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Ioanna Naoum

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Unperfect Histories and *Drifting Cities*: Stratis Tsirkas and the Persistence of History in Abeyance

Yiannis Papatheodorou, *Unwritten Histories: On Stratis Tsirkas's 'Drifting Cities'* [Agrafes istories: Gia tis 'Akyvernites Politeies' tou Strati Tsirka]. Agra, 2024.

It would not be an exaggeration to claim that Stratis Tsirkas's trilogy, *Drifting Cities*, constitutes perhaps the most complex instance in Modern Greek literature where we witness the testing, clashing, and eventual transformation of institutions, mechanisms, and mentalities–not only within the literary field but also across ideological, partisan, authorial, and readerly reflexes, occurring at a critical juncture for both national and global political history. This reality is highlighted with clarity and precision by Yiannis Papatheodorou's tripartite study, *Unwritten Histories: On Stratis Tsirkas's 'Drifting Cities'* (Agra, 2024).

The ethics and politics of reading and writing, as well as strategies of control and escape, are examined across three primary fronts: (a) the relationship between the intelligentsia and partisan commitment; (b) the relationship between literary narrative and the events of April 1944, along with their mnemonic management; and (c) the literary representation of colonialism. These three fields, with their various branches and in their constant dialogue, cover three corresponding chapters in the book–three "successive returns", one might say, through which the study circles its subject, focusing each time on a different center.

The apt title, *Unwritten Histories*, finds its origin in Manolis Anagnostakis's early observation in 1963 that "Stratis Tsirkas does not produce history. His *Ariadne*, like *The Club*, presupposes […] a history as yet unwritten […] a history, one might say, in abeyance."[1] This "unperfect," incomplete history–in its distortion, fragmentariness, and plurality–becomes Tsirkas's authorial wager in *Drifting Cities*, while the scholar interpretively metabolizes this challenge, attempting to showcase the trilogy as a work in a state of constant composition: a literature that rescues mnemonic fragments from the "shipwreck of time" and from mandated oblivion, creating a history that refuses to close.[2]

Papatheodorou's study is, of course, positioned in dialogue with the earlier extensive contribution of Miltos Pechlivanos, *The Punctuation of Reading: From 'The Club' to 'Drifting Cities'*, where, with an emphasis on *The Club* as an initial autonomous authorial conception, the "genetic

[1] Manolis Anagnostakis, "The Ariadne of Stratis Tsirkas: The Legend and the Historical Landscape", *Epoches* 4, year A, Athens 1963 (= *Ta sympliromatika. Simeioseis kritikis*, Stigmi, Athens 1985, pp. 125-131, quote on p. 126).

[2] The idea of "unperfect history" suggested by Harriet Archer in her book *Unperfect Histories: The Mirror for Magistrates, 1559–1610* (Oxford UP, 2017) seems to have contributed to the choice of the title and orientation of Papatheodorou's study. Archer examines a popular collection of Tudor/Stuart poems where the souls of fallen leaders "return" to tell their tragedies. Drawing the term from Francis Bacon and re-conceptualizing it, Archer argues that these stories are "unperfect" not by failure, but by choice, as they constitute a writing that is constantly revised, plural, contradictory, and remains in a perpetual state of composition.

file" of *Drifting Cities* was delivered to scholars and readers. The evidence presented there demonstrates the extent to which Tsirkas's authorial labor drew from the political and aesthetic reception of his work, documenting the aesthetic, political, and historical negotiations between the author and his first readers.

Papatheodorou's study presupposes and converses with Pechlivanos's work, yet it moves in the opposite direction. It tracks and focuses on readerly reactions, the rifts and realignments that *Drifting Cities* brought about within existing interpretive communities (the partisan community in Greece, the underground Communist Party [KKE] in Bucharest, and the bourgeois intelligentsia). Its focus is the novelistic depiction of partisan guidance–personified by "Anthropaki" and the "severed heads" of dogmatism–and, in connection with this partisan evaluation, the condemnation of the April 1944 movement. In other words, the scholar's stake in the present study is to articulate a now largely crystallized but truly "unwritten" aspect of Tsirkas and the trilogy–unwritten in terms of its dynamic representation. In his treatment, Papatheodorou draws synthetically, yet distinctly by chapter, from the theory of interpretive communities (mainly regarding censorship), the field of memory studies and mnemonic archives/ communities, and the field of cultural/postcolonial studies and cultural hybridity.

The Club "shatters" the reader's horizon within a very dense historical period marked by many contradictory co-occurrences. The slow process of de-Stalinization and the 20th Congress of the CPSU in 1956 on one hand; the crushing of the Hungarian Uprising on the other; the rise of EDA (United Democratic Left) to the position of the main opposition in the 1958 elections; the ideological openings in the journal *Epitheorisi Technis* (Art Review), but also the alignment of most satellite communist parties with the suppression in Hungary and the hardline stance of the KKE core in Bucharest–all describe the duality of the Left. They describe what Papatheodorou calls a "binary Left" (regarding the Greek Left of the 1960s), which was anything but welcoming toward *The Club* in 1961.

The first chapter, titled "I Don't Burn Books," follows precisely the parallel and/or rival interpretive communities within the Left in their reception of *The Club*, focusing on how the novel functions constitutively or transformatively for these communities. The pseudonymous letter from "Mich. Papalexis" in Cairo (June 1961), which exposes all of Tsirkas's "errors," summarizes the partisan condemnation of the novel. A primary issue with *The Club* denounced by Papalexis is the choice of fictional time–the fact that the author places the negative portrayal of "Anthropos" and the "severed heads" in the years 1941-46, tarnishing the image of comrades and fighters against fascism, rather than later, where they seemed to belong. On the other hand, the differentiated opinions expressed by members of the "Literary Circle of Enlightenment" of the underground KKE–a significant advisory body with normative powers, as seen in documents from the Bucharest archives–as well as the specter of the author's expulsion from the party, constitute rifts within the reception itself, rather than mere symptoms of it. Here, Papatheodorou utilizes Pierre Bourdieu's

theory of the "Field of Cultural Production" to analyze power relations and the symbolic violence exerted by the party mechanism on the intellectual, while employing Stephen Greenblatt's concept of "cultural blockage" to interpret how the system manages heterodoxy. The analysis is supplemented by Hans Robert Jauss's Reception Theory and Stanley Fish's "interpretive communities," illustrating how different "reading protocols" clash over the same text. Finally, Arlette Farge's *The Allure of the Archive* provides the framework for reconstructing "captured voices" within partisan records.

From the interpretive communities reflecting the tension between partisan intellect and the party line–and behind it, the great dilemma of "action or art?" as embodied by the (otherwise problematic, according to partisan diagnosis) character of Manos Simonidis–Papatheodorou moves in the second chapter to memory communities and the "hard April of '44." The April movement is the "mobile abeyance," the driving force for Tsirkas to write and perhaps the main reason he transitions from *The Club* to *Drifting Cities*, a fact clearly evident in *The Bat*. The dissolution of the II Brigade by the British, the uprising, and the "dirty label" of provocation from the KKE are highlighted, centered on Zachariadis's speech at the KKE Plenum in June 1945. The scholar closely follows Tsirkas as he attempts to novelistically render a divided memory–that of the Middle East veterans versus that cultivated by the KKE–assuming the role of a historian. Following the advice of Foula Chatzidaki, who was otherwise supportive of his project, to avoid an "histoire trop concrète," was not an option for Tsirkas. He transmutes it, however, at the level of authorial technique through the ironic distancing of the narrative voice. The proposed reading becomes interesting as the entanglement of dramatic and narrative irony is ultimately traced back to irony as a philosophical view of history. Papatheodorou now utilizes Hayden White's thought and the concept of metahistory to show how historical representation is structured as a narrative and how the "content of the form" affects historical truth. The inclusion of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* is crucial for understanding the narrator as an "accountant of memories," where subjective memory merges with the social panorama. Additionally, Tzvetan Todorov offers the theoretical background for the "abuses of memory" and the "duty of memory" regarding the trauma of April '44. To this novelistic management of unwritten history and difficult memory, Tsirkas adds the memory of the diaspora within the colony and the memory of colonialism during the post-colonial 1960s. This constitutes the subject of the study's third section.

In the third chapter, titled "The Earth Seeks Its Master," we observe the Orientalist reflections in Tsirkas's writing–already present in *The Club*, where the East appears as a "heterotopia" to Western eyes–intertwined with Spivak's definitive question, "Can the subaltern speak?" which seems to have preoccupied Tsirkas prematurely. Papatheodorou tracks the novelistic transmutation of this question in the trilogy through the character of Ariadne, while tracing the origins of Tsirkas's anxiety to find a way for "the cry uttered by the Arab in the dirty

galabeya" to be heard. The prehisto-ideological and authorial processes recorded in his short stories and the novella *Noureddin Bomba* (1956), but it also glimmers in earlier unpublished material dating back to the summer of 1946. During that period of "authorial aphasia" (writer's block), Tsirkas resorted to Baudelairean lyrical prose, providing a description of the East somewhere between heterotopia and "no man's land."[3]

In this chapter, Eric Hobsbawm's thought, particularly from *The Age of Extremes*, is utilized to place Tsirkas's work and the historical events of the Middle East within the broader context of the twentieth century's "global civil war." The reading of WWII as an ideological conflict exceeding national borders and of anti-fascism as a "common language" allows us to understand how and why the Greek anti-fascist struggle in the Middle East met the anti-colonial demands of the Egyptians. Combined with Edward Said's conceptualization of "Orientalism" and "contrapuntal reading," Papatheodorou recognizes the trilogy not as a "Greek story in the desert," but as part of the global "resistance literature of decolonization."Furthermore, Frantz Fanon (*The Wretched of the Earth*) is used to analyze the bodily redemption of the colonized through dance and *dhikr*, while Mikhail Bakhtin offers the tools for understanding the popular neighborhood as a "carnivalesque" collectivity. In this way, Ariadne is linked to the need of colory of this anxiety is found in the nized peoples to reclaim their bodies and voices, and Tsirkas's "abeyance" meets anti-colonial thought: history is not complete until it includes the violent yet redemptive entrance of the "natives" into the spotlight. The literary vindication of *Ariadne* is, for Papatheodorou, an act of decolonizing memory.

In my opinion, this chapter dynamically opens a new field of fertile questions and interpretations, positioning Tsirkas among major Western authors of his caliber who cannot be interpreted outside the condition of colonialism and post-colonialism. Ultimately, the trilogy functions as an archive that refuses to close, precisely because the "pending matters" it describes remain active. Literature becomes the site where "unwritten histories" finally find their form as a perpetual reminder. "History in abeyance" appears to be the only honest history: the one that admits its gaps, listens to the silences of the archive(s), and allows the reader to reflect on their own present. The scholar showcases *Drifting Cities* as a work that rescues the fragmentary. "Unwritten histories" do not merely consist of what was omitted or forbidden, but are marked and haunted by what is yet to be written. For this reason, Papatheodorou's book is not only a significant philological study but a crucial proposal for how we can read literature as a gesture of historical justice.

Ioanna Naoum
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

[3] Regarding these prose pieces, see Ioanna Naoum, "Stratis Tsirkas, NO MAN'S LAND (Ten [minus one] pieces in prose)," in *Logotechnikes Diadromes: Mnimi Vangeli Athanasopoulou*, edited by Thanasis Agathos, Christina Dounia, and Anna Tzouma, Kastaniotis, Athens 2016, pp. 346-354,