

## CAROL FRANKLIN

Didier Coste, *Vita Australis*. Wild & Woolley, 1977. pp. 87. \$2.95

This attractively printed little book contains nine poems, only one of them lengthy, in the English translation first, followed by a separate section containing the original French. What a pity, since Coste is quite careful to point out the primacy of the French, that the poems are not printed as parallel texts. Most of the translation is very close in spirit, phrase and imagery to the original, but there are quite significant exceptions. How much more useful and satisfying to have the versions side by side, to compare subtleties and indeed formal problems as well. Another criticism is that there are annoying faults in the proof-reading that confuse one, and spoil the effect of overall high quality — there are spelling errors, for instance, and capitals appear from apparently nowhere. "Minieres" is listed in the contents as "The Mind Revisited" and on the actual poem as "The Mine Revisited", and why ever prefer the title "Memorandum" with its inter-office connotations, to the original "Memento Mori"? Flaws such as these are disappointing.

Didier Coste makes it quite clear in his note to readers that the French version of these poems remains the "foremost, authentic and only form whose formal rigour justifies the rigour of the aesthetic attitude proclaimed within". This aesthetic attitude is worth restating in English. Didier dedicates the book "To the memory of a vanished landscape, opportunistically replaced by multicoloured bricks, and purple plastic, those ironic and impassioned images of the Antipodes which we shall all soon inhabit. Here the new brutality and the exile of the spirit seek their final say in a rational violence."

Visitors to this land of rational violence, as was Didier Coste for three years, hence this book of impressionistic poems, have remarked upon these very qualities with the most galling frequency, although not always as elegantly, and one must concede their essential truth. Our own writers and artists have painfully examined the makeshift utilitarian values of our peculiar way of life. From Alec Hope to Craig McGregor to Robin Boyd the ugly, grubbing, naive flavour of our citizenry has been dissected in attitudes varying from loathing-cynical rejection to amused disgust to wry tolerance.

Coste has a reasonably impressive background of publication and prizes and is described as one of the "practitioners of the *nouvel roman*". His work in prose would be interesting to pursue as his long poem, "Demain commence Aujourd'hui/Tomorrow begins Today", presents difficulties of ellipsis and compression, yet hints of a rich sensibility and a wide range of experience that would, in this reader's opinion, be more satisfying, not to say comprehensible in prose. His poems almost all succeed. Insights abound, and so does memorable and incisive imagery. But, owing to an occasionally

strained allusive quality that sometimes does not quite connect with a satisfying click in one's mind, they leave one not quite sure of the statement. This is a pity, because his best "That Mind", "Far from Lesbos" and perhaps "Canberra" convey a certain excitement.

"That Mind" characterises the Australian spiritual emptiness in a string of disconnected, but telling images

"you may wash it in lots of soap it will smell still  
Permeate your clothes and open air . . ."

Like a fly you may

" . . . take [it] between your fingers . . .  
and . . . blow it out the door . . ."

That mind has

"its dens under the scales of the veneer  
By the legs of heavy tables."

This is excellent, but the last stanza which gives the image of the mind, never beneath the sun, let to run on a short rope, forever seeking a cage — all excellent images — oddly rendered impotent for me by the strange shifting of images suddenly in the last line

"Where it would beat Now for everyone the sun's eyelid."

The French reads

"Où il palpiterait devenu pour tous la paupière du profil."

This last line, which should be emotionally satisfying and intellectually clear, fails for me in Coste's English translation.

In "Far from Lesbos" images of classic love, beauty and serenity are juxtaposed perhaps predictably, but nevertheless well, with local Australian atmospherics.

"Far from Lesbos  
A beery mist hovers about the gardens."

and later, ruefully

"how useless it is to be naked  
Far from Lesbos."

Once again the French version is more elegant in this poem. For instance for

"And big round flowers screened on the concrete"

which is rather imprecise in effect, the French has —

" . . . et des fleurs larges peintes sur le ciment"

"screened" is a poor substitute for the literal "painted".

This poem has a beautifully complete last line, the English does not do it justice

"The rosy Cythera is easily maintained in flowerbeds  
And you lay down a steel frame behind  
On the realistic heart, painted white."

In French this is —

"Des masques expressifs et des mains claquées sur les flancs  
S'entretient sans drame la rose Cythérée des bordures  
Et l'on pose sur le coeur réaliste une ruche de fer peinte en blanc."

The English is clumsy, capable of misinterpretation in this allusive style, and quite without cadence. The French, elegant and satisfying.

These two poems sum up the feeling throughout the volume, of spiritual and sensual poverty in the observed realities of our lives. Many times in Coste's longest poem here "Tomorrow begins Today" he touches on a wide range of specifics, but overall I find the poem too long and at times incomprehensible. The poem has a magnificent opening reminiscent for me of the impact of Wallace Stevens opening line in "Sunday Morning"

"Sur l'enthousiasme factice d'un samedi déjà entamé  
La puanteur du gazon pourrait passer pour naturelle . . .  
Et recommence de matinal aloi le bréviaire du perpétuel été."

"Fictitiously enthusiastic as a Saturday – half-begun-can be,  
The foul smell of the lawn could fool us with its natural air  
And the friendly sterling morninghood of a long, hot summer;"

The last two stanzas of this poem give the flavour of the work at its most successful –

"All freedom to you to play the wide-winged virgin, to prefer mar-  
guerites  
To camellias, a day with no difference drains you off in the chlorine  
of the bath:  
This sea which has lost its marine countenance, is it still the sea?

Ah! Had it not been a world so handy to schools and railway stations,  
And signed by us in the presence of pine trees poisoned at the root  
of your imagination,  
We might have been led dancing to see with the round, its face that  
it sees within itself:"

In "Canberra" I also love his capturing of the frozen spirit of that maddeningly circular city

"The get-together of roads by a plan separated"

captures it perfectly. His conclusion to this poem is also apt –

"I become involved in the crescents of deathly plans  
Grazing the way out sign the maddened hand,  
Blending the profiles of species and the land."

Coste accomplishes ironic juxtapositions very well –

"Must we follow the helpful arrows to wild nature parks"  
says something surely about you and me.

"Must we stay 10 years on the waiting list to be granted

A walk before the storm, a sublime moment full of cicadas."

But often I find his elliptical symbolist style not carrying me anywhere in particular. One can be too diffuse and fail in communication. Often he does fail, and although the English tries hard, it misses the genuine richness rhyme, assonance and alliterative qualities, especially the patterning of these. No matter how good

"Palms o potted palms o calm cascades o carved rocks beach Gala-  
teas"

it cannot compare with

"Palmes ô palmes en pots ô cascades sages ô rocs ciselés Galatées de la plages."

A good attempt at alliterative substitution is found in

"Le ciel, encore lui, glacé nous couvre d'ailes  
Ma soeur aux os de jeune lilas la légère  
Sur ses pieds y répond par une palme ombrelle."

and its parallel

"The sky once more, the iced sky closes back its wings  
My light lilac, my hollow boned sister swings  
With a palm leaf parasol its answer on her feet."

Didier Coste reveals a richness both in technique and range of content. With more time and patience perhaps even the poems I found less comprehensible would yield up treasures as well.