

## Μουσείο Μπενάκη

A Singular Antiquity: Archaeology and Hellenic Identity in Twentieth-Century Greece



### The rehearsal of antiquity in post-modern Greek fiction

*Vassilis Lambropoulos*

doi: [10.12681/benaki.17984](https://doi.org/10.12681/benaki.17984)

Copyright © 2018, Vassilis Lambropoulos



Άδεια χρήσης [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

### Βιβλιογραφική αναφορά:

Lambropoulos, V. (2008). The rehearsal of antiquity in post-modern Greek fiction. *Μουσείο Μπενάκη*, 163–171. <https://doi.org/10.12681/benaki.17984>

## The rehearsal of antiquity in post-modern Greek fiction

HOW GREEK NATIONAL HISTORY and ethnic identity have been 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 contributed 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 the visual arts 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 post-modern novel that first questioned national history as such (and not just its reactionary appropriations). Since the early eighties, it has set out 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, theatre faces more challenges than, say, an exhibition 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* [*O διάσος των Αθηναίων*] (Athens 1998) by Vassilis Gouroyannis (b. 1951) is set in Epirus, in northern Greece, and takes place over a few weeks in 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 first 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 theatre

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 increasing 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 theatre to fiction, from polytheism to a single god, and from the old Roman capital to a new world centre. 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 530s BC and toured with his players. The latter-day Thespis, in the Late Roman period when Hellenism is in steep decline, will also tour in an attempt to revive tragedy's popularity. Since the Romans will not let him perform in the Odeion of Herod Atticus in Athens, he moves with his Athenian troupe to the Epirote city of Nicopolis, the 'victory city' founded by Octavian opposite the promontory of Actium to commemorate his victory of 31 BC over Anthony and Cleopatra. There he plans to appeal to Apollo (whose local cult dates back to the sixth century BC) for help in his battle against the decline of Hellenism. He will produce a tragedy in the theatre at Dodona, further north, built in the third century BC, and which he is going to open for the first time in centuries.

Thespis became 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 angers the gods and Zeus throws his thunderbolts, burning the actors (158). In preparation for a performance, the troupe must live ascetically. Those serving tragedy must be seized by its *daimonio*, its demonic spirit (212). At the same time, Thespis is not an antiquarian or traditionalist. He does not insist on ancient rules. He fully understands 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 popular 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' *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 creator 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 an end in itself (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 becomes reality 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 the Christians leave the theatre, 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 angering Zeus, who throws his thunderbolts 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 theatre, abolishes it. In addition to the suffering of Prometheus and Jesus referred to explicitly in the production, the director's cruel death vividly recalls the suffering of Pentheus as the raving Christians, followers of the latest eastern cult, kill Thespis who defended the traditional order. While the first Thespis reputedly wrote a tragedy called *Pentheus*, the later 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' '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' pursuit completely lacks. Aesthetic idealism projects Greek art as pure and present, even when it must make concessions to mixture and mediation. Identifying it completely 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* [*Πορφύρα γέλια*] (Athens 2008) by Michel Fais (b. 1957) covers three generations of a Greek family since the thirties. The grandfather, Yorgos Sekeris, now dead, was a prompter at the Royal Theatre and a moderate member of the Greek Communist Party who viewed its hard line with great scepticism. 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 programme of nationalist propaganda on a minor TV station; Stratos, who is in prison for his participation during the nineties in a Trotskyite urban guerrilla group; and a nameless one, now dead, a literary editor who shared his father's leftist scepticism. Dionysis Sekeris, the son of the nameless editor, is a budding writer in his mid-thirties 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 laboured for years on a modern Greek translation without ever finishing it. This labour preoccupied him during three periods of his turbulent life. During the first period, his internal exile as a political prisoner in 1938–39 on the remote island of Icaria, he saw Dionysus as the threat posed by 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 expulsion on account of his anti-Stalinist views, in hiding in Athens and Piraeus until he was caught again and sent to another island for a period of internal exile. During this time, he witnessed with horror the fratricidal struggles within his Party and thought of Thebes as a state in civil strife. The last period was the nineties, when he saw two of his sons follow 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 over a 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 now and again 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 forties, when Greek leftists turned against one another while also fighting the government, Yorgos believed that the *Bacchae* dramatized not the Civil War between the Left and the Right that was then going on in the country, but the strife within the Left itself. In this view, the General Secretary of the Greek Communist Party, Nikos Zahariadis, 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 Velouhiotis, was Dionysus, representing the freedom fighters abiding by the law of nature, communal tradition and solidarity, and the spirit of comradeship. Zahariadis ruled by military terror in the cities, Velouhiotis by maenadic violence on the mountains; the one relied on commissars, the other on guerrillas. The history of the Party was marked by the suicide of Velouhiotis in 1945 and of Zahariadis in 1973. Writer Dionysis Sekeris, who has carried his grandfather's political scepticism 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 guerrilla) respectively. The difference between the two attitudes to the play is that, while Yorgos had tried to translate the *Bacchae* as a tragedy in which historical reality could be directly reflected, his grandson, who has

been influenced by theories of theatre and revisionist performances, is writing his own tragicomedy. 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 forties.

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 just a convenient way of saying 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 1999) covers four critical moments in Greek history.<sup>1</sup> 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 nineties, 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 than himself, 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 theatre but he decides that he is a mediocre artist, self-defeated and living in self-exile. Having lost

faith in everything, he now rejects his entire work and thinks about jumping off the so-called 'Euripides' box', the cliff above the Theatre of Dionysus below the Acropolis where the tragedian, allegedly, 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 theatre of Epidaurus he has been rehearsing the *Bacchae*, which has been billed as his farewell work. The night before the premiere, right after the dress rehearsal, he will destroy the entire stage, cancelling the entire project. Thus the days leading to the opening of the play represent the most recent historical moment of the novel – a post-modern 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 amphitheatre but in some abandoned Macedonian village. This medieval village near Edessa, the Byzantine Vodena, and the ancient Aegae now lies in ruins, abandoned since the Civil War ravaged the region in the forties. 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 those 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 theatre 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 the dispersed former inhabitants from all over the world to revive for one 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 the Macedonian village 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 little-known kind of transmission – not the transmission of Greek works which left Byzantium for prestigious Italian libraries but that of works which remained in Greek hands after the Fall of Constantinople in 1453; not the transmission that was part of the Renaissance tradition in Venice but the one that operated in its absence in Ottoman-occupied Macedonia. Five centuries before Leonidas went to the village seeking Euripides' 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 the Macedonian village that cannot capture the originary time and place of composition. While we still believe that we are following Leonidas' increasingly desperate efforts to decipher the palimpsest of history (his personal history but also that of the *Bacchae* and of 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 in the book is the only true one: in 407 BC, in the court of the Macedonian king, 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 in 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 nineties, 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 otherwise. It needs to be constantly defined and defended anew and by those directly concerned. But when fully practised, it can survive the twilight of the 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 practise their own freedom responsibly.

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 fulfilment 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 simply 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* in distant Macedonia, far from the Athenian theatre of Dionysus, the theatre to which Thespis and all

other actors would never be allowed to return.

It is obvious that *The Troupe of the Athenians*, *Purple Laughter*, and *The Power of the Dark God* share many characteristics, both major and minor. For example, some of their protagonists have to work under conditions of censorship (in fourth-century Athens, fifteenth-century Macedonia, and twentieth-century Yugoslavia) and they consider possible performances in distant and obscure places like Dodona and Tashkent. In a wider context, 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 yet well defined, 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 (Nicompolis), of a period (antiquity). There is constant talk about decline and dissolution, accompanied by apprehension about the unknowable future. This sense of finality is heightened by the specific emphasis on the *Bacchae* as all the theatre people in the books grapple, whether directly or not, with the last play in 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 their transitional phases with great uncertainty, characters in the books also try to grasp the recent or distant past, be it the archaic era, the classical period, Byzantium, or the forties. What should 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 all include nu-

merous discussions about meaning. In terms of form, they include ancient passages in their own translations (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 own translation (to show the results of Yorgos' labour). 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 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, which opens with Dionysus, the god of theatre. 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 Γυναίκων*] (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, which seeks to retrace the true depth of meaning and origin. This approach may also be called archaeological, archival, or mimetic, and is usually also inspired by aesthetic ideals. 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 his-

stories, 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-defeating 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 theatre to self-cancellation and even self-immolation. The three heroes, martyrs of interpretation as they are, believe that the *Bacchae* too represents a Euripidean attempt to collapse theatre and ritual, art and religion.

These three subversive books explore impasses of identification and interpretation. With their interest in citing, prompting, translating, and performing, they argue that there is no ethnic or aesthetic essence, 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 enthusiasm. Their books represent the alternative to a palimpsestic, ethnocentric performance, throwing 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 dramatist's approach to history that competes with the ancients as equals by staging their plays with great agility in the post-modern 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 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 post-modern interests were not unfamiliar to Euripides (a veteran of *agons* in the theatre of Dionysus) when he was considering the future of tragedy.

For the last one hundred years, the *Bacchae* has been closely associated with major artistic experiments, from

Eva Palmer Sikelianos' 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 it 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), Screaming Weenie Productions's electronic *The Bacchae* (2003), Liz Stanton's *The Bacchae* (prem. 2005), Steve Nieve's cross-over *Welcome to the Voice* (comp. 1994–2000, released in 2007), Peter Mills' 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 theatre 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 Stambouloupoloulos (b. 1936), who directed his own screenplay, the question of theatrical performance is paramount. The film takes place in 391, during the reign of the Emperor Theodosius, when temples were closed down and the ancient religion banned. The Roman Empire is torn between the fall of the gods and the rise of God. The narrator is called Athanasios the Diboulos ('Double-Minded'). The story is set in Antioch where the two heroes, Timotheus the Actor and Lazarus the Cappadocian Magistrate, play out in the theatre 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 chases 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 in a panel painting 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 a twenty-four-hour period when 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 the famous reggae performer Maxi Priest and his band in the role of the chorus.

*Mania* (1985), a 'pagan film' by Yiorgos Panoussopoulos (b. 1942), who directed his own screenplay, also tells a story over one day. Zoe, a thirty something, married, with two children, is a career woman who works as a programme 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 in 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 ways in which the theme is treated 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 fashion but in an agonistic one. This agonism is not psychoanalytical (following Freud) or polemical (following Carl Schmitt) but the competitive one advocated by a variety of thinkers from Machiavelli 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. Post-modern 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 oneself, to enter a debate of equals. The three books are highly representative examples of this activity because they engage with the ancients by telling stories about people who attempted to engage with the ancients. Through this intense, multi-layered self-reflexivity, they show what the stakes are in reactivating 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 post-colonialism, 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 elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> the work of authors such as Gouroyannis, Fais and Theodoropoulos:

'[P]roposes 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

The rehearsal of antiquity in post-modern Greek fiction

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.<sup>23</sup>

Scholarship can learn a lot from self-reflexive novels that dramatize questions of historical and literary understanding by performing the classics in an agonistic fashion. These novels have already offered 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  
C.P. Cavafy Chair in Modern Greek  
Department of Classical Studies  
University of Michigan  
vlambrop@umich.edu

NOTES

\* This paper was delivered on 4 June 2008 at the American College of Greece in Athens as the 13th Kimon Friar Lecture in Neo-Hellenic Arts and Letters. The author is grateful for the honour of this invitation.

1. The following several paragraphs appeared first in the In-

troduction to the American publication of the novel by Cosmos in 2007, see Theodoropoulos 2007.

2. Lambropoulos 2002.

3. Lambropoulos 2002, 202.

REFERENCES

Lambropoulos V. 2002: Classics in performance, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 20, 191-213.

Theodoropoulos T. 2007: *The Power of the Dark God: a Novel* (transl. by D. Connolly; River Vale, NJ).

