. As it is, she does more than any woman is ever expected to do. After she has carried out her vow she is free to be a woman again and

give way to her emotions. But it is too late for her to live happily with her new man. On the other hand she has not shirked her responsibilities by running away with Kostandis. She has done her duty openly, so that as she is led away to execution she says, "Thanks be to God! My sufferings will not remain secret. The innocent will understand me and awaken." Now her soul has opened and she can resign herself to her fate: "I love this man. I've been reborn through love, even though I was a murderer . . . Nevertheless, it wasn't my hand that struck him, but the hand of the slain . . . The dead don't know how to love and forgive, because they're dead. (. . .) Now you can kill me." Her tragedy is that she cannot combine duty with love, and that she has to die as soon as she has been reborn. But at least she has lived through some moments of ecstasy in the intervening time.

The play is short, and, as the title suggests, takes place over three days. There is but one plot with no diversions: this starkness is reflected in the bare language itself, each word of which is carefully weighed up and placed like something tangible in the mouths of the characters. Prevelakis, one of the few remaining practitioners of the old demotic, has the rare ability of honing down the language to a tight conciseness, salvaging its original essence from the plethoric hyperbole of so many writers.

The language, as so often, reflects deeper things. This play is an example of the change which Prevelakis has undergone in recent years from the epic novel to a shorter archetypal form. The author points out in a recent interview that his latest novel, *The Angel in the Well*, is bound by the rule of the three dramatic unities. In that book as well as in the present play the exclusion of all irrelevant detail is the sign of a mature confidence in a myth that is self-supporting because of its elemental power. All this he achieves without making his writing portentously heavy.

The struggle that Prevelakis depicts of a man becoming an outcast because he is trying to learn how to love and forgive is not a new one. It is an eternal problem which needs ever so often to be re-examined and re-evaluated. This is what Prevelakis consistently does.