

Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

Ap. 5 (2013)

Hellenism Unbound



Some Thoughts on the Trails and Travails of Hellenism and Orientalism: An Interview with Gonda Van Steen

Amy Muse, Efterpi Mitsi

doi: [10.12681/syn.17436](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.17436)

Copyright © 2013, Amy Muse, Efterpi Mitsi



Άδεια χρήσης [Creative Commons Αναφορά 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Some Thoughts on the Trails and Travails of Hellenism and Orientalism: An Interview with Gonda Van Steen

by

Efterpi Mitsi and Amy Muse

Efterpi Mitsi and Amy Muse: Much of the definition and understanding of Hellenism is predicated on a longstanding contrast (or discrimination—meant in both positive and negative senses) between ‘Greek’ and ‘barbarian.’ This has been expanded to be understood as a difference between West (‘Greek’ or ‘civilised’) and East (‘barbaric’). You’ve wrestled with this in your recent research, including the crafting of your provocative title “Liberating Hellenism from the Ottoman Empire,” although in your Introduction to the book you argue to “redraw the outlines of mutually dependent Orientalism and Hellenism” (2). Can there be a Hellenism *without* this East-West binary? Does the study of Hellenism *promote* or *encourage* binary thinking? We’re thinking also of Dimitris Tziouvas’s “Beyond the Acropolis” for *The Journal of Modern Greek Studies* in which he argues that “Hellenism cannot escape a binary logic” (199), although he goes on to attempt a rethinking of Neohellenism through “dialogism, hybridity, or syncretism” (202).

Gonda Van Steen: Let me first state how honoured and grateful I am to be asked for an interview to introduce this special issue of *Synthesis*, by the timely title of *Hellenism Unbound*. I am eager to first answer and contextualise the question about the West-East binary and the definition of Hellenism as well: Hellenism as an idea, a destination of literal travel, a sense

of metaphorical homecoming or cultural belonging, and the competing figurations of Greekness that Hellenism engendered. Ever since 9/11, I have been thinking about the West-East divide and about our own task, as scholars and perennial students of the Humanities and the Social Sciences, to bring a nuanced, critical, and elongated historical perspective to this perceived dichotomy, which is being reinforced or simplified further every day. The Orientalist bias still plagues modern times and discursive modes, even if it has evolved from the monolithic 'Orientalism' of the late eighteenth century. The hardening of meanings and positions has expressed itself in a populist, militant, and all-Western ethnocentrism, replete with the public posturing of 'defending (superior) Western civilisation' against renewed Eastern threats. Therefore, my aim in *Liberating Hellenism from the Ottoman Empire: Comte de Marcellus and the Last of the Classics* was to recreate some of the Orient's multiple colorations, to acknowledge anew that all Eastern societies are fundamentally different from one another, and to illustrate, by way of the case study of Marcellus, how much Western Europe and classical scholarship have done to diminish this plurality. The outlines of *Liberating Hellenism* are intentionally broad, but its point of departure is quite specific. The book features two stories written by the French traveller and diplomat Comte de Marcellus (1795-1865): first, his discovery and 'purchase' of the Venus de Milo and, secondly, his participation in a secretive staged reading of Aeschylus's *Persians* in Constantinople. Marcellus's narrations, both situated in the early months of 1820, thematise two Greek objects of relevance to the nineteenth-century West (and to our study of its cultural history): ancient art and ancient texts. These prominent themes allow us to unravel the larger cultural, ideological, and geopolitical processes involved, focusing on the Western philhellene 'impulse' and the Orientalist 'logic' driving it. Thus these stories, which are nothing short of adventure tales, operate like conduits through which a wide range of nineteenth-century issues and phenomena are examined. I assess both the statue (the priceless ancient artefact) and the play reading (the classical text and the oldest extant and prize-winning tragedy) as vectors of knowledge about the Orient (including emerging Greece versus the Ottoman Empire) but also about the

West, its Romantic Hellenism, its burgeoning philhellenism, its expansionist designs on the East, and its tradition of classical scholarship, which fed into all of the above but fuelled the unreasonable quest for Greek continuity, in particular. Marcellus's records invite us to reflect on the intellectual realm but also on the expansionist reach of Western (phil)Hellenism and to consider how this Hellenism intersected with the project of Classical Studies and its own (hitherto underexplored) 'Occidentalism,' which defined ancient *through* modern Greece at the expense of the 'degenerate' and 'hostile' East.

In the eyes of the professed French philhellene Marcellus, the 'barbaric' and 'despotic' Ottoman Empire holds captive both the Venus statue and those modern Greeks who prove to be worthy descendants of the ancient Greeks. While the phrase 'the last of the classics' was coined to eulogise Marcellus, I like to apply it also to the Venus and to those 'deserving' Greeks, suggesting various double meanings in my book's title. My title is, indeed, meant to be somewhat ironic as well as provocative: it exposes the instant assumption that only the Ottoman Empire could obstruct the liberation of Hellenism; the book shows that drastic action to shake Hellenism free from the prejudiced West was overdue as well. If we had a chance to question Marcellus, the 'hero' of my book, he would certainly see himself as a liberator of Hellenism and as a saviour of (ancient) Greek culture.¹ His actions, however, reveal that he was out to free Hellenism for self-aggrandising reasons and for the self-legitimation of the Enlightened West, that is, for the 'betterment' of the ambitious kingdom of France, to which he was beholden and whose mistakes he did not see. Moreover, the Hellenism that Marcellus boasted of saving had to be strictly (fifth-century BCE) classical in nature to be deemed worthwhile. This widespread demand compelled him (and his contemporaries) to uphold the Venus de Milo as a specimen of classical, not of Hellenistic sculpture and to sing the praises of the Greek revolutionaries of 1820 who reconnected with 'their' classical roots but soon paid with their lives. For Marcellus, both the statue and the 'reincarnated' ancient Greeks had to be among 'the last of the classics,' for the sake of his-story and of the exigencies of modern history. The Frenchman himself was 'the last of the classics' for being enamoured with an ideal of Greece that was unrealistic and

outdated already in the 1820s. His peregrinations are symbolic of the West's search for Greece in its classical image—and of its ('disappointing') discovery of a Greece in its sub-Western profile. Marcellus's enthrallment, however, came in spite of his exposure to progressive Greek circles and to Greek lands in turmoil, readying themselves for an armed insurgency (which broke out in March 1821). But the author's own revolutionary sympathies did not extend to accepting and protecting—let alone setting free—a viable Hellenism for the modern Greeks. Greeks populated Marcellus's memoirs but they always had to prove themselves: they had to be sufficiently classical to counterbalance the Orientalist image associated with them and also to be deserving of Western support. Modern Greeks had to prove that, within a short time span and through contact with Western intellectuals like Marcellus, they could become as classical as the 'civilised' Western Europeans had supposedly been for centuries. Unfortunately, the Greeks internalised these normative standards: they incorporated them in their definition of Neohellenic patriotism, which drove the nation-building project for another full century (1821-1922). It was precisely this demanding ethos, infused with Orientalist hostility against the Turks, that the clandestine reading of Aeschylus's *Persians* captured. Resurrecting grand, moral tragedy was the act of resurrecting the classical fatherland and of having tragedy serve the Enlightenment ideals of liberty, virtue, education, and (nationalistic) patriotism. The *Persians* of 472 BCE became the revolutionary charter myth that bespoke Greek victory over Eastern enemies: in 1820, it foretold victory as an event-to-be, with the past entering the modern performance as a view of the imminent future, with analogy growing into manifest destiny.

The Greek intelligentsia of the 1810s and 1820s, or the exponents of the Greek intellectual renaissance, realized that classical antiquity held the key to the West's commitment to its struggle for autonomy. From the new nation's onset, Greek national consciousness was embedded also in the West's construction of the East, or in Orientalism. The budding performance of 1820 further revealed the Western European predilection for 'spontaneous revivals' of Greek tragedy. A true rhetorical strategist, Marcellus belaboured the 'heroic' performance of the *Persians* before his readership at home,

raised on neoclassical French drama and revolutionary plays. The Greek revival of Aeschylus reaffirmed the familiar, the ancient text, to the educated West, which styled itself as liberal and philhellene. But when up against Greek advances to buy the Venus (with the purpose of keeping her in Constantinople), Marcellus could not fathom the full scope of the modern Greeks' nationalist ethos. Even in the purview of French Enlightenment liberalism, the elite Greek circles of Constantinople could not legitimately claim to be able to safeguard the Venus. With contrived 'objectivity,' Marcellus responded to the 'need' to subject the Venus to French protection. It hardly occurred to him that, like the Greeks' rehearsal of the *Persians*, their wish to keep the Venus statue, too, was about investing in the nation's future.

Marcellus's stories mark entire trends, not singular moments or isolated behaviours, in the cultural encounters between philhellenism and Orientalism. The case of Marcellus warns the student of history and culture to be wary of Eurocentric dichotomies and imperialist agendas—both then and now. The Frenchman's records, therefore, compel us to scrutinise our methodological approaches to (phil)hellenism and Orientalism and to their role in the nineteenth-century evolution of classical scholarship and intellectual history at large. The West and the Orient were far from closed entities, and our study can help us comprehend how they interrelated by examining processes of exchange, diplomacy, commerce, and even complicity. Further insights into the shades of historical differentiation can certainly be gauged from Greece's stance in the fraught encounter between West and East. A detailed analysis of Greece's position in the first decades of the nineteenth century (paying critical attention to the cultural dimensions of its burgeoning nationalism) enhances our understanding of West-East frictions and also deepens the questions posed of modern Greek culture and Classical Studies. These questions are not simply of a topical but also of ideological and even of (academic) disciplinary relevance. It is time to acknowledge Classics' own preconceived notions, that is, the politics and morality of our scholarly pursuits.

Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism* (1978), still stands as a provocative beginning in this hermeneutic context: it is not a tried and true endpoint but spurs further research and cultural critique. Marcellus's records complement, nuance, and differentiate what Said has laid out. They do so by focusing on ideas in discourse, images, imaginings, and representations in literature, travel writing, and diplomatic reporting, but also on archaeological and collecting practices and on the historicisation of such practices against a backdrop of local tensions. Marcellus's treasure hunt (a practice which his elite French contemporaries encouraged) must make us question the depth of his philhellenism and the extent to which philhellenism associated with French imperialism. Therefore, the notion of Hellenism, in forms still practiced by classicists, needs to be scrutinised for its role in supporting the imperialist and colonialist discourse.² Marcellus's sense of identification with the Greek revolutionaries generated a patronising depiction of their nationalism. His careful framing of his memories, too, in his dramatising (and exoticising) conception of modern Greek receptions of classical texts, was tainted by Orientalism. In a paternalistic manner, the Frenchman had the modern Greeks play at being ancients rather than Europeans. He remained doubtful about the Greeks' lasting momentum for throwing off their Oriental bondage. He painted the Turks, however, with the thicker Orientalist brush, leaving them without hope of ever being anything other than Easterners. For him, the Ottoman 'tyranny' was defined by all that the West perceived as lacking in the East: liberty, progress, rationality, humane conduct, or the values seen as germane to Western morality and civilisation. Marcellus's philhellenism was thus configured at the nexus of imperialist politics, Orientalist fantasies, and the Western 'civilising mission' to pull Greece out of the "emptiness" of Asia.³ The Frenchman kept up the pretence of contributing to knowledge while, in fact, he contributed to the politics of knowledge—and power (to tap into Said's Foucauldian perspective on the Orientalist discourse). Significantly, the Western European intelligentsia saw all of his acts as contributions to the fields of Hellenism and Classics, whereas, in essence, they contributed to the growth and strength of Orientalism.

In the person of Marcellus, whose classical training was extensive, we gain a kaleidoscopic perspective on how the discipline of Classics has fuelled West-East power relations, even though Classics developed the tools and methods to comprehend antiquity, the classical tradition, and Hellenism in more ambivalent and complex ways. Powerbrokers with a classical training such as Marcellus have perpetrated their own kind of colonialism of Greece under the cover of 'liberating Hellenism,' of saving a land, its treasure, and its culture from 'peril,' as much as the Venus de Milo or the Elgin Marbles needed to be salvaged. The themes of peril, rescue, or escape are central to my analysis: Marcellus presents the 'purchase' of the Venus as a necessary abduction of the statue, which is whisked off to the safety and civilisation of Paris. His memoirs, however, point up the distinction between classical traces that were still physically rooted in Greek soil and those that were not, or the dialogue/rivalry between archaeology and philology.⁴ For Marcellus, the Venus statue had to be salvaged from the 'preying' Greeks and the 'destructive' Turks alike, even though its 'barbarian' site of origin was Greek. With wilful blindness, the Frenchman claimed to have recovered the sculpture not from a remote Aegean island but from an East embalmed in 'backward' and 'intolerant' traditions. The text of Aeschylus's *Persians*, on the other hand, had long made its safe escape and could, in the 1820 reading, be subjected to a non-material (but still unequal) exchange of knowledge and ideology. Marcellus deliberately Orientalised the geographical domain that was the 'theatre' of his operations during the years of Greece's transition from occupied Ottoman territory to modern nation-state. The philhellene's words and deeds revealed blatant inconsistencies in the face of real power and opportunity.

It was Herodotus who first drew the demarcation line between Greeks and 'barbarians,' and he served as an ancient mentor to Marcellus. Herodotus, however, did not colour his distinction in negative terms but was driven by a fascination with foreign cultures and became one of the first travellers in the Middle East. Marcellus followed in the footsteps of modern travellers to the Orient and shared in the curiosity that impelled Herodotus, but constantly revealed how much intellectual baggage he was bringing along. The traveller/

treasure hunter often gave himself away, as in the episode I cite at the opening of my book:

When...Marcellus...went looking for the presumed school of Homer on the island of Chios, he asked some local women for directions, but to no avail. He recalls, "when I persisted and asked about the seat of Homer, they answered me in all seriousness that Omer Pasha, whenever he came to Chios, seldom removed himself that far from the city; and that, in any case, he would sit only on rugs." (1)

Ancient and modern, Hellenism and Orientalism clash in Marcellus's recollections, urging us to rethink the old binaries and especially the prejudices attached to them. The Frenchman placed local matters before the eyes of the Western, classically-trained elite. Perhaps more strongly: his stories put local matters on the world stage of the West's perception of Greece. His microcosm reflected what was happening on the grand geopolitical and ideological scale of the first decades of the nineteenth century. His constructs and dramatisations warn us that the writing of adventures became the adventure of writing. Local women from Chios, an island on the very frontiers of West and East, served Marcellus with a reminder that the Classics' focus of Hellenism was not indigenous to their lands, and that Greeks, Turks, Armenians, Jews, Arabs, and others had been preoccupied, rather, with staking out a living that was conditioned by present challenges, not by past glories. Hellenism *without* the West-East dichotomy was one of experience-on-the-ground, daily needs and predicaments, and cross-cultural exchanges, which reckoned with the true realities of the nineteenth-century Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. In the fervour of the revolutionary years, however, a binary thinking about the 'sullen,' 'violent,' and 'tyrannical' Eastern enemy came to serve all parties: the Greek revolutionaries of 1821 and also Russia, France, and Britain, which could only reluctantly be convinced to join the struggle 'for the cause of the Christian Greeks.' The Great Powers, however, were more motivated by Greece's antiquity than by the fate of the 'earliest Christians.' Greece's very existence as a modern nation was thus 'owed' to its classical past. Revolution entailed a revolving back to past history, a tenacious investment in cultural, linguistic, and ethnic continuity, and a fierce denial of racial mixing.

Consequently, modern Greece came about as a restorative act, a purification process that could never viably claim to be entirely pure, let alone disinterested. Because ancient Greece had never been a country, this restorative act focused on Athens, which became metonymic for all of Greece. The decades-long process of fervent Athenocentrism hampered the development of the rest of the modern country. My hope is that more detailed analyses of West-East exchanges and travels, such as those captured in Marcellus's memoirs, will discourage the binary thinking that has served political and military causes for far too long, and that they will bring the focus back on the intricacies of co-existence in what has been one of the most culturally diverse regions of the world through the ages. The study of the complexities of Marcellus's acts, thoughts, writings, and fictions may help us move beyond our renewed, twenty-first-century tendency to engage in binary posturing. We must, rather, commit to the dialogism, the hybridity, and the syncretism (to use Tziouvas's terms) that have been catalyst impulses within historical Hellenism—and make the effort to first notice them. Here is then where Classics can show its strengths and where the reception of Classics in Modern Greek Studies and Modern Greek Studies *per se* have important roles to fulfil: attempting to respond to persistent questions and ideological limitations and reductions with creative interpretations fortified by both diachronic and lateral reflections. Together, these fields can keep the axis of Hellenism and Orientalism in a productive tension.⁵ Personally, I take an expansive view on the malleable and contested notion of Hellenism, shedding its tendencies to sanitise or romanticise. I advocate for a healthy, corrective dose of 'unbinding Hellenism,' in interpreting modern Greece without relating it constantly to what I recognize from my studies of classical antiquity. I value modern Greece on its own terms (and wish that I could forever discard the qualifier 'modern' in such a statement). Focusing on the liveable present of contemporary Greece in its own right helps me to distance myself from a Hellenism that has pivoted on the useable past. I value performances of Greek drama, in particular, as reflections of issues of social, ethnic, or political identity; the study of the modern Greek performance tradition offers tools that point to the fault lines of the master narratives of

Hellenism. At times, that ‘unbinding’ of Hellenism (from mainstream topics and readings and also from the grasp of rigorously defined academic disciplines) becomes a deconstructionist ‘unleashing of Hellenism,’ as when I speak out about some of the most controversial periods in Greek history: the dictatorship and, *a priori*, the Civil War and its aftermath (see further my response to question 7).

E.M & A.M.: To press this question a bit more, *can* Hellenism be understood without the East, without Orientalism? Or is that an unproductive, even invalid question, because there’s never been a ‘pure’ Hellenism of solely Greek composition? (Nor would we want such a pure Hellenism, might be the natural rejoinder to this question. Wasn’t it the eighteenth century and then later the Germans who gave us this ultimately dangerous notion of a pure Hellenism?)

G.V.S.: Hellenism shored up its identity in situations of challenge and conflict and, as soon as these conditions recur, West-East antitheses are back in full force. It is, therefore, hard to understand Hellenism as severed from the East and Orientalism. Even the ‘pure’ Hellenism of Hitler and, to some extent, Metaxas (reigned Greece 1936-1941) was predicated on its juxtaposition with and hostility toward other cultures (including anti-Semitism, which was, however, far less prominent in Greece’s interwar fascism). The special focus of Hitler and Metaxas on Sparta stands as a potent reminder that militarism necessarily breeds its opposite and that, therefore, Hellenism can hardly ever be called ‘pure.’

The ancient Greeks had set the military boundaries between Europe and Asia and perceived the Persian Wars as a conflict between two forces that were different mainly in numbers (with the Greeks being at a huge disadvantage). For Herodotus, the Asian forces were not inferior but daunting and their customs were intriguing. He described a struggle for resources in which self-serving pettiness was common to all, but admitted that the Greek responsibility for the conflict’s outbreak was actually greater. When, however, Hellenism grew to better define itself (starting already in the fourth century BCE), it found the archetypal enemy in this early fifth-century

BCE conflict and gladly drew up analogies with the Trojan War (of mythical times), Alexander's conquest of the East (during the decade prior to his death in 323 BCE), the fall of Constantinople (1453), and the Greek Revolution (1821). Western travellers surprised the Greeks by 'othering' them, too, and lumping them in with the exotic and feminised Orient. As a country stirring itself for its national uprising, however, Greece needed to shed these biases and it went along promulgating the East's hostility as a perennial constant. The concern with classical antiquity prompted Western Europe to lend its cooperation to the Greek cause, which was redefined as the cause of Western civilisation, Christian religion, and Enlightenment rationalism. Because Greece's struggle for independence became the cause of the West, it spurred renewed interest in the racial purity of the Greeks and in the origins, successes, and failures of the fundamentally different state systems of ancient Athens (democracy) and Sparta (militaristic oligarchy).⁶

In the context of the growing acknowledgment of *ancient* Greek culture's hybridity, let me cite here a recent discussion in *The Guardian*, initiated by Charlotte Higgins, in dialogue with some of the leading scholars on the subject (11 July 2013). Higgins's article is entitled "Ancient Greece, the Middle East and an ancient cultural internet: The ancient Greek world is being recast from an isolated entity to one of many hybrid cultures in Africa and in the East." She states, in words that apply to changing perceptions of nineteenth-century Hellenism as well (and why it should not be understood without reference to the East):

[T]here is a fresh urgency, according to [Tim] Whitmarsh and like-minded scholars, to the study of the classical world's relationships with what is now the Middle East, and the new approaches are significantly different from those offered in the past. Access to newly discovered or newly available texts is allowing classicists to reframe the terms of engagement between cultures: less a one-way importation, followed by transformation and "perfection" of the original influences, and more a dialogue, or an "intertwining" as Johannes Haubold, professor of Greek at Durham University, puts it.

So, instead of the study of ancient Greece being predicated on its uniqueness--its isolated, exceptional and untouchable brilliance--some scholars are recasting the Greek world (and, in different ways, the Roman world) as part of a series of networked cultures in multivoiced conversation with the lands lying east and south of the Mediterranean.

E.M. & A.M.: In *Liberating Hellenism* the story of Venus de Milo aptly symbolises the ambiguous relationship between Greece and Western Europe, merging Hellenism with Orientalism. To what extent is this ambivalence still part of the baggage of Hellenism? Also, do you think that Marcellus' 'double vision' of Greece, desire and contempt, admiration and denigration, reveals a pattern persisting in narratives and representations of post-independence Greece and the Greeks even today?

G.V.S.: Marcellus is driven by an overwhelming desire to own the Venus, to take the statue with him, and to arrange for its transport to Paris, where it will be protected from "certain demise." This sexually charged possessiveness, thinly disguised as a concern for the classical Greek legacy, ruins a valuable friendship and jeopardises a network of diplomatic relations. Moreover, the Frenchman covers up important parts of the truth as much as possible, because truth might just get in the way of a good story.⁷ Thus Marcellus's proclaimed Hellenism unmasks itself as an Orientalism eager to lump nascent Greece back into the inert, dangerous, and corrupt mass of the Ottoman Empire. In the West's predatory view, Greece is a treasure trove betokened by the Venus's sexualised matter-reality. Marcellus's memoirs illustrate the international chase for antiquities, which still fuels hostile standoffs between West and East. Ironically, too, in today's Western perception of the ongoing Greek economic and financial crisis, the Orientalist outlook again holds much currency. The Greeks are all too often portrayed as the poor brothers of the Balkans, who cannot get their act—to let alone their economic affairs—together without Western-style, even German-style discipline. Greece is constantly being discussed in terms of the Western (re)solution. Some pundits have blamed Eastern-style attitudes among the Greeks in their search for the causes underlying the crisis. The 'double vision' of the 'superior' Marcellus, the vision of admiration and hard-nosed denigration, is indeed still prevalent today and has been for the past decades. After the 1967 military coup, for instance, some foreign newspapers declared that the Greek government was not unique in the region for resorting to violent tactics and that, in the spectrum of 'Southern' history, the terror in Greece was not as ruthless or widespread as, for instance, in Argentina

(culminating in its dictatorship of 1976-1983, known as the Dirty War). Others presented modern Greece as less deserving of a democratic state system simply because its people had failed too many times to keep up this tradition 'inherited' from Golden Age Athens. A controversial voice in this debate was David Holden, whose 1972 book, *Greece without Columns: The Making of the Modern Greeks*, pointed to flaws in the Greek national character to explain a history of social and political instability. In its own patronising ways, the West expected the Greeks to draw on their classical past as a deep cultural resource for stabilising their country—or regarded the classical past as the country's only stable foundation. Thus many outsiders have reduced the Greeks to the role of actors on a stage to be watched and have barely let them be agents or authors in their own right.

E.M. & A.M.: Is your analysis of Marcellus's appropriation of the Venus de Milo—an object of desire, a rhetorical feminine emblem, a collector's prize—also proposing the gendering of Hellenism, not just of Orientalism?

G.V.S.: Yes, Marcellus is quick to make the Venus a desirable female captive from an occupied land. His dramatisation of his conquest of the Venus gains from the practice of gendering Hellenism. As an 'endangered' statue, the Venus fits the 'female-in-peril' trope, a phrase coined by Angela Pao to denote an Orientalist commonplace. It suited Marcellus well to apply this trope to the Venus and thus to cover up the traces of his own treasure hunting at the expense of a humiliated and feminised Greece. For Marcellus/Pygmalion, the statue nearly comes to life as a sexually attractive woman: his gendering of the Greek context surrounding and suffocating the statue takes on very detailed, possessive, and at times graphic traits. His act of writing up the adventure was a form of displaying his trophy against the contrastive backdrop of the rest of Greece and the East. The Venus was the female in danger, awaiting rescue, but so was the classical Greek culture she represented and which the West was again eager to appropriate. Hellenism was thus be subjugated, conquered, and possessed (in the passive-physical as well as in the symbolic sense). If France would not be making spectacular military or colonial conquests again soon (after Napoleon's defeat), at least it

had scored a victory in the manly Marcellus's acquisition of the Venus. The will to conquer, to make a virulent conquest, deflates the perception of opponents, rendering them physically and morally weak. Marcellus guiltlessly feminised and sexualised Greece as well as the Orient. The image of Greece rising comes with a foreboding of the country's lasting vulnerable status.

E.M. & A.M.: You write that the relatively unknown figure of Marcellus gave you a mode for addressing 'the post-9/11 conflict and media coverage' about the West and East. In a wider sense, do you find that studying Hellenism, far from being an obscure or 'merely' historical topic, is useful for understanding the ongoing conflicts between the U.S. and Western Europe and the Middle East?

G.V.S.: Let me keep this answer short, given that I have already addressed part of this topic in my response to question 1. Indeed, I argue that there is a tremendous amount of knowledge to be gained from the study of cultural exchanges of a diverse range between West and East, which tell us far more than military standoffs, political treaties, or trade negotiations. Marcellus's stories crystallise those exchanges for me, and strike home that enigma does not lie in the East but in the Western observer as subject. As a little appendix to this topic, let me state how much I benefited from reading Evgenia Sifaki's essay, which persuasively discusses the guiding themes of subjectivity, observation, and dramatisation in Cavafy's poems that reflect on the axes Greek-barbarian-philhellene. Cavafy offers us pointed cues of where subjectivity lies and of the forces that propel dramatisation.

E.M. & A.M.: Your most recent scholarship has been excavating the history of performance in Greece in the twentieth century, in eras little-known to readers outside of Greece: the 1946-1949 Greek Civil War and the 1967-1974 rule of the military junta. What have you learned about Hellenism from that research? Has this research uncovered new discoveries about Hellenism, or helped you clarify or complicate the history of Hellenism?

G.V.S.: The common thread in my work is performance in times of crisis in Greece. This leads me to ask questions about the choices that playwrights, stage directors, actors, and audiences make and about the liberties afforded to them. It also takes me to topics and methods that are off the beaten track, whether in Classics or in Theatre Studies. Your metaphor of ‘excavating the history of performance in Greece’ is very apt: the trajectory of my research has been a long but exciting trail of discovery in Greek libraries, archives, newspaper holdings, private collections, etc., with no certainty about what any given day might bring. I need to constantly draw and redraw my conclusions, because nothing is manifest to the naked eye, so to speak; working from certain preconceptions would do more damage than good. That, too, has been a healthy process. I have thus covered the Greek reception of Aristophanes, whose work I read as a platform for ideological clashes in Greece’s nineteenth and twentieth-century history and politics (*Venom in Verse*); the ancient tragedies that were produced by the political prisoners of the Greek Civil War (late 1940s through 1950s) (*Theatre of the Condemned*); and the staged reading of Aeschylus’s *Persians* that had to prepare and rehearse revolution in 1820 (*Liberating Hellenism*). My current project (tentatively entitled *Stage of Emergency*) delves into politicised productions of both ancient and modern Greek drama that were mounted during the military dictatorship, with a special focus on how state censorship tried but failed to curtail ‘unpredictable’ performance.

The main lessons that I have been able to draw from these research projects is that Greece has gone through an excruciatingly long history of exorcising the demons of Hellenism and that the discipline of Classics has not been of much help in this process. The twentieth-century history of Hellenism has seen challenging episodes in the right-wing authoritarianism of the 1940s and in the ultra-right-wing rule of the military junta, with both regimes reinventing an antiquated form of Hellenism. This stilted and at times suffocating Hellenism centred on the glories of fifth-century BCE Athens, replete with its military victories over evil Eastern enemies, but kept ignoring the need for social and political reforms in a rapidly modernising Greece, where such reforms were long overdue. These hyperpoliticised forms

of a revamped but still born Hellenism caused a tremendous amount of cultural and political damage, ruining lives, families, and (micro-) economies. My study of the seven-year junta period allows me to demonstrate also how the stifling Hellenism of the so-called Colonels was being undermined by the flexible, outward-looking Hellenism of the growing numbers of young people who joined youth and student movements and rebelled for the cause of personal and collective freedom with protest actions inspired by May 1968. This generation adopted Che Guevara as a cultural and political champion and zealously applied the Latin American freedom struggle to the Greek predicament. Already during and after the Civil War, however, and again under the dictatorship, the Greek Left fought back with and recovered a classical tradition of its own, in which theatre production opened up a path toward an alternative, dialogic type of discourse (often invoking the dissident value of iconic tragic heroes such as Aeschylus's Prometheus and Sophocles's Antigone). It took long and arduous work for Greek left-wing intellectuals of the twentieth century to re-establish the classical tradition as a *critical* tradition, but their endeavours have met with success. Sometimes, the Left had to face its internal critics, as when Aris Alexandrou launched his virulent critique of the dogmatic Left in his own, trenchant adaptation of Sophocles's *Antigone*—an act of iconoclastic Hellenism but Hellenism no less. I am constantly struck by the richness of the receptions (a deliberate plural form) of the classics in modern Greece. Greece deserves a place at the core of Reception Studies, in that the Greeks have always been rethinking and reusing the ancient legacy, and did so long before it became fashionable. I aim to make contributions in this area, with studies that open windows on these ongoing dialectics but that remain readable for specialists in diverse fields and also for the general public, which will discover how much Hellenism is still present in our daily intellectual exchanges. Possessing some knowledge of the history of Hellenism has simply become essential for anyone who keeps hearing about Greece in the day's news bulletin. This daily focus on Greece has pushed the country in a (reluctant) paradigmatic role once again: currently, the West is watching Greece as if it were an on-going laboratory experiment, whose economic and

political outcomes will help the West—again—to determine how to proceed when similar crises occur in other European Union countries or in the global economy. Greece and Hellenism are no longer exclusively scholarly pursuits but are as current as today's news headlines. Greece not only invites us but forces us to think of Hellenism as constitutive of a global, transnational world.

E.M. & A.M.: What predictions or hopes do you have for the future of Hellenic studies? What do you think still needs to be investigated? What questions have been left unexplored? It seems to us that in *Liberating Hellenism* you suggest a cross-disciplinary and transnational Hellenism, an opening up of the term so to speak, as many of the essays in this issue of *Synthesis* also do.

G.V.S.: Hellenic Studies and Modern Greek Studies have worked long and hard to establish the kind of interdisciplinarity that these fields deserve and that keeps enriching them. My hope is that the discipline will be able to sustain this commitment even in times when academic departments shrink and tenure-track lines disappear, and while departments in Greece fend off perhaps the greatest possible threats to their existence. The *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, for instance, is a stellar example of such a sustained commitment to interdisciplinary approaches.

Personally, I feel that the area of theatre and performance has remained underexplored. Theatre and performance are not addressed in some of the most prominent comprehensive studies of modern Greek literature. While Greek-language monographs on Greek theatre are numerous, the paucity of studies in the English language remains striking. I encourage Greek scholars to publish more of their work in English or in other modern languages, to broaden the dialogue across cultures. Theatre and performance are also ideally positioned to spawn interdisciplinarity, given that stage practitioners and audiences bring their own histories, literatures, and ideologies to bear on play production. I would also like to see more research done in fields such as Greek photography, installation art, Museum Studies, international heritage preservation, and other subjects that veer off from the mainstream but that

prove to be the perfect media for a more globalising outlook. Lastly, I am mindful of the intense interest that many Chinese students and scholars take in Greek culture, ancient and modern alike. Now the responsibility rests with all of us to not make the same mistakes again and to enable a truly transnational dialogue on Hellenism.

July 2013

¹ Unfortunately, Comte de Marcellus does not feature in the newest study on French travel literature of the first half of the nineteenth century by C. W. Thompson, an insightful and eloquent book which I would have liked to consult if it had been available sooner. Thompson claims that Chateaubriand's "wish for quick results...made him abandon exploration" (22), and that this superficiality affected the popular travelogue *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem* (*Itinerary from Paris to Jerusalem*, 1811), the story of Chateaubriand's trip of 1806. Marcellus was a huge admirer (and relative) of Chateaubriand but was the better explorer, even though some of the true facts behind his tales may remain elusive. It is hard to deduce, for instance, what is and what is not construed about his "record" of the 1820 reading of Aeschylus's *Persians* in prerevolutionary circles of Constantinople. Thompson places us on the alert about Marcellus's model, and perhaps his warnings pertain to our Frenchman as well: "his [Chateaubriand's] taste for presenting himself elsewhere as the last to see some disappearing spectacle or world was a psychologically satisfying shift in circumstances where he could not claim to be the first on the spot" (23). In addition, Thompson raises some key points about French Romantic travel writing, which he calls a fashion or a "sub-genre" that was far more prominent in France than in Germany or Britain: many French artists and writers experienced their lives as wanderings or quests, and they were deeply concerned with recording these experiences in actual books, the publication process of which they cared to oversee.

² This gives us all the more reasons to study Hellenism, colonialism, and postcolonialism in tandem, with an excellent example provided in this issue by Lara Owoeye on the *Tegonmi* play of Femi Osofisan. This paper invites us to think about the Hellenism that different groups have used as a tool for self-formation and emancipation, without being dictated by an imperialist discourse. For a recent collection of illuminating perspectives on British classicism and imperialism, see the volume edited by Mark Bradley.

³ "To Asia are given the feelings of emptiness, loss, and disaster" (Said 56).

⁴ Stathis Gourgouris discusses the "anti-Hellenic" solution of the Western philhellene in more general terms (139, 151). He distinguishes between the "explicit" philhellenism that was enthralled with ancient "ruins and legends" and the philhellenism that sought a "contemporary resurrection of ancient traces" (139). It is this line of thought that allows Gourgouris to equate philhellenism with Orientalism and, therefore, with antihellenic tendencies. In my view, his distinction can productively be expanded by the more clear-cut difference between the ancient vestiges that were, in the early nineteenth century, still rooted in Greek earth and

those that had come to be of a 'metaphorical' nature (in the double meaning of the word). Both artifacts ('archaeology') and texts (philology) excited the traveling philhellene, but sculpture could still be unearthed and exported from emerging Greece (urgently and forcibly, if necessary), whereas most texts, long uncovered, exerted not a present and material but a symbolic impact. In other words, Marcellus saw the Venus as an artifact but not Aeschylus's tragedy. His praxis of collecting material fragments, however, does intersect with his collecting of thoughts and experiences based on texts. The 'discovery' of the classical texts was known to be a shining achievement of the Western Renaissance. The bulk of the texts was already in 'safe' Western possession in their physical form as Byzantine manuscripts. The classical literary corpus was no longer contested (material) property, unlike the many artifacts that were shipped off under politically contentious circumstances. By the 1820s, texts were perceived to be portable to and from any location and were thus disassociated from the Greek lands. Printed editions had made them into reproducible repositories of Western knowledge (be it knowledge inevitably reduced or distorted by its compression). In the best case scenario, texts could be restored or, ironically, 'imported' to the Greek lands, not as manuscripts, but as book manuals for sharing knowledge. The discrepancy between Marcellus's treatment of treasure versus text also touches on the transdisciplinary question of the objectivity of 'scientific' archaeology versus the (stated) subjectivity of philology. The Frenchman's account lets the reader gauge how and where the prestige-driven Orientalist mode of archaeology (or, rather, counter-archaeology) met the record of the text-based interpretation, which made the representational *tour de force* of the Venus story serve as a rationale agreeable to the West.

⁵ David Roessel (in this special issue) shows how the West placed pressures on the representation of the East and illustrates the personal, literary, and ideological conflicts arising from such pressures (in the person and work of Byron). As with Marcellus's stories and constructs, so we see one work of Byron comment on or invert the other and generate the kind of friction with which Western rebels and ideologues grappled.

⁶ I very much enjoyed reading Eleni Andriakaina's article, which centers on the question of who owned the Greek Revolution of 1821. She observes that actual freedom fighters as well as Westerners eagerly claimed ownership of the cause.

⁷ Philippe Jockey, too, highlights the extent of Marcellus's myth-making on the subject of the 'purchase' of the Venus. His recent chapter, entitled "The Venus de Milo: Genesis of a Modern Myth," is part of a brand-new collective volume on archaeology in the Ottoman Empire, *Scramble for the Past: A Story of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire, 1753-1914*.

Works Cited

Bradley, Mark, ed. *Classics and Imperialism in the British Empire*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2010.

Gourgouris, Stathis. *Dream Nation: Enlightenment, Colonization, and the Institution of Modern Greece*, Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996.

- Higgins, Charlotte. "Ancient Greece, the Middle East and an ancient cultural internet: The ancient Greek world is being recast from an isolated entity to one of many hybrid cultures in Africa and in the East." *The Guardian*, 11 July 2013. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2013/jul/11/ancient-greece-cultural-hybridisation-theory>. 22 July 2013.
- Holden, David. *Greece without Columns: The Making of the Modern Greeks*. London: Faber & Faber, 1972.
- Jockey, Phillipe. "The Venus de Milo: Genesis of a Modern Myth." *Scramble for the Past: A Story of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire, 1753-1914*. Ed. Zainab Bahrani, Zeynep Çelik and Edhem Eldem. Istanbul: SALT Galata, 2011.
- Pao, Angela. *The Orient of the Boulevards: Exoticism, Empire, and Nineteenth-century French Theater*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1998.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Random House, 1979.
- Thompson, C. W. *French Romantic Travel Writing: Chateaubriand to Nerval*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012.
- Tziovas, Dimitris. "Beyond the Acropolis: Rethinking Neohellenism." *The Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 19.2 (2001): 189-220.
- Van Steen, Gonda. *Liberating Hellenism from the Ottoman Empire: Comte de Marcellus and the Last of the Classics*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010.
- . *Theatre of the Condemned: Classical Tragedy on Greek Prison Islands*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011.
- . *Venom in Verse: Aristophanes in Modern Greece*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000.