The American College of Greece ◆ Thirteenth Annual Kimon Friar Lecture 2008 ◆ Vassilios Lambropoulos

KIMON FRIAR

Vassilis Lambropoulos

Since Fall 1999, Vassilios Lambropoulos has been the first C. P. Cavafy Professor of Modern Greek at the University of Michigan, teaching in the Departments of Classical Studies and Comparative Literature. Before that, he was professor of Modern Greek at The Ohio State University for eighteen years. Professor Lambropoulos received his B.A. from the University of Athens and his Ph.D. from the University of Thessaloniki. He also went to the University of Birmingham, England, as a postdoctoral fellow before moving to the U.S. in 1981. He teaches courses in Modern Greek language, literature, criticism, and culture, as well as literary theory and comparative literature.

Professor Lambropoulos' authored books are: *Literature as National Institution: Studies in the Politics of Modern Greek Criticism* (Princeton University Press, 1988), *The Rise of Eurocentrism: Anatomy of Interpretation* (Princeton University Press, 1993), and *The Tragic Idea* (Duckworth, 2006). He has co-edited the volumes *The Text and Its Margins: Post-Structuralist Approaches to Twentieth-Century Greek Literature* (Pella, 1985, with Margaret Alexiou) and *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory: An Introductory Anthology* (State University of New York Press, 1987, with David Miller), and a special issue of the journal *October*, "The Humanities as Social Technology" (1990, with Eugene Holland). He edited Ethical Politics, a special issue of the journal *South Atlantic Quarterly* (1996). He has also published papers, articles, reviews, and translations in American, English, and Greek journals, periodicals, and newspapers. He is currently writing a book on the notion of hubris in modern theater.

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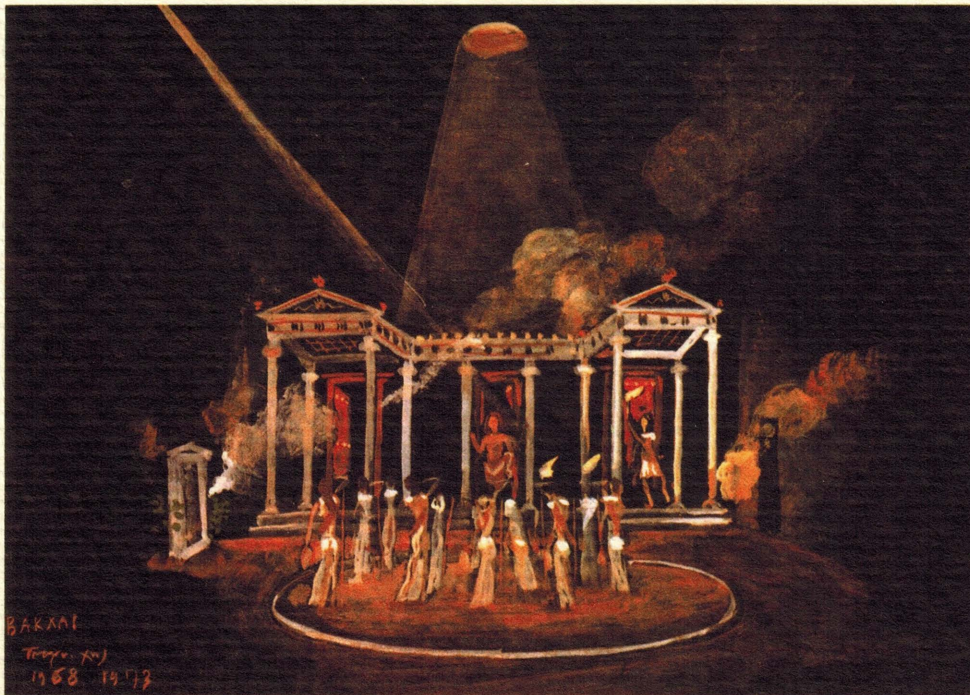
Reflections on Tragedy in Greek Post-Modern Fiction

by

Professor Vassilios Lambropoulos



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Reflections on Tragedy in Greek Post-Modern Fiction

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The Kimon Friar Lecture in Neo-Hellenic Arts & Letters

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Introduction

This year's Kimon Friar Lecturer, Dr. Vassilis Lambropoulos, is one of the leading scholars of Modern Greek studies writing today. I must confess that I am not entirely satisfied identifying Professor Lambropoulos exclusively as a Modern Greek scholar. Definitions by their nature are restrictive and exclusionary, and so to define Professor Lambropoulos' work in this way is to confine it to a single category that does not begin to capture the wide range of his scholarship and critical inquiry. His books and numerous articles explore, and take provocative and often controversial positions on, current debates not just in Modern Greek studies, but in literary studies internationally. His work is essential reading in present-day discussions concerning nation, canonicity, tradition, interpretive authority, politics, and textuality.

A case in point is Professor Lambropoulos' book *The Rise of Eurocentricism:* Anatomy of Interpretation (1993), in which he treats the controversial subject of the western hegemonic tradition. Exploring five centuries of European culture, he argues that the archetypes of Hebraism (reason and morality) and Hellenism (spirit and art), both inventions of the modern Protestant West, have served as essential points of reference in the establishment and defense of European Western modernity. Lambropoulos emphasizes that throughout almost all modern history Hebraism has dominated, while Hellenism has become the Other of the Hebraic. His erudite study of the changing place of interpretation in European culture challenges all of us who are engaged in textual interpretation to see

all interpretive acts as inextricably linked to power and politics.
Dr. Vassilis Lambropoulos' postmodern approach to Modern Greek literature has sparked lively and often heated debates among scholars internationally. His authored book, *Literature as National Institution: Studies in the Politics of Modern Greek Criticism* (1988) and his edited volume, *The Text and Its Margins: Post Structuralist Approaches to Twentieth-Century Greek Literature (1985)*, co-edited with Margaret Alexiou, challenge conventional thinking within Modern Greek studies concerning cultural and national identity, as well as literary canonization. The importance of Professor Lambropoulos' work in this field cannot be underestimated as he examines Greece from an interdisciplinary perspective and, more importantly, in an international context. As Gregory Jusdanis has noted, Lambropoulos questions the status of Modern Greek literature as a minority or marginal discipline within the humanities and transforms it into a theorized field able to participate in interdisciplinary discussions internationally (180).

Professor Lambropoulos' most recent scholarship examines how classical ideas have shaped the modern world. His book, The Tragic Idea, published in 2006, traces the rise of the tragic idea in literature and culture from early Romanticism to late Modernism, while his book-in-progress, *Modern Hubris*, analyzes the concept of hubris in post-classical tragedy. In these works, Lambropoulos highlights the ways in which tragedy and the tragic resonate in literature and theory.

The connection between tragedy and the cultural and critical contexts of the postmodern world are at the core of Professor Lambropoulos' Kimon Friar Lecture, "Reflections on Tragedy in Greek Post-Modern Fiction." Professor Lambropoulos explores three contemporary Greek novels,--Vassilis Gouroyannis' *The Troupe of the Athenians* (1998), Michael Fais' Purple Laughter (2009) and Takis Theodoropoulos' *The Power of the Dark God* (1999)--and their concern with the Greeks' relationship with antiquity as well as the construction of Hellenism. He examines how these three works develop the interrelated themes of identity, history, and performativity through the central action of performance of a classical tragedy, namely Euripides' *The Bacchae.*[1] Lambropoulos argues that these postmodern texts exemplify an "agonistic philology" by engaging the past in order to contest it, in this way "re-activating tradition with a polycentric and syncretic view of Hellenism." His lecture highlights the radical experimentation of Greek post-modern fiction while offering a new literary context in which to investigate theories concerning tradition and identity.
Since identifying a "paradigm shift" from empiricism to skepticism (or from philology to theory) in Modern Greek studies in 1989 ("Modern Greek Studies at the Crossroads"2), Lambropoulos has stirred controversy in academic circles (Beaton 171ff). This public dialogue between disparate viewpoints has reoriented and redefined Modern Greek studies in exciting new ways. That the discipline is no longer contained within the borders of its nation (or, at best, the Eastern Mediterranean) or defined by a single perspective is largely due to Vassilis Lambropoulos' groundbreaking scholarship. Thus, while some Modern Greek scholars may disagree with his work, few (if any) can ignore its impact.

Hariclea Zengos
Professor of English
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[1] The topic of this lecture pays an appropriate tribute to Kimon Friar, to whom this series of lectures is dedicated. When Friar was an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1929, he translated Euripides' Bacchae and staged the play as part of a research project. The performance was a great success. For Friar this performance was a life changing experience that not only left him with a life long interest in the theater, but also allowed him to reexamine his relationship with Greek culture and accept his identity as a Greek American. I would like to thank Dr. Alexandra Thalassi, professor of Modern Greek Literature at the American College of Greece, for bringing this information to my attention.

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Reflections on Tragedy in Greek Post-Modern Fiction

How Greek national history and ethnic identity are established and consecrated has been the subject of much recent research. Constructionist analysis of sites and symbols, ruins and rituals, has exposed the mechanisms that support particular canons of continuity and claims of exceptionalism. Several fields have been contributing to this wide-ranging project, from literary studies, which pioneered it, to anthropology, historiography, and gender studies. We now have anatomies of regimes (Metaxas, the Junta), disciplines (history, archaeology), institutions (museums, concentration camps), policies (educational, foreign), and minorities (ethnic, political). While mechanisms of oppression have been amply documented, we still lack studies of the discourses that defied them. Little attention is devoted to Greek artworks and cultural practices that resist essentialism from within. For example, film and art have spent considerable creative energy undermining dominant national ideologies. Scholarship can benefit greatly by studying this significant body of radical work that shares its interests. In spaces, events, and publications like those devoted to 'Destroy Athens,' the first Athens Biennale (October-November 2007), scholars may encounter contemporary artists who are conducting parallel critical inquiries.

In the Greek cultural domain, it was the postmodern novel that first questioned national history as such (and not just its reactionary appropriations). Since the early 1980s, it set to undermine dominant narratives (from the entire political spectrum) either by

deconstructing them (exposing their constitutive assumptions) or by destroying them (discrediting their authoritarian claims). A significant body of fiction on ancient, medieval, and modern times has shown that our relationship to the past is never direct or transparent. This paper discusses three novels that look at Greeks' relationships with the classical past by examining theatrical performance, the practice that, more than any other, confronts questions of presence and fullness. When it comes to (re)producing the Greeks, theater faces more challenges than, say, an exhibit or a seminar. Everybody involved in a production, from the translator to the actors and from the designer to the composer, is committed to bringing them back to life. The three novels under discussion raise questions of tradition, transmission, and translation by focusing on individuals who are consumed by the ideal of a consummate theatrical interpretation.

The Troupe of the Athenians [Ο θίασος των Αθηναίων] (Athens: Kastaniotis 1998) by Vassilis Gouroyannis (b. 1951) takes place in Epirus, in northern Greece, during a few weeks of the year 326. Its protagonist is Thespis, an actor, director, and troupe leader who feels that he lives in artistically and spiritually impoverished times. Christianity is on the rise. A year earlier, Emperor Constantine I convened the Synod of Nicaea, the 1st ecumenical council, which formulated the Nicene Creed, strengthening church unity. Preparations are under way to inaugurate Constantinople, the new capital of the Roman Empire, which the emperor founded two years earlier. Can Hellenism survive in a Galilean world? The arts are already in serious decline. For example, tragedies are now read only by elites and never performed because large audiences cannot understand them. People go to the theater for sex and scandal or stay home to read popular novels by Chariton and Heliodorus.

Thespis is a Greek living under Roman rule, an artist working under rising Christian censorship, and an actor in search of an audience at a time when tragedies are no longer performed. He knows that the times are moving from theater to fiction, from polytheism to a single god, and from the Roman capital to a new world center. Going against this tide with all his idealism, he believes that only art can save the world (13) and that, more than ever, the world needs tragedy. According to ancient lore, it was the Athenian Thespis who, at the end of the archaic period, created tragedy in the 530sBC and toured with his players. The latter-day Thespis, at the end of the Hellenistic period, will also tour in an attempt to bring tragedy back to life. Since the Romans will not let him perform in the theater of Herod Atticus in Athens, he moves with his Athenean troupe to the Epirotic city of Nicopolis, the 'victory city' founded by Octavian opposite the promontory Actium to honor his victory at 31 BC over Anthony and Cleopatra. There he plans to appeal to Apollo (whose local cult dates back to sixth century BC) for help in his battle against the decline of Hellenism. He will produce a tragedy in the 3rd-century BC theater of near-by Dodona that he is going to open for the first time after centuries.

Thespis got involved in tragedy in order to be saved (190), and makes grandiose claims about it. In its highest manifestation, art is tragic, and therefore Greek too. Performance is intercourse between actors and spectators (84). When it is effective, it irritates the gods and Zeus throws his lightning, burning the actors (158). In preparation for a performance, the troupe must live ascetically. Those serving tragedy must be seized by its *daimonio* (212). At the same time, Thespis is not an antiquarian or traditionalist. He does not

insist on ancient rules. He understands well that cultural conditions have changed, dramatic standards have been revised, codes have been altered, and he is willing to adjust to current public taste. He adapts the original to the common language, he uses female actors, he deploys very few masks, and his music is a fusion of different styles (194). Thus he tries to remain faithful to the spirit of tragedy and let its demon possess him while coming up with a new approach based on contemporary norms and expectations. Recognizing that he needs to reach a broad audience, Thespis is willing to compromise in order to make tragedy accessible to Christians too. He will direct Aeschylus's *Prometheus Unbound* by drawing parallels between the suffering of two divinities, Jesus and the Titan. He will produce a 'conciliatory fusion' (195) of the two religions to show that pain is universal and the divine one (345).

Despite all these practical compromises, his idealism continues unabated because Thespis has a thoroughly aesthetic understanding of life. He believes that all the world is a play, and 'god is the great director' (220). At the same time, drama angers its divine producer because it shows that, even though mortals know who the director is, they can choose to defy him. In this cosmic *theatrum mundi*, tragedy does not serve an ulterior purpose but is its own end (361). It does not represent reality, it is reality. At an early rehearsal, Thespis asks that he be crucified so that all will be 'perfect, true' (181). His demand comes true at the shattering end of the novel when Christians attack the stage during the last rehearsal and crucify him as a 'rebel' on the cross that was meant for Prometheus. Those who expect the resurrection of the dead have triumphed over those who expect the restoration of tragedy (302). After they leave the theater,

his actors gather around him and together they begin performing the play. This is no longer a rehearsal: it is their leader's ultimate production – not *Prometheus Unbound* but Thespis Bound. Life and art have become one.

Thespis does succeed in irritating Zeus, who throws his thunder at the stage. Yet, the performance takes place at night, not in broad daylight; it has no audience; and it achieves the kind of reality that, by transcending theater, it abolishes it. In addition to the suffering of Prometheus and Jesus referred to explicitly in the production, the director's cruel death recalls vividly the suffering of Pentheus as the raving Christians, the followers of the latest eastern cult, kill Thespis who defended the traditional order. While the first Thespis reputedly wrote a tragedy called *Pentheus*, the last one dies like the Theban king. Eight centuries after its invention, the consummate artistic genre has come full circle as mimesis turns violently into reality and perishes.

The novel offers a critique of the idealistic view of Hellenism as the supreme culture and of art as the best approach to this culture. The critique is conducted in two distinct ways: thematically, by following Thespis's demonic pursuit of tragic performance, and formally, by interpolating dialogues of his contemporaries about their uncertain times. This double staging that runs through the book shows the constitutively performative dimension of culture that Thespis's pursuit is missing completely. Aesthetic idealism projects Greek art as pure and present, even when it must make concessions to mixture and mediation. Its total identification with the past can only wipe the arts out of the present.

The second novel also deals with a period of civil strife, like

the one between pagan and Christian Greeks, and it too highlights a fascination with the Bacchae – not with producing it but with recovering its deepest meaning. *Purple Laughter [Πορφυρά γέλια]* (Athens: Patakis 2009) by Michel Fais (b. 1957) covers three generations of a Greek family since the 1930s. The grandfather, Yorgos Sekeris, now dead, was a prompter at the Royal Theater and a moderate member of the Greek Communist Party who viewed its hard line with great skepticism. The grandmother, Athina Kalimani, now suffering from Alzheimer's disease, was a teacher and a passionate Stalinist who always adhered to the Party line. The couple had three sons: Stathis, who is now an extreme right-winger with his own program of nationalist propaganda on a minor TV station; Stratos, who is in prison for his participation during the 1990s in a Trotskyite urban guerilla group; and a nameless one, now dead, a literary editor who shared his father's leftist skepticism. Dionysis Sekeris, the son of the nameless editor, is a budding writer in his mid-30s writing a theatrical 'fragmented tale,' also called *Purple Laughter*. The first half of the novel consists largely of his monologue as he talks to his demented grandmother about the past while the second half consists of the play he has just finished.

Grandfather Yorgos, who, as a prompter, worked with many famous actors of tragedies, took a personal interest in the *Bacchae* and labored for years on a modern Greek translation without ever finishing it. This labor preoccupied him during three periods of his turbulent life. During the first period, his internal exile as a political prisoner in 1938-39 to the remote island of Icaria, he saw Dionysus as the threat of irrational forces and sided with Pentheus, who represented communist reason. As a traditional leftist who believed

in the power of reason to open people's eyes, he was puzzled by the capacity of the Nazi and fascist ideologies to brainwash millions, and sought answers in the appeal of the Dionysian cult. The second period included the years 1946-47 which he spent first as a political refugee in the Yugoslavian village of Buljkes and then, following his evacuation for his anti-Stalinist positions, in hiding in Athens and Piraeus until he was caught again and sent to another island of internal exile. During this time, he witnessed in horror the fratricidal struggles within his Party and thought of Thebes as a state in civil strife. The last period was the 1990s, when he saw two of his sons take the opposite trajectories of the extreme Left and Right, and understood the play as a family tragedy, with grandmother Agave raving with communist fever and exterminating grandfather Pentheus by denouncing him to the Party. Since in the span of some sixty years Yorgos came to see the *Bacchae* from three different angles, he did not manage to complete his translation as he kept revising it even though at certain points there was some interest in staging it.

Of the three interpretive angles, it is the second one that is given greatest prominence in the book. During the late 1940s, as Greek leftists had turned against one another while also fighting the government, Yorgos believed that the *Bacchae* dramatizes not the Civil War between the Left and the Right that was going on in the country but the strife within the Left itself. In this view, the General Secretary of the Greek Communist Party, Nikos Zachariadis, was Pentheus, representing the pen pushers of party bureaucracy, the communist order and discipline, and personality cult; while the leader of the National People's Liberation Army (ELAS), Aris Velouchiotis, was Dionysus, representing the freedom fighters

abiding by the law of nature, communal tradition and solidarity, and the spirit of commaraderie. The first ruled by military terror in the cities, the other by maenadic violence on the mountains; the one relied on commissars, the other on guerillas. The history of the Party was marked by the suicide of Velouchiotis in 1945 and of Zachariadis in 1973. Writer Dionysis Sekeris, who has carried his grandfather's political skepticism to a nihilistic degree, believes that, as a political tragedy, the *Bacchae* has not lost its relevance since his uncles, Stratos and Stathis, have become Pentheus (nationalist newscaster) and Dionysus (urban guerilla) respectively. The difference between the two attitudes to the play is that, while Yorgos tried to translate the *Bacchae* as a tragedy where historical reality can be directly reflected, his grandson, who has been influenced by theories of theater and revisionist performances, is writing his own tragic-comedy. At the same time, in the first decade of the twenty first century civil strife has broken out in a new terrain, the academic field of history, where scholars fight among themselves over the true conduct and meaning of the fratricidal conflict in the 1940s.

In his translation, the prompter was prompting not actors but the text itself to make it speak on the stage. However, each time he tried to finish it, individual and collective history interrupted his progress and affected his thinking. By the time he returned to the task, he had changed his mind about the play and had to revise his work. Only if he could stand outside the flow of history would he be able to complete his task. *Purple Laughter* shows how the course of events, the demands of ideology, and personal experiences may affect literary understanding. Rendering the Bacchae meaningful may be conditioned by the function of several practices like those

of translation, production, party policy, and historiography. Fais shows that, like textuality, identity is a matter of translation, and furthermore that its constitution is a matter of performance more than authentication. This is not to say conveniently that the same play may be rendered in various ways but that the play exists (or rather, functions) only as its renderings. In this novel, even the ancient text is not an original but a genuine performance.

The changing meaning of the Bacchae over successive historical periods is also the main concern of Takis Theodoropoulos (b. 1954), only the story of his novel moves not forward but backward. *The Power of the Dark God [Η δύναμη του σκοτεινού θεού]* (Athens: Okeanida 1999) covers four critical moments in Greek history. Readers need to keep them in mind in order to comprehend the unique chronological scope of the book. When it opens, the story unfolds in the most recent historical moment, the 1990s, as the end of the twentieth century weighs heavily on people's minds. Leonidas K., the protagonist, is a famous director of classical plays who at sixty has reached a turning point in his life. Although he is enjoying an affair with an actress thirty-four years younger, the thought that he may be dying of prostate cancer makes him review his life and conclude that it has been a failure. People consider the cerebral and authoritarian director a master of the theater but he discovers that he is a mediocre artist who has been self-defeated and lives in self-exile. Having lost faith in everything, he now rejects his entire work and thinks about jumping off the so-called Euripides' theater box, the cliff above the theater of Dionysus below the Acropolis where the tragedian used to withdraw and watch the performances. The acclaimed interpreter of the classics who has

been incapable of interpreting his own life may at least be able to stage his death.

Instead of that, he decides to stage something more grandiose: the twilight of the false gods. Some writers burn their unfinished works before they die. Leonidas will burn down his last production. In the ancient theater of Epidaurus he has been rehearsing the *Bacchae*, which has been billed as his farewell work. The night before the premiere, right after the last rehearsal, he will destroy the entire stage, canceling the entire project. Thus the days leading to the opening of the play represent the most recent historical moment of the novel – a postmodern period overshadowed by premonitions for the end of the century, the end of a distinguished career, and the possible end of Leonidas' life.

Leonidas' theatrical ideas reach back to the previous historical moment, a modern one. While preparing for the Bacchae and discovering that he lacks a dramatic technique adequate to the play, the director is intrigued by the idea of staging it not in an ancient amphitheater but in the abandoned Macedonian village of Orestikon. This medieval village near Edessa, the Byzantine Vodena, and the ancient Aiges now lies in ruins, abandoned since the Civil War ravaged the region in the 1940s. Before they left it, the inhabitants observed an old custom. Each year, at the end of Lent, they took out a manuscript preserved in the sanctuary of a church and gave it to the people who had just reached adulthood to memorize and perform. Although they probably did not understand what was performed, this communal rite was part of the natural rhythm of their lives. They transmitted the tragedy as part of an authentic tradition and had no need for a director. What if Leonidas premiered his production

not in the restored classical theater before 14,000 people but in the ruined village for just 200, making his work a continuation of the local ritual and authenticating it not through the affirmation of individual originality but through the recovery of a collective tradition? He could even take his idea further: he could also invite from all over the world the dispersed last inhabitants to revive for a last time their custom and re-enact their Bacchae. Thus, as Leonidas is sadly contemplating the integrity of their lost culture, the second historical moment of the novel takes us to the period before traditional communities ceased to function.

This third moment represents the conclusion of pre-modern times, the end of the Greek Renaissance. The invaluable manuscript that the people of Orestikon were preserving and transmitting was a copy of the play made by Hysechios, a fifteenth-century monk who belonged to a Neoplatonic circle and specialized in copying tragedies. Like the communal rite, this copying represents another less-known kind of transmission – not the transmission of Greek works that left Byzantium for prestigious Italian libraries but that of works which remained in Byzantine hands after the fall of Constantinople in 1453; not the transmission that joined the Renaissance tradition in Venice but the one that operated in its absence in Ottoman-occupied Orestikon. Five centuries before Leonidas went to the Macedonian village seeking Euripides's true meaning, the monk Hysechios, who had also served the tragedian but could not understand him, had gone to the same location, probably for the same purpose. But how could the copyist understand plays if he had never seen one on the stage?

So far in this novel, we have encountered three moments

of profound, conscious or unconscious, interpretive ignorance – three interpretations (modern performance, traditional ritual, and monastic copying) taking place in Orestikon that cannot capture the originary time and place of composition. While we still believe that we are following Leonidas's increasingly desperate efforts to decipher the palimpsest of history (his personal history but also that of Bacchae as well as Greek culture), a few pages before the end the novel introduces a shocking revelation that sheds a different light on the 'dark god' of its title.

Everything we have read so far is but the dream of a seventy-year old Athenian who, at the end of another century, is reflecting on the future of his work, trying to come to terms with its unpredictable reception by the generations to come, a reception completely outside his control. The last historical moment of this book is the only true one: in 407 BC, in the court of the Macedonian king, somewhere near Orestikon, Euripides has just finished his *Bacchae* and is speculating how inaccessible it will appear to future readers, viewers, and performers like Hysechios, the locals, and Leonidas. They may live or return to the same place but they will not be able to reconstruct the meaning of the work, let alone his life. They will also wonder what makes works stand the test of time but will not comprehend that great works dream their future, creating in their dreams those who will interpret them. That is how one cold night, just as he had finished his *Bacchae*, Euripides dreamt the entire story we have been reading. Its protagonists, like the heroes of his plays, are his inventions. Who knows, maybe we the readers are his creations too.

Working at the end of the glorious and controversial fifth century BC, the self-exiled playwright gleaned one insight from his

penultimate play: to embrace contingency, contradiction, and chaos. The cult of Dionysus might disappear, making the meaning of the Bacchae hard to grasp; yet the play would continue speaking the language of its 'dark god.' The tragedy of reason, the fact that it cannot order and control everything, much as it tries to, is made bearable by the possibilities of freedom opened up by the reign of chaos. As he wakes up from his dream of the 1990s, Euripides concludes that the dark forces of Dionysus will continue to challenge people to new struggles and make them conscious of their inexhaustible freedom. This freedom has no transcendental guarantees – religious, metaphysical, ideological or other. It needs to be defined and defended always anew and by those directly concerned. But when fully practiced, it can survive the twilight of gods in the fifth, fifteenth, and twentieth centuries, and enable human creativity to flourish. No wonder Euripides came up with a Theodoropoulos, or maybe Takis Theodoropoulos invented Euripides. This Nietzschean reflection on freedom and necessity authorizes its readers to invent their own Greeks and practice responsibly their own freedom.

If *The Troupe* focuses on production and *Laughter* on translation, The Power foregrounds questions of transmission. Aesthetic idealism, especially when inspired by national epiphanies, aspires to stop history and experience a pleromatic fulfillment in the presence of a total artwork, of a monumental individual and collective expression. With its critique of interpretation, the novel shows that a play is reconstituted anew from one era to another, and every time it operates differently. Each historical moment does not enrich the meaning of the work but produces a new one in competition with earlier meanings. This is something Euripides may have realized

when composing the Bacchae at a Macedonian distance from the Athenian theater of Dionysus, the theater to which Thespis and all other actors would never be allowed to return.

As it is obvious, *The Troupe of the Athenians, Purple Laughter, and The Power of the Dark God* share many minor and major characteristics. For example, some of their protagonists have to work under conditions of censorship (in 4th-century Athens, 15th-century Macedonia, and 20th-century Yugoslavia) and they consider possible performances in distant and obscure places like Dodona, Orestikon, and Tashkend. On a larger scale, there are two interconnected historical issues that dominate the books. The first issue is the uncertainty of a transitional period when a vast socio-cultural formation is coming to an end and a new one, not well-defined yet, is emerging. The books depict the end of a personal trajectory (a director's career, a playwright's life), of collective action (revolution), of a custom (performance of manuscript), of a political movement (the Left), of a genre (tragedy), of a town (Nicopolis), of a period (antiquity). Talk about decline and dissolution is constant, accompanied by apprehension about the unknown future. This sense of finality is heightened by the specific emphasis on the *Bacchae* as all the theater people in the books grapple, directly or not, with the last play of the classical tradition: they deal with termination by participating in a terminal tragedy.

The second historical issue is the understanding of the past. As they navigate with great uncertainty their transitional phases, figures in the books also try to grasp the recent or distant past, be it the archaic era, the classical times, Byzantium, or the 1940s. What may be one's attitude to history, personal and collective? What is

one's responsibility to one's own time? Can the past be salvaged or recovered? These questions acquire special urgency as they focus on the function and fate of tragedy. In tragic, transitional times, might this genre provide answers to the search for cohesion and continuity? The three authors do not provide answers to these questions but they raise them in complex ways to indicate that they need to remain open. Tragedy does not offer a solution but a stage to rehearse provisional, experimental solutions. No canonical view of tradition, territory, the nation, or the arts will be able to freeze time or endure history. The past is always under rehearsal on the tragic stage.

Language as a means of representation and transmission is another major concern for Gouroyannis, Fais, and Theodoropoulos. In terms of content, they include numerous discussions about meaning and significance. In terms of form, they include ancient passages in their own translation (instead of quoting existing ones), thus giving the tragedians a language that is fitting for their novels. They highlight the question of the ancient text in intriguing ways. Fais quotes from the *Bacchae* in two Greek versions – the original (to depict Yorgos recollecting Euripides to make sense of present circumstances) and his translation (to show the results of Yorgos' labor). In a feat of audacious originality, Gouroyannis includes passages from the lost *Prometheus Unbound* that he himself has composed, thus prompting Aeschylus to say things he did not. These Greek novelists are rehearsing their own translations of tragedy. Indeed, next to history, translation is the other over-arching issue here, and it takes a dazzling variety of directions: from one form of Greek to another, from one style and genre to another, from text to performance, from pagan to Christian, from private symbol to public message, from ideology to party line,

from event to history and so on. The quest for the past is constantly mediated by the material needs and conditions of rendition and reproduction.

History and translation come together in the central question of performance. The three authors have chosen the *Bacchae*, a play highly conscious of performativity that opens with Dionysus, the god of theater. They have also highlighted processes of rehearsal in ways reminiscent of other works where the Greeks are also rehearsed, such as the films *Contempt* (1963) by Jean-Luc Godard, The Girls (1968) by Mai Zetterling, and *A Dream of Passion [Κραυγή γυναικών]* (1978) by Jules Dassin. Rehearsing includes everything – translating, choosing among translations, reciting a translation, setting to music, acting, designing, lighting and so on. The books show the impasse of the interpretive approach, the one looking to retrace the true depth of meaning and origin. This approach may also be called archaeological, archival, or mimetic, and is usually inspired by aesthetic ideals as well. It seeks to recover and restore the lost meaning, the forgotten message, the genuine past. The troupe leader, the prompter, and the director seek single-mindedly the return of tragedy, a chimeric dream that cannot be fulfilled. Their performative projects aspire to performance, that is, to theatrical interpretation. They dedicate themselves to reviving the ancients but they see performance as an expression of inner self and collective authenticity. While interpretation is concerned with obedience to normative texts and histories, it imagines itself heroic. The three heroes are on a lonely, defiant quest for the holy artwork. They struggle against all decay – of text, of culture, of body, of vision. Despite their failures, they never suspect that the last layer of the palimpsest is an abyss. Neither do

they realize that their goals are self-contradictory in that the search for the total performance is ultimately anti-theatrical: despite its avowed interest in a broad and engaged audience, it leads further and further away from theater to self-cancellation and even self-immolation. The martyrs of interpretation believe that the *Bacchae* too represents a Euripidean attempt to collapse theater and ritual, art and religion.

The three subversive books explore impasses of identification and interpretation. With their interest in citing, quoting, prompting, translating, and performing, they argue that, instead of an ethnic or aesthetic essence, there are only discursive acts whose citational repetition within regimes of truth constitutes an identity. By mixing binaries and blurring boundaries, they destabilize hegemonic norms, showing that categories are based on performances of social conventions, and that identities are impure and heterogeneous. While the protagonists ignore discursive performativity, the authors espouse it with enthousiasm. The alternative to a palimpsestic, ethnocentric performance is represented by their books, which throw the quest for antiquity into confusion by utilizing multiple voices and perspectives. Gouroyannis, Fais, and Theodoropoulos *perform* ancient tragedy in that they see their novels as participating in a contest. Theirs is a dramatistic approach to history that competes with the ancients as equals by staging them with great agility in the postmodern terrain. Instead of seeking an echo of the original, they give the original their own voice. They critique both historical metaphysics (reconstruction of the self-sufficient past) and aesthetic metaphysics (creation of the self-contained artwork). They question the desire to transcend history through antiquity and art

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through tragedy. Through their novelistic performance on the very topic of performance, they promote a performative (as opposed to interpretive) model of understanding. What is more, their agonistic reading of the *Bacchae* intimates that certain postmodern interests were not unfamiliar to Euripides (a veteran of agons in the theater of Dionysus) when he was considering the future of tragedy.

Over the last one hundred years, the *Bacchae* is a play that has been closely associated with major artistic experiments, from Eva Palmer-Sikelianos's 1934 production at Smith College to Richard Schechner's 1968 *Dionysus in 69* in New York and Brad May's 1997 production, also in New York, to limit ourselves to American examples. A history of modern classical music could be written on the basis of operas and other adaptations for the musical stage alone. Suffice to list here (in chronological order of composition) Karol Szymanowski's *King Roger* (composed in 1918-24, premiered in 1926), Egon Wellesz's *Die Backhantinnen* (comp. 1928-30, prem. 1931), Edwin Geist's *The Return of Dionysos* (comp. 1938, prem. 2002), Giorgio Federico Ghedini's *Le baccanti* (comp. 1941-44, prem. 1948), Harry Partch's *Revelation in the Courthouse Park* (comp. 1960, prem. 1987), Hans Werner Henze's *Die Bassariden* (comp. 1965-66, prem. 1966), Roy Travis's African *The Black Bacchants* (comp 1982), John Buller's *BAKXAI* (prem. 1992), Daniel Börtz's *Backanterna* (comp. 1991, prem. 1992), Screeming Weenie Productions's electronic *The Bacchae* (2003), Liz Stanton's *The Bacchae* (prem. 2005), Steve Nieve's crossover *Welcome to the Voice* (comp. 1994-2000, released in 2007), Peter Mills's rock *The Rockae* (prem. 2007), and Steven Clark's *Dionysus* (prem. 2007).

Greek participation in this multifaceted exploration has increased substantially. For example, recent works in music theater

include the operas *Bacchae* (composed in 1992, premiered in 1995) by Theodore Antoniou (b. 1935), *Bacchae* (composed in 1993, premiered in 1996) by Argyris Kounadis (b. 1924) and *Bacchae* (composed in 1993) by Yiorgos Koumentakis (b. 1959) as well as *Les Bacchantes d' Euripide*, the music Iannis Xenakis (1922-2001) wrote for the play's London production (1993) by David Freeman.

Films have been even more innovative. In *Two suns in the sky* (1991) by Yiorgos Stamboulopoulos (b. 1936), who directed his own screenplay, the question of theatrical performance is paramount. The film takes place in 391, during the reign of Emperor Theodosius, when temples were closed down and the ancient faith banned. The Roman Empire is torn between the fall of the gods and the rise of God. The narrator is called Athanasios the Double-Minded. The story is set in Antioch where the two heroes, Timotheus the Actor and Lazarus the Magistrate the Cappadocian play out in the theater of history their version of *The Bacchae*. Timotheus and his troupe stage the play, trying to keep tragedy alive under conditions of persecution, while Lazarus is chasing them out of town and attempts to arrest the Actor. Thus the story of Dionysus and Pentheus is enacted both in performance and in real life. Also, the story incorporates Christian elements such as a Last Supper that Timotheus has with his troupe or his depiction on an icon as Saint Dionysus.

Oh Babylon (1987) by Costas Ferris (b. 1935), who directed his own screenplay, is a parable based on The Bacchae that dispenses with Dionysus and focuses on the madness of a modern intellectual, the neurotic and sexless Pentheus, who is caught between the logic he espouses and the irrational forces that appeal to him as he is trying to finish his book. The story takes place during twenty-four hours

as people have gathered to celebrate his birthday at his neoclassical mansion. It starts with a thunderstorm and earthquake and ends with the death of the protagonist. While the movie lacks a Dionysus, it boasts in the role of the chorus the famous reggae performer Maxi Priest and his band.

Mania (1985), a 'pagan film' by Yiorgos Panoussopoulos (b. 1942), who directed his own screenplay, also tells a story that lasts one day. Zoe, who is around thirty, married, with two children, is a career woman who works as a program analyst for an international computer company. On this particular day she learns that she has been selected for advanced training in the United States. In the afternoon, she goes with her baby to the National Gardens of Athens, leaving the jungle of the modern city. In this modern Cythaeron, subconscious forces (such as her repressed eroticism) are unleashed and her actions arouse the children in the park (turning a group of boy scouts into a chorus of followers of Dionysus) and the animals in the zoo, creating total panic. She turns into a maenad and the police have to hunt her down like a wild beast.

It is obvious that Dionysus is very much alive on the Greek stage, screen, and page. The variety of his treatments testifies to an on-going agonistic engagement with the *Bacchae* that continues to reconstitute the play in new performative contexts instead of seeking to reconstruct the originary one. An agonistic view of antiquity avoids a simplistic distinction between a repressive text and a transgressive performance: textuality is not by itself authoritarian and performativity does not equal resistance. (After all, performance too can be repressive.) Performance constructs a text by reconstituting it within the theatrical apparatus. Performative fiction

constructs antiquity by reconstituting it within the literary apparatus. The Greek literature discussed here does not interpret or imitate the ancients. It performs them with great creativity, and it does that not in a faithful or transgressive but in an agonistic fashion. This agonism is not psychoanalytical (following Freud) or polemical (following Carl Schmitt) but the competitive one advocated by a variety of thinkers from N. Machiaveli to Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, and Chantal Mouffe. As a political and cultural theory, agonism is a pluralist view that accepts conflict as an inherent feature of society but embraces its positive, productive aspects by promoting occasions of open competition and by supporting performance on such occasions as a combination of virtue and virtuosity. Postmodern Greek literature often gives agonistic performances when competing with its ancient counterparts. The point is not to obliterate or transcend the classics but to excel, to distinguish once self, to enter a debate of equals. The three books are highly representative examples of this activity because they engage the ancients by telling stories about people who attempted to engage the ancients. Through this intense, multi-layered self-reflexivity, they show what the stakes are in re-activating tradition with a polycentric and syncretic view of Hellenism.

Historians, anthropologists, political theorists and other scholars involved in genealogies of classicism and critiques of nationalism would benefit by studying Greek arts such as literature and film, which offer an extensive anatomy of humanism. Since the late twentieth century, these arts have been interrogating dominant discourses, official histories, national canons, and educational orthodoxies in ways that parallel the systematic inquiry into disciplines and institutions. Contemporary Greek fiction, in particular,

has been exploring questions of postcolonialism, multiculturalism, hybridity, heterodoxy, and sexuality. Its wide-ranging investigation of constructions of antiquity deserves scholarly recognition and encouragement. But the point is not for research to give its support. As I have argued in my paper 'Classics in Performance' (*Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 20:2, October 2002), the work of authors such as Gouroyannis, Fais, and Theodoropoulos

> proposes and exemplifies an agonistic philology – one inspired by the ethics of worldly (as opposed to, say, ascetic) virtuosity. Such a philology is not assigning itself the secondary role of serving the ancients or the aesthetic vocation of revealing their hidden depths. Instead of a scribal or archaeological disposition, it adopts an agonistic one that views understanding as a public, virtuosic performance. By so doing, it responds to Nietzsche's challenge that the Classics should not be imitated or superseded but surpassed by action (202).

Scholarship can learn a lot from self-reflexive novels that dramatize questions of historical and literary understanding by performing the ancients in an agonistic fashion. These novels have been already conducting a comprehensive anti-imitative and anti-interpretive critique of ethno-classical metaphysics, undermining idealizations of identity and contesting normative Hellenism. Such a remarkable convergence of intellectual and political interests should only encourage an energetic solidarity between radical research and the arts.

Vassilis Lambropoulos

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