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Interview with Kostas Peroulis

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Interview with Kostas Peroulis

by
Chryssa Marinou

Chryssa Marinou: Kostas, thank you for agreeing to do this. I would first like to ask you about your studies in comparative literature. Do you find that your studies are in some way related to what you do?

Kostas Peroulis: Well, when I first decided to start writing with the aim of publishing, I was a career lawyer. I had graduated from Law School, so, I looked for an organised —a scientific so to speak— manner of exploring the nature of writing. I enrolled in the comparative literature MA programme of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, which was doing a lot of serious work at the time. It was then that I met Kostas Spatharakis, my publisher; in fact, we have known each other before he became a publisher. Overall, the MA programme brought me into contact with people who are now part of a significant community.

C.M.: Your stories in *Automata*, read as if you've done a significant amount of research prior to the writing. Would you like to share a few things about that? How exactly did you do it in terms of method? Have you interviewed different professionals or perhaps followed some other course?

K.P.: Yes, there were a lot of interviews. Apart from the extensive online research, I would say that for more than half of the professions, I actually talked to somebody who practiced the profession or used to. I think that, in a way, this, kind of, saved the day. The fact that I had access to several people was immensely helpful.

C.M.: Your stories seem to contain some kind of archival work; I mean that each professional is shown in a manner that salvages certain things about the realities of labour, your stories have some documentary value. The “labour event,” if I may use this phrase, comes across so powerfully in your writing, that it transcends the narrative as such.

K.P.: Well, in these interviews I tried to capture the “soul” of each job. One might say that if I had talked to a different set of people, I would have got different answers. But what I was really interested in was people’s blind spots about their jobs, what they failed to see; they would often refrain from offering information about things that disturbed them and this is when I knew I had to push...The worker that wishes to break free from the working class in an effort to become middle class has difficulty speaking about the adverse conditions that enfold manual labour. Likewise, the male escort shuns the image that society has of him, that kind of thing. And then I certainly needed the technical details which are very important in order to get a feel for the psychological profile of each profession. Among dozens of details which would often be over-technical and uninteresting, I had to select those that would be structural to personality and psychology. One of the aims of the book, as it developed, was to portray labour as a metaphor of the self.

C.M.: I see. And how did you come to choose the specific professions?

K.P.: Initially, there was no agenda. I slowly realised though that my selection was basically “old” professions; there is no “new” profession, there is no manager or physical instructor in the book. These “timeless” professions reinforced a somewhat anthropological subtext; the book deals with the nature of labour and these professions broadened its scope towards the collective, detaching it from the level of a few realist personal stories.

C.M.: Yet, there is only one profession from the primary sector, agriculture, and one from the secondary sector, industry, or at least what we used to know as industry in Greece. My impression is that this, in a manner, reflects the realities of production, and the fact that services, the tertiary sector, have taken up most of the space in the economy.

K.P.: Well, I guess that in the case of Greece this is accurate, you are probably right. When I had already finished nine out of the ten stories —the lawyer was not yet there— I realised that I wished to discuss labour and hadn’t included a kind of traditional, “social” profession. I mean I had written the story of the civil engineer,

but I felt it wasn't enough. Why? Evidently, the situation is more or less as you describe it. In fact, the solderer starts as a factory worker and gradually moves to contracted labour in ships, that is to say, from industry he moves on to services.

C.M.: Okay, the other thing I wanted to highlight is that what comes across as the book's theme—leaving the narrator of the tenth story aside— is nine different takes on the labor experience under capitalism. In your opinion, is the book about nine different experiences, or would you say that capitalism is read as a rather unified condition that tends to have a similar impact on the working subject?

K.P.: Well, I would go for the second. The very nature of each job enfolds different processes and different paths, but the effect of capitalism on the subject is always the same. All my characters commodify their labour and at the same time are deeply engaged in what they do. For instance, the solderer takes pride in his work, he is ambitious and proud to be hired to repair the most severe damage of the least accessible areas in the ships. To my mind, this is the way capitalism works, in terms of labour. My characters are not really automata in the classic sense of the term, they always try to escape their impasses, build careers, make money etc., while in fact there are many workers out there who have become true automata. I think that capitalism is winning in exactly that; building a consciousness for the worker who in turn tries to find interest in what they do. Today automation has ceased to mean just alienation, even delivery workers—which is probably one of the worst jobs around—will attempt to find something that intrigues them while riding their motorbike.

C.M.: Isn't that an immanent tendency of the human being, the will to resist?

K.P.: I agree that it is a salient human feature, but I also think that capitalism has reinforced it in order to assimilate, internalise, and take advantage of it. I really think the book can be read both ways. Part of the critical reception of the book was right-wing, arguing that the characters should be read as embedded in neoliberal economy, struggling, trying to make a profit for themselves, etc. So, I really believe the baggage you carry plays a role: for instance, I grew up in an upper-middle class home where work ethic was extremely significant. I think that, in a way, the trace of such ethics is to be found in my book.

C.M.: Who do you like to read?

K.P.: The authors who lured me into literature were modernists, Kafka and Beckett were seminal to me, also Joyce, Musil. I am still trying to cut loose from this

paradigm, but I think my book, which, with few exceptions, was received as absolutely realist, is embedded in the modernist tradition. These days, I greatly appreciate [Michel] Houellebecq, I think he is the most important author to me right now. Plus, the original idea about professions comes from him. Houellebecq offers an interesting mixture of social realism, the French tradition of Balzac, combined with the core of Camus's writing. There is always an existentialist core when he depicts the western subject in the social context.

C.M.: I am happy to hear that. I would argue that you engage in a kind of re-modern writing.

K.P.: Absolutely, I think so too.

C.M.: I also get the impression that "On All Fours," with its focus on sex work, stands as a metonymy for all other professions in the book. Is this the reason why it is the penultimate one —followed only by the story of the writer?

K.P.: What do you mean?

C.M.: I thought that, following the Marxian and Benjaminian strand, we may infer that all hired labour becomes prostitution. In other words, the sex worker is the Ur-form of the wage labourer.

K.P.: Well, that's a very interesting observation, but I never thought of it that way. The story's positioning in the end —the writer is indeed sort of "beyond" the book— was rather instinctive. I really thought about whether I should be using a male or female sex worker. When I started to research the industry, I was overwhelmed; you wouldn't believe the cynicism of transactions, and trust me, I am not foreign to pornographic writing. It was absolutely terrifying. When I arranged the meeting with the sex worker, he insisted of course on being paid for his time, even though he wouldn't perform sexual services. Yet, in the end, instead of charging me one hundred and twenty euros for the two hours we spent together, I only had to pay sixty. He was also adamant that I had to give him an excellent review, which I kind of protested because I would have had to write on his sexual performance, so I wouldn't know what to write about. His very ironic and appropriate response was along the lines of: "Make something up, you are a writer!" So, for them, all that is part of their marketing. Still. I was lucky because he was a true professional; many people do it for three or four months and then stop when they find better work. He had absolute control of everything, he reminded you of a business executive.

C.M.: To move for a second to your writing for the cinema: the script for Alexandros Avranas's *Miss Violence* (2013) thematically shared some common ground with Giannis Economides' *Stratos* (2014). Both families force their underage children to prostitution; in *Miss Violence* the father sexually abuses and sells his children and, in fact, that is his only source of income. In *Stratos*, the mother of the little girl, a part-time prostitute herself, is about to sell her daughter's virginity with the sole purpose of making money. Do you think that this sexual violence against minors, common in the two films, is, in a way, symptomatic of life in late capitalism?

K.P.: In our film, there was definitely a deliberate economisation of family relations. It was meant to reflect the relations of exploitation in late capitalism. Capitalism takes advantage of the inner feelings of individuals, twists and exploits it in order to establish these relations. I would say that Giannis Economides is more of a realist filmmaker. But in the case of *Miss Violence*, our intention was also to offer an outlook on the family, family relations, etc. I think that all Greek filmmakers unavoidably explore the notion of the Greek family, each to their own ends; the post-dictatorship (Metapolitefsi) nuclear family evolved into a dominant but extremely contradictory formation within the Greek society—in my opinion, it is a generational concern. Perhaps at some point filmmakers might even be overdoing it. Lanthimos, Tzoumerkas, Economides, even Koutras have dealt with the notion of family. But yes, that's late capitalism for you.

C.M.: What about your title? Is *Automata* an allusion to the nineteenth-century fascination with the automaton?

K.P.: My title has often been considered misleading because the stories escape the narrow sense of automation. But automata have a history in literature; my aim was to combine social theory and a literary tradition. Since the Enlightenment, and especially for Romanticism, the automaton was so much more than a robot, so much more than simple mechanics.

C.M.: What will you be working on next?

K.P.: It will probably be a novel. I am interested in something that would look at the emergence of the bourgeois character inversely, something that would discuss the fall of, which is a classic leitmotif in literature. Thomas Mann and Camus have of course already done it —Mann was writing about his family's history. But I am intrigued by something that would be updated, relevant to now. The hero will be a bourgeois corporate attorney. You see, we always tend to think of the rise and fall of

somebody in economic terms, which is exactly what I wish to avoid. So, in my case, it will be a cultural fall of sorts. Most importantly, a deliberate fall which the hero desperately wishes to accomplish so that he breaks loose from his class and from himself—a goal that is perhaps unattainable.

C.M.: Well, what you say brings me back to Benjamin. In discussing the *flâneur* as a counterpart to the crowd, Benjamin argues that the consummate *flâneur* is a bohemian, a *déraciné*, that is to say he is asocial or in a liminal social position. Is this perhaps relevant to your character being a renegade of sorts, or does this sound like a stretch?

K.P.: I think that the *flâneur* as a notion is a type that belongs somewhere between literature and reality; nevertheless he utterly expresses both modern literature and modern society precisely because he embodies the feeling of being outside and/or in society which the modern—and I would say urban—subject experiences. Yet it seems risky to read him in class terms—though Benjamin also highlights the *flâneur's* commodification. I would like to have my hero descend classes, fall from grace, not only as an external observer, but as part of them.

C.M.: Well, I can't wait. Thank you. It was a real pleasure talking to you.

K.P.: Thank you very much.

Athens
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