

## Evan Jones

### Calling Nanos Valaoritis

*L'été dernier, mon ami Nanos Valaoritis a bien voulu consigner pour moi les observations qu'a appelées la trouvaille de la très belle pierre...*

- André Breton

Nanos Valaoritis, born in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1921, is a descendent of the Romantic poet, Aristotelis Valaoritis. He published his first poems in the mouthpiece of the Greek 'Generation of the 30s', *Τα Νέα Γράμματα* [*New Letters*], at the age of 18, alongside poems by future Nobel Laureates George Seferis and Odysseus Elytis. In 1944, he fled civil war-torn Greece and arrived in Egypt, where Seferis was in exile with the Greek government. Procuring letters of introduction to Cyril Connolly and John Lehmann, he travelled to London, where Lehmann introduced him to Stephen Spender who in turn introduced him to TS Eliot and Louis MacNiece. Valaoritis then found a job working with MacNiece at the BBC and collaborating with Dylan Thomas on various radio programmes (Valaoritis supplied any foreign accents needed). Living in London for nine years, he strengthened the relationship between Modern Greek poetry and the Anglo-Modernists; his work included the first book of translations of Seferis in English, *The King of Asine* (1948), and an important essay on Greek Modernism published in Connolly's magazine *Horizon* (1946). In 1954, he moved to Paris and interacted with the post-war surrealist group, including André Breton, Benjamin Péret, and Joyce Mansour. He returned to Greece in the sixties, advocating the avant-garde, but his efforts were cut short by the military coup in 1967. This time, Valaoritis travelled to the US, taking a position at San Francisco State University. He taught creative writing and comparative literature there for twenty-five years, coming into contact with all of the major figures on the west coast, including Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Allen Ginsberg.

Very little of Nanos's considerable work is available outside of Greece (the poems published here in *Studio* will be among the few available on the Web, even; they date from some of his earliest collections, and are translated by Valaoritis himself). Before our first meeting, I best knew him through one of his two American collections, *My Afterlife Guaranteed*, a book of poetic texts that revealed a humour and adventurousness I admired. When I travelled to Athens in Spring 2007 on a research grant, I had been given his postal address, e-mail address, and phone number. I had written him twice and sent as many E-mails, noting that I was going to be in Athens and asking if he would have time to meet with me. Naturally, as I now know, the only way to reach a Greek is on the phone. One call after my arrival I was invited over. His home in Kolonaki is an old building, with a fenced-in elevator in the foyer. He greeted me at the door of his second-floor apartment, welcomed me in and, over a cup of tea, began to talk. The details I've given above are a shortened version of the stories he told and I wished I'd had a tape recorder at the time so that I might have with me the anecdotes about Eliot and Breton, the New Apocalyptic and *les poètes électriques*, rather than the notes that I am writing this from. I can't do justice to his wide range of knowledge and interest, his gift of the gab, his limitless energy—and all this at 86. He was preparing a lecture on Wilhelm Reich to deliver at the University of

Athens the last time I saw him.

While the influence of French poetry and critical thinking has always been strong for Valaoritis, he owes a debt to Auden's playfulness and turns of phrase, from the long surrealistic passages of *The Orators* to the fresh lyricism of *Look, Stranger*. This is to say that the forms of the avant-garde and the Anglo-American Modernists, the lessons and language of the various Western Modernisms, are at work in his poetry, suggesting a greater valance between the differing poetics of the 20th Century than most critics would be comfortable with. But all of this seems natural within the savvy poems that Valaoritis has written, full of humour, insight, and a genuine passion for the adventure to be found within the process of writing itself—only validated when the result is a work of high standards. While I don't hope to suggest that "Resume," "Cornerstone," and "Words of the Prow" are anything more than a slice of the full fruit, they are a good place to start looking into the work of a poet whose encompassing resolve engages the 20th and 21st centuries in a way few others have dared and even fewer have actually achieved.