



Large nude

Κωνσταντίνος Παρθένης, 1925

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Parody and National Crisis: Thanasis Valtinos' *Three Greek One-Act Plays* and its critical Reception

«... man's suffering with all the amplification of tragic masks»¹

Abstract

Three Greek One-Act Plays (1978) is a short, tripartite work of post-war fiction comprising seemingly unrelated documents supposedly quoted verbatim from their original sources. They are: a) the proceedings of a trial held in 1957 and related to National Army operations in the last phase of the Civil War; b) a series of letters received by a prison inmate between 1954 and circa 1970; and, c) the undated instruction manual to a Kenwood mixer. In a play of generic terms on the cover and title page the slim volume is described with salient irony from the outset as a “novel”.² The somewhat risqué quotation of apparently authentic documents with minimal extraneous commentary in a *soi-disant* “novel” is a pioneering narrative technique at least in Greek literary prose. Critical commentators who did not neglect the text altogether either offered partial readings of it in the cultural milieu of post-dictatorship Greece or, baffled until recently by its ostentatiously unconventional form, treated it as little more than “experimental” literature. As a result, the text’s underlying criticisms of the dominant ideology in Greece and the nation’s socioeconomic crisis since the end of the Civil War and right up to the first years of the *Metapolitefsi* have largely gone unnoticed. The purpose of this paper is to propose a reading of *Three Greek One-Act Plays* as a parody³ with a potential political message that transcends the stated or implied chronologies of reference, and to explore the cultural and ideological conditions that contributed to the text’s partisan or unceremonious reception.

1. Background

When *Three Greek One-Act Plays* was first published, Valtinos was well known in Greek literary circles. His novella *The Descent of the Nine* (1963) had inaugurated his accession to the literary scene and was well known among intellectuals.⁴ It was a quasi-testimonial narrative about the demise of a platoon of leftist guerillas in the final year of the Civil War. In the inimical climate of the Colonels' dictatorship it was a 'cult text' which circulated secretly in photocopies among university students and teachers. Indeed, until its publication in book form, in 1978, it had been published in English (1973) and German (1976).⁵ Its additional relevance for this article is that the author considers *Three Greek One-Act Plays* as a "comment on and sequel to" *The Descent of the Nine*.⁶ In 1978 Valtinos was also known for his short story "The Plaster Cast", his contribution to *Eighteen Texts* (1970), the first collective volume by Greek writers protesting against the Colonels' censorship.

In comparison to *Three Greek One-Act Plays* these texts by Valtinos were more conventional narratives. In the *zeitgeist* of post-dictatorship Greece avowed commentators treated these works as party-minded left-wing statements,⁷ but they were far from according with the partisan spirit that evolved from the 1973 Polytechnic events after seven years of military rule and spawned the populism of PASOK in the ensuing years.⁸ As one 1979 review of the text suggests,⁹ Greece's return to parliamentary democracy germinated a wholesale dismissal of liberal conservatism and the elevation of leftism to exclusive benevolence. This new polarization was an offshoot of the dictatorship which probably also cloned Cold-War antinomies at the time. Some of its many effects in Greece were idealized interpretations of the left's involvement in the Civil War¹⁰ and a subdued self-criticism within a large majority of the Greek left and its intelligentsia. Stifled self-criticism, ideological consensus and historical oblivion are the principal objects of critique in *Three Greek One-Act Plays*.

2. The subsidiary texts of *Three Greek One-Act Plays*

The first document ["Πρακτικά μιας δίκης (ξεσηκωμένα από τις εφημερίδες της εποχής)"] (henceforth "Πρακτικά")¹¹ is strongly reminiscent of a dramatic work. It is structured in two parts and interspersed with brief descriptions extraneous to the dialogue. In it a retired general (Vasilopoulos) sues one of his peers (Zafirooulos) for misrepresenting him

in his book on the Civil War.¹² Seven witnesses reveal Vasilopoulos' catastrophic contribution to National Army operations on Mount Vitsi in 1948 but also display tolerance for his laxity. In the second part of the trial, the testimony of an officer with amputated lower limbs brings an unexpected *volte face*: the plaintiff and the accused compromise, indeed as the presiding judge had recommended before the beginning of proceedings. Zafiroopoulos withdraws his published criticisms and Vasilopoulos emerges as a competent leader. "Πρακτικά" is a scathing comment on the distortion of the officers' experience on the battlefield, the muffling of self-questioning within the military and its collaboration with the judiciary and the press in establishing an ideological concord after the Civil War.

The second text ["Γράμματα στη φυλακή" (henceforth "Γράμματα")] is reminiscent of the epistolary novel. It is an archive of 14 letters received by the inmate Stelios Thomaidis. Allusions to his political affiliation and that of his relatives fade in comparison to the text's emphasis: a profound malaise in the lives of almost everyone involved. The sympathy that Valtinos creates for most correspondents is counterbalanced by pressures they exert on Thomaidis to be more compliant. In spite of expectations for his release, the inmate's fate remains unknown. At the end of the text, an authorial note states that the letters were discovered in 1972 in the toilets of the disused Kalami Gaol in Chania (p. 64). In reality Valtinos found four letters addressed to different recipients which inspired him to compose this putatively authentic epistolary archive.¹³

The last document is undated and bears the title of a well-known advertising catch-phrase in Greece: "Ναι, αλλά Kenwood" (henceforth "Kenwood"). It seems to be a verbatim quotation of a manual to the appliance. I could not ascertain the degree of Valtinos' personal input in the text's composition. The author claims to have come across the (now misplaced) manual in his sisters' home in Athens. In it the impersonal narrator ceremoniously promises to emancipate the prospective user from the daily toil of food preparation while simultaneously announcing his/her subjugation to the appliance's advanced technology. Three recipes make up the denouement of the book. In the context of *Three Greek One-Act Plays* it is a bitter and humorously ironic comment on post-war economic growth that scoffs at the partial and illusory prosperity of the Greek urban home. The references to effective homogenization of materials in the kitchen

relate metaphorically to the theme of ideological uniformity in the other two texts and, by extension, to literary cohesiveness.

For the casual reader, *Three Greek One-Act Plays* is at a certain remove from this aesthetic principle. In spatial terms the quasi-logical transition from the courtroom to prison is followed by an incongruous one to the domestic kitchen. In discursive terms there is a notable transition from dialogue to epistolary monologues followed by the quasi-apostrophic or impersonal monologue of a manual. However, my brief description above suggests that the three texts share at least one thematic opposition (freedom ≠ suppression or control of people, views, or behaviour) which is treated with varying degrees of irony in each text. It is therefore significant that the referential impetus of the subsidiary texts to actual situations and discursive practices is repeatedly displaced or reversed with the “true” and the “authentic” being consistently exposed as fiction. In their totality, the three texts refer to an all-pervasive ideology in post-Civil-War Greece whose partialities, falsehoods and modes of dissemination the reader is invited to question beyond the stated or implied times of reference. It appears, however, that the cultural ambiance of post-dictatorship Greece was not altogether conducive to reading *Three Greek One-Act Plays* in this way. Rather it might explain the omissions, bewilderment and reservations of the few critics who commented even fruitfully on the text.

3. The critical reception of *Three Greek One-Act Plays*

Mario Vitti and Vasilis Rafailidis were the first to review the book approximately seven months after publication.¹⁴ Later critics drew from and commented on their commentaries both directly and indirectly.¹⁵ Vitti’s was an incisive, albeit understandably cautious, review. His sensationalistic description of the work as “an authorless novel” was supplemented by references to a “conscientious editor”, “selection”, “appropriation” and “initiative” which culminates into a “more radical objectivity”.¹⁶ Commenting on “Γράμματα” and “Kenwood”, he identified a “violence exercised on the inmate” and a “distortion” of reality respectively. Although, he appears to have purposely avoided commenting on the very same issues in “Πρακτικά”, his wording suggests that they relate to both the times of reference and publication.¹⁷

Rafailidis’ review the same year was less restrained. He described the text as a “daring montage of impressions” which “creates a synecdoche” that

signifies what he termed as the “optimistic tragedy” of Greek history. This he explicitly related to the “dramatic defeat” of the Democratic Army in the Civil War by “farical victors”. Optimism is perceived in the survival of Natsios (the narrator of *The Descent of the Nine*) in his surrogate, Thomaidis.¹⁸ In true antimilitarist spirit of the period, the officers in “Πρακτικά” are shown to participate in an “intra-class civil war... squabbling over their mislaid honour” while the “drama of an entire people” is limited to Thomaidis’ hapless relatives. In the text itself, however, the inmate’s idealization on grounds of political affiliation is meticulously avoided. Indeed the generals compromise their differences which is part of the “drama” that Rafailidis eschews.¹⁹ In spite of this, he seems to doubt his optimistic appraisal of the *Metapolitefsi* as the “symbolic end of the Civil War”.²⁰ His interpretation may be described as historically contingent, brimming with post-dictatorship leftist enthusiasm, but also containing uncertainties on its own findings.

Approximately a decade later, Dimitris Daskalopoulos declared reservations about Rafailidis’ gloss but he expressly refused involvement in “ideological discussions”.²¹ His reserve describes eloquently the climate that prevailed during the 80s in relation to the left’s idealized role in the Civil War.²² Daskalopoulos described Valtinos’ text as an “interesting experiment”. Michel Fais drew similar conclusions referring to “an experimental undertaking whose accessibility remains problematic even nowadays”.²³ If these hermeneutic restraints can be attributed to critical inhibitions fomented during the *Metapolitefsi*, a broader neglect of the text resulted from other, perhaps more tangible, causes.

In a relatively recent newspaper article, Elisavet Kotzia observed that Valtinos gained a place in the multi-volume series *Η μεταπολεμική πεζογραφία - Από τον πόλεμο του '40 ως τη δικτατορία του '67* on the basis of four works of prose fiction, *Three Greek One-Act Plays* among them.²⁴ In the introductory volume of the series, however, Alexandros Argyriou makes no mention of Valtinos’ text. Indeed, it does not feature in his annual catalogues of published works of fiction.²⁵ This philological oversight in a highly regarded critical anthology seems to have had some adverse consequences for the work’s reception thenceforth,²⁶ perhaps because it was not republished until 1989 along with the similarly styled *Data from the decade of the 60s* whose instant success seems to have overshadowed the shorter book.

Valtinós himself has described *Three Greek One-Act Plays* as his least “commercial” book,²⁷ a fact that perhaps documents that unconventional narratives do not necessarily enjoy a wide readership, critical commentary or philological listings. It would appear that as a result, the author orchestrated a reexamination of the text in a dedicatory issue of the periodical *Πρόφωρος* and with the reprint of the first reviews in the volume of critical writings *Για τον Βαλτινό*.²⁸ The critical efforts that germinated remained within the limits of general or theoretical commentaries and one commentator reiterated a difficulty to treat it as literature.²⁹ According to another critic, the text referred to the “theme of the Junta” possibly in prolonged accordance with the post-dictatorship *zeitgeist*.³⁰ The allusions to the Colonels’ dictatorship, however, are only marginal in the work’s preoccupation with social inequities, prolonged repression and interment of socio-political antinomies after the Civil War.

In retrospect, the polarizations that evolved from the internecine conflict and featured in both literary and critical writings before and after the dictatorship were not an unexpected development. During the 90s, however, and until recently when historians, writers and press commentators resuscitated a widespread interest in the Civil War, the author’s preoccupation with the subject was frequently described as regressive.³¹ Consequently, the critical negligence of Valtinós’ text may be partly attributed to problems of “accessibility”, as Fais pointed out in 1989, but included other factors such as philological oversight, the nature and preoccupations of critical practices in Greece, the stereotypical labeling of Valtinós as a leftist writer, and the ideological climate that predominated throughout the *Metapolitefsi*. In my view, it is also attributable to the inherent difficulties of parody as a literary genre, in particular its ambiguity.

4. Irony, Parody and Satire in *Three Greek One-Act Plays*

The terms “irony”, “parody” and “satire” overlap but they are not of course synonymous. Irony is based on differences between form and content or stated and implied meaning. The discrepancy imposes a semantic shift that rules out possibilities of their convergence.³² Parody and satire are generic carriers of irony. The former in that imitates a text and at the same time distances itself from it without necessarily mocking it. Thus, parody is rebellious but it is also conservative. Satire on the other hand usually

targets social institutions. When it targets a literary piece, it comments on the aesthetic status quo. In such cases, parody and satire cooperate in acknowledging and simultaneously undermining the hegemony of a given cultural condition. Research findings of the last decades state that parodies have a broad spectrum of effects that vary according to the context of each composition. However, the oscillation of parody between its polemic and conservative functions³³ and its description as “quotation or repetition with a critical difference” gives sufficient broadness to the term for a preliminary understanding of *Three Greek One-Act Plays*.

4.1. “Πρακτικά”: Severed logic

“Πρακτικά” comments on the catastrophic consequences of individual contributions to collective efforts with the expected formality and seriousness. The use of *Katharevousa* befits the occasion and reinforces its verisimilitude; the idiom is not an object or the means of satire. The plot, however, leads to the evaluation of personal responsibility as a negligible misdemeanor, exposing institutional involvement in the biased appraisal of an historical event. This interpretation serves the “practical” purpose of ideological consensus but the irony of the pun does not mock the institutions involved, regardless of how conducive to this interpretation antimilitarism may have been in post-dictatorship Greece. On the contrary, the tragic results of misguided individual inputs are maintained and are at the furthest possible remove from satirical treatment.

In the first part of the trial Vasilopoulos questions Zafirooulos’ historiography claiming that he is represented as cowardly. Similarly, during the trial, the validity of other official documents is questioned.³⁴ In a self-referential turn, this questioning is directed towards “Πρακτικά” itself as a document. In spite of this, Zafirooulos’ account is supported by witnesses and shown to have been justified. So, the scales of justice lean in his favour as the text creates expectations for a development that leads logically to a confluence of justice and truth. The formality and dryness of expression, a systematic arrangement of testimonies and their internal organization reinforce such expectations. Their eventual deflation, however, does not invalidate or mock the text’s putative authenticity either.

In the second part of the trial, witnesses characterize Zafirooulos’ account as “false”. The last witness, the legless veteran in his wheel chair,

fails to answer a question on events at the battlefield due to “expressed emotion” (p. 31). The question is withdrawn, the proceedings come to a close and the historiographic plot of what actually happened on Mount Vitsi in September 1948 is dissolved in a mist of emotional uncertainty. The next day, Zafiropoulos withdraws his views and the social status and heroism of his brothers in arms is reinstated. The tragic developments on the battle field, as they are expressed in the loss of the officer’s lower limbs were the result of a general laxity in the National Army Corps including the sluggishness of Vasilopoulos. The severing of logic in the evaluation of the events intensifies the tragedy. Judgments based on solidarity and camaraderie, emerge as logical and just whereas those founded on logic and criticism are shown to be injurious. The outcome of the trial exudes a cultural inclination towards ideological consensus over and above critical dialogue. Part of the text’s irony arises from the illogicality of this outcome.

In “Πρακτικά”, historiographic verity is largely based on synecdoche, perhaps the most unifying of rhetorical tropes.³⁵ What short-circuits this homogenization is a contamination of the characters as epic figures by less heroic attributes which force them to succumb to a coerced self-deception. This is not a feature of the side they served but a component in the way their experience was interpreted posthumously. What the reader is invited to do is question not only the oversight of individual responsibility but also the imaginary conscience formed on the basis of muffled criticism and partial historical narratives. Parody introduces this very possibility of distance from this dominant interpretation at the expense of another. Thus, *Three Greek One-Act Plays* is a “sequel to and a comment on” *The Descent of the Nine* because it refers to what the pursuers of the nine guerillas suffered in 1948 and exposes the ideological use of narratives on the internecine conflict. Perhaps the most savage irony at the expense of those involved is that the revelation of “unfortunate events”³⁶ implies an epic narrative for the Democratic Army at least for the Vitsi clashes. However, mutinous behaviour and lack of discipline in a generally exhausted National Army after the Grammos battles puts the epic nature of this narrative under serious doubt for either side of the conflict. This is particularly evident not only because details of the contested events are silenced, but also due to Democratic Army representatives’ conspicuous absence. They are either in exile or have signed so-called “declarations of repentance”.

“Πρακτικά” challenges the reader’s logic by making him/her question the reliability of formal documents, the validity of personal testimonies, the significance of individual contributions to collective enterprises and the ways in which these are interpreted posthumously. At the end of proceedings the presiding judge delivers a speech that contains a series of contextual ironies:

“Μετά ταύτα ο πρόεδρος του κακουργιοδικείου έλυσε την συνεδρίασιν ειπών ότι ο επελθών συμβιβασμός θα ήτο καλόν να εγένετο πριν προχωρήσει η δίκη —δεδομένου ότι όλοι αγαπάμε τον στρατόν— οπότε θα απεφεύγετο η αποκάλυψις ωρισμένων γεγονότων της περιόδου του συμμοριτοπολέμου 1948.

Η Ελλάς, ετόνισε, με την βοήθειαν μεγάλων συμμάχων, εκέρισε την μάχην υπέρξεώς της. Με την βοήθειαν των ίδιων συμμάχων εκερδήθη η μάχη της ανασυγκροτήσεως της ερειπωμένης πατρίδος μας. Ο αγών βεβαίως δεν έπαυσε ακόμα. Απομένει διά τον λαόν μας η φάσις κατακτήσεως της ενημερίας, προϋπόθεσις εκ των ουκ άνευ, διά πάσαν περαιτέρω πολιτιστικήν πρόοδον. Γενναιόφρονες σύμμαχοι ίστανται παρά το πλευρόν μας και εις την φάσιν αυτήν. Δεν θα πρέπει να το λησμονούμε. Όπως δεν θα πρέπει να λησμονούμε το ύψιστον χρέος μας: Δήθη διά το παρελθόν και ομόνοια.

Το τέλος των εμπνευσμένων λόγων του κυρίου προέδρου διεδέχθησαν παρατεταμένα χειροκροτήματα εκ του ακροατηρίου” (σ. 33-4).

In 1978, the excerpt would have certainly echoed the rhetoric of George Papadopoulos’ speeches. The parenthetical remark “όλοι αγαπάμε τον στρατόν” and the references to “γενναιόφρονες σύμμαχους” suggest anachronistically the *coup d’état* of 1967 and hint at the American aid to Greece after 1947, respectively. The speech, however, is in a mixture of direct and indirect speech that restrains its grandiloquence. The satirical effect, therefore, is not unquestionably clear.

What seems to be the object of satire here is the rhetoric rather than the content (the personification of Greece as a reconstructed entity and the contradictory call for remembrance and oblivion at the end of the second paragraph). Valtinos shares the view that prosperity is a prerequisite for cultural advancement and the judge seems to be aware of its insecure

prospects.³⁷ The struggling relatives of Thomaidis confirm this, making the irony of such an ambition even more pronounced. If, therefore, one discerns satire at the expense of those involved, this relates to the institutional cover-up that has been achieved. The references to “λήθη” and “ομόνοια” in the judge’s final appeal are salient in that regard. The former echoes the compound “αλήθεια” (truth), which was never sought *ab initio*. The latter underlines the violence of Zafirooulos’ legal defeat and the stifled self-criticism within the military. However, by means of controlled sympathy for at least two of its members, the text formulates a direct challenge to the endorsed ideology. Arguably it foreshadows a similar challenge to the corresponding *zeitgeist* spawned during the *Metapolitefsi*.

The satire that underlies the denouement of “Πρακτικά” reaches its climax in the indeterminate audience’s endorsement of the judge by “extended applause”. This human ensemble appears to succumb to paternalism and sentimental rhetoric rather than seek dialogue and proof. Placing emotional appraisals above logical argument is presented as the distinguishing feature of a collective attitude whose acquiescence betrays a desire for solidarity. Parody in “Πρακτικά” exposes human propensity to credulity and the shaky foundations of such solidarity but does not seek their unquestioning condemnation.

4.2 “Γράμματα”: Severed links

In “Γράμματα” there are four basic narrative sequences involving Thomaidis and his relatives. The first one relates to his marriage. In the first four letters and a two-year span his marriage to Tasia heads inexorably towards dissolution. Four letters and five years later a lawyer informs him of his divorce. Three letters and six years later he is prompted to transfer the guardianship of his children to their new stepfather. His dramatic condition is counterbalanced with justifications of Tasia’s choices, mild chastisements of his attempts to blackmail her and his non-involvement in graver family issues.³⁸ The promises of his relatives to visit him are quickly replaced by declarations of difficulty in their fulfillment. Thus, Thomaidis character is presented as severed from both family and society.

The second narrative sequence relates to the difficulties of his parents, the deterioration of their health and death of his mother. The third sequence involves his sister’s family. The relevant descriptions include unemploy-

ment, poverty and struggle for daily subsistence. The prosperity envisaged by the judge in “Πρακτικῶ” and resonantly announced in “Kenwood” are in ironic inconsistency with the central text. The fourth sequence relates to Thomaidis’ release. The absence of date in the last piece of correspondence in conjunction with the author’s note at the end of “Γράμματᾶ” where the prisons he patronized are enumerated in asyndeton,³⁹ create the impression of an incarceration *ad infinitum*.

Thomaidis’ correspondents make references to letters received by him but the epistolary dialogue is rudimentary. In its totality, however, the text is in dialogue with “Πρακτικῶ” in a number of ways. To begin with, there is a kind of parallel between Thomaidis and Zafiropoulos. Thomaidis’ correspondents refer to stubbornness (p. 49) on his behalf and possible insubordination (p. 48 and 50). This behaviour suggests that his incarceration is the result of a refusal to sign a “declaration of repentance”. Zafiropoulos too submits a semblance of a repent at the end of the trial. His criticisms are suppressed metaphorically whereas the uncompromising Thomaidis is in literal confinement. The two texts do not juxtapose right-wingers to left-wingers with the stereotypical addenda of comfortably acquiescent members of the middle class against justly combative or struggling proletarians. What underlies both texts is a criticism of the post-Civil-War state for its prolonged Manichaeism and intolerance. Indeed the outcome of the trial functions as a signifier for this ideological climate and as a cause of Thomaidis’ incarceration which is seemingly extended thanks to the Colonels’ dictatorship.⁴⁰ The other ways in which the two texts are in dialogue relate to irony.

Some of the content of the relevant letters agglutinates to coerce Thomaidis into compliance. His relatives ask him to be “disciplined” (p. 48), to “not change his mind again” (p. 50) and to “shave, because facial hair doesn’t suit [him]” (p. 52). His mother’s piety (p. 39 and 41) is extended to a kind of guidance of Thomaidis⁴¹ while some developments in his life are presented as divine justice.⁴² The possibility of self-censorship seems to underlie the phraseology at times,⁴³ but the correspondents appear to accept their condition as a natural development, almost like an incurable ailment.⁴⁴ Their acquiescence betrays the treatment of their condition as a fateful outcome similarly to the consenting audience in “Πρακτικῶ”.

Valtinos seems to refuse to transpose this acquiescence to Thomaidis himself. In spite of haziness in his characterization, he functions as a struc-

ture of resistance to authority which pretends to permit expressional liberties but, essentially, abolishes dialogue and endorses concealment of facts in the interest of ideological consensus. There is a confluence of his confinement “inside” with corresponding restraints “outside” but he also represents the opposite of “outside” which in reality is another form of “inside”. The literary effect of these inconsistencies which reinforce and simultaneously undermine differences between opposing concepts is irony. This is intensified in the final letter, where a supplier informs Thomaidis of some material he has ordered for making artifacts. The undated letter abstracts time and its last paragraph expands spatial reference to a global context. This makes Thomaidis appear as a dissolved entity in spatiotemporal non-specificity and at considerable distance form idealized interpretations of his character:

“ΕΙΣΑΓΩΓΑΙ - ΔΙΑΡΚΗΣ ΠΑΡΑΚΑΤΑΘΗΚΗ

α—Πρώται ύλαι ψηκτροποιΐας: Τρίχες Κινεζικές, Αλόγινες Ευρώπης-Αμερικής, Συνθετικές Νάυλον, Χόρτα Μεξικού Ταμπικό-Λουστρέ.

β—Πρώται ύλαι καθεκλοποιΐας και πλεκτών επίπλων: Καλαμάκι, φαθίον, ξυλεία Ροτέν, κορδέλα, μπανέλες, νάυλον σωληνάκι και πλακέ, ψάθες Viscose, κάλαμοι Ινδιών Βαμποο.

γ—Πρώται ύλαι πιλοποιΐας: Λέξες, σπαρτρί, ψάθινες ταινίες Ευρώπης-Κίνας-Άπω Ανατολής, ροκανίδι Ιταλίας, κορδόνι χάρτινο, πιλήματα Μερινός ανδρικά-παιδικά, μοχέρο καστόρινα, βελούρ γυναικεία βούρλινα-ψάθινα-κοντινεντάλ-Bangkok.

δ—Διάφορα: Τζίβα Μαρόκου κοτσίδα και ξασμένη, χόρτο νικελωτηρίων, τινακτήρια Ινδιών, μπαστούνια περιπάτου αναπήρων εκ βαμποο κλπ” (p. 63).

Parody in “Γράμματα” manifests itself in the imitation of correspondence which preserves the relevant conventions and concomitant expressions of emotional solidarity towards the inmate, but also employs their ironic potential. Thus, it functions very similarly to “Πρακτικά” in that it cuts both ways: on the one hand with subdued satire at the expense of the relatives and critical stance towards the sociopolitical climate in which they express themselves, and, on the other, with an oxymoronic mixture of sympathy and distance from their plight. This distance relates to their apparent

compliance with authority and the acceptance of their condition as fatal. Thomaidis' apparent vanishing at the end, leaves a void in the resistance to such acquiescence. So, if, as Pylarinos intuitively perceived in 2002,⁴⁵ the text empowers its reader politically it does so not through catechism but by severing semantic links and through ironic displacements that undermine teleological judgments on all relevant issues.

4.3 "Kenwood": Domestic Technology and Freedom

When one is forced to read a manual to a kitchen appliance as literature, the initial irony is largely due to the absence of the machine and the "accompanying documents" referred to in it.⁴⁶ In the first sentences "Τώρα έχετε και σεις ένα νέο KENWOOD CHEF" and "Από σήμερα η ζωή σας στην κουζίνα αποχτάει καινούργιο νόημα" (σ. 67) this irony is intensified by stylistic features like the use of the cluster "χτ" (instead of "κτ") and the uncontracted ending "-άει" (instead of "-ά"), due to inconsistency with the formality of the plural address. In this literary context, therefore, the appliance is a linguistic *mélange* of different registers, vocabulary and rhetorical devices: saliently its personification initially in the French term "Chef" (also meaning "leader", "superior", or "boss") and later in its presentation as "companion".

The prospective user is presented as the master of this appliance devoted to his service and wellbeing,⁴⁷ but the hierarchy of this relationship is gradually reversed when the machine – perhaps an early postmodern cyborg – is said to surpass human dexterity and accommodate the inefficiencies of its user who is encouraged to show fidelity in following instructions.⁴⁸ The description of various components emphasizes superlative juicing and blending capabilities arguing for economy of time and materials. The phraseology, however, is excessively lavish and often tautological. The ironic humour is set off by differences in register between titles (in *Katharevousa*) and explanations (in a popular kitchen idiom) and results from inconsistencies between claims to economy and verbal recklessness.⁴⁹

The irony resulting from the almost simultaneous declaration of one thing and its opposite is reinforced intra-textually through the transition from dialogue in "Πρακτικά" to monologues in "Τράμματα" and to the apostrophe of "Kenwood". This transition is incongruous with the dialogic operations the reader is invited to perform in order to produce contextual

meaning.⁵⁰ If the humorous ironies have a satirical edge to them, they do not involve the denial of gastronomic pleasures. The object of satire is not an actual user of a Kenwood Chef or the average bon-vivant. In the broader context of the work, the “Ναυ” of the title is followed by the inducement of a theoretical prospective user to consent to a substitute of personal will with that of an impersonal enunciator. The target of the text’s satire is the (self-) enfeeblement of the individual in his or her compliance with an ideological climate that promotes consumerism as a vision of wellbeing *in conjunction with* loss of historical memory.

Consequently the repetitiousness of parody is not in itself sufficient for it to be ironic or satirical. The other texts and an understanding of the cultural context are prerequisites for the effectiveness of irony. So, the recipe for *kourabiédes* in the denouement of “Kenwood” parodies cook book language but its irony is not satirical. The irony becomes more poignant in the final words (“ζάχαρη άχνη”, p. 83) which offers the semblance of a happy ending illustrating how sweet the veneer of the exerted clandestine violence can be. If it simultaneously questions this, it is thanks to the text’s dependence on similar techniques in the traditional novel, on the reader’s memory of details in the previous texts and the author’s complicity in bringing them together despite his apparent withdrawal.

Three Greek One-Act Plays can be read as a critique of a national ideology founded on dubiously partial interpretations of historical events and on a concomitant loss of historical memory combined with fallacies of domestic affluence and the comforts of consumerism. Thus, by exploiting the ironic potential of parody Valtinos calls for a more realistic aesthetic in the contemporary novel rather than proclaim the genre’s demise. Indeed, the text activates the reader’s participation in recognizing literary conventions of the novel in the construction of both reality and literary meaning. The text also exposes the connivance of literary discourse in the formation of ideology and cultivates its potential to politically motivate through critical analysis rather than catechism. Thus, the “experienced violence” by the work’s “conscientious editor”, aptly noted by Vitti in his inaugural review, is transformed into its symbolic or benevolent exertion with the acknowledged complicity of the reader.⁵¹

Notes

- 1 R. Barthes, 'Wrestling', *Mythologies*, Hill and Wang, New York 1972, p. 19.
- 2 The description features in all three editions of the text to date [Κέδρος (1978), Στιγγιή (1989) and Εστία (2008)]. All page references to the text are to the 1978 edition.
- 3 My shorthand definition of "parody" is "quotation or repetition with a critical difference". See L. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, Methuen, London and New York 1985, p. 26 and 31-2; W. Ommundsen, *Metafiction? Reflexivity in Contemporary Texts*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne 1993, p. 10-11 and S. Dentith *Parody*, The New Critical Idiom, Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, London and New York 2000, p. 9-21.
- 4 *Η κάθοδος των εννιά*, first published in the periodical *Εποχές* 5 (September 1963) p. 32-45.
- 5 For a critical commentary, see D. Paivanas "A post-modern lesson in history: the incomplete rhetoric of Thanasis Valtinos's *The Descent of the Nine*", *BMGS*, Vol. 29, No 2 (2005), p. 203-234.
- 6 S Alexandropoulou "Η πόλη αλλοίωσε τη λαϊκή γλώσσα" λέει ο συγγραφέας Βαλτινός" *Πρωινή* (7 March 1979) p. 8.
- 7 On the renewed lustre of the Greek left after 1974 see, e.g., Γ. Βούλγαρης *Η Ελλάδα της Μεταπολίτευσης 1974-1990. Σταθερή δημοκρατία σημαδεμένη από τη μεταπολεμική ιστορία*, Θεμέλιο, Athens 2002, p. 8 and D. Close *Greece since 1945*, Pearson Education Limited, London 2002, p. 103-110.
- 8 The 1978 edition of *Three Greek One-Act Plays* includes a seemingly relevant postscript which is absent from subsequent editions: "Η σύνθεση τους άρχισε περί το 1966. Για λόγους αντικειμενικούς μέχρι το '74 — και για λόγους εξίσου αντικειμενικούς από το '74 και εντεύθεν, ο συγγραφέας είχε αρνηθεί να τα εκδώσει" (p. 87) At the "Homage à Thanassis Valtinos" workshop held at the Frei Universität in Berlin (21 June 2014), the author revealed that the post-1974 reference involved a more personal kind of censorship: the manuscript of *Three Greek One-Act plays* was withheld by what appears to be a malcontent partner at the time. His "refusal" to publish the text between 1974 and 1978 suggests a piquant response to institutionalized and personal forms of censorship.
- 9 V. Rafailidis "Ελληνική αισιόδοξη τραγωδία σε τέσσερα μέρη" *Διαβάζω* 22 (July 1979) p. 69-70. For a brief discussion of this review, see section 3 below.
- 10 See e.g. Γ. Θ. Μαυρογορδάτος "Η 'ρεβάνς' των ηττημένων" *Πενήντα χρόνια μετά τον Εμφύλιο*, Ερμής, Athens 1999 and Ν. Μαραντζίδης "Η 'ρεβάνς των ηττημένων'" *Το βήμα* (9 July 2006) electronic archive <http://www.tovima.gr/opinions/article/?aid=174364>.
- 11 According to the author (personal interview 16/08/2003), their publication in the daily press was common practice in the 50s.
- 12 D. Zafiroopoulos, *Ο αντισυμμοριακός αγών 1945-1949*, private edition, Athens 1956. The book is a well known work of historiography on the Greek Civil War. I've seen a copy in Valtinos' personal library at his village home in Karatoula.
- 13 See Th. Valtinos "Ημέρες καλοκαιριού του '72" *Συνέχεια* 2 (April 1973) p. 86 and V. Rafailidis, op. cit., p. 70.
- 14 M. Vitti, "Ένα μυθιστόρημα χωρίς συγγραφέα. Τα 'Τρία ελληνικά μονόπρακτα' του Θανάση Βαλτινού" *Το βήμα* (29 July 1979) and V. Rafailidis, op. cit., p. 67-70.
- 15 See, e.g. footnotes 17, 20 and 21 below. Cf. also V. Chatzivasilieou (Άτομο και Ιστορία στην πεζογραφία του Θανάση Βαλτινού" *Νέα Εστία* 1802 (July-August 2007) p. 58-9, footnotes 5 and 6.

- 16 Similar comments are echoed in K. Χρυσομάλλη-Henrich's "Το ύφος της αμεσότητας, η αρμονία λόγου και περιεχομένων" *Πόρφυρας* 103 (April-June 2002), p. 32-3.
- 17 See, e.g. "...αρνητικές όψεις της ελληνικής ζωής, εμπειρίες μιας νόθου ζωής που η συνείδηση [του Βαλτινού] τις αποκρούει με δυσφορία" (M. Vitti, op. cit.).
- 18 V. Rafailidis, op. cit., p. 70.
- 19 See also the indirect comment on Rafailidis criticism by D. Raftopoulos who notes correctly that what seems to be "more lost than their honour is the truth" [D. Raftopoulos, "Το μυθιστόρημα τεκμηρίων κατά Βαλτινόν" *Νέα Εστία* 1802 (July-August 2007) p. 31.] Cf. footnote 36 below.
- 20 "Το δράμα μοιάζει να τελειώνει, ή μάλλον, ν' αλλάζει μορφή, μόλις το 1974, δηλαδή είκοσι πέντε χρόνια απ' τη λήξη του Εμφυλίου" (V. Rafailidis, op. cit., p. 69, my emphasis).
- 21 D. Daskalopoulos, "Θανάσης Βαλτινός" in *Η μεταπολεμική πεζογραφία. Από τον πόλεμο του '40 ως τη δικτατορία του '67*, vol. 2, Σοκόλης, Athens 1989, p. 312.
- 22 See footnotes 7 and 10 above and Valtinos' own letter of protest against PASOK's cultural policies in "Ένα κείμενο" *Μανδραγόρας* 30 (September 2003), p. 79, reprinted in Th. Valtinos, *Κρασί και νύμφες*, Εστία, Athens 2009, p. 206-209.
- 23 M. Fais "Ένα αιρετικό μυθιστόρημα" *Τύπος της Κυριακής* (26 November 1989); reprinted in Th. Pylarinos (ed.), *Για τον Βαλτινό. Κριτικά κείμενα*, Αιγάλεω, Nicosia 2003, p. 126-8.
- 24 E. Kotzia "Δαιμονικός δημιουργός" *Η Καθημερινή* (23 October 2011) p. 10.
- 25 A. Argyriou "Εισαγωγή" in *Η μεταπολεμική πεζογραφία. Από τον πόλεμο του '40 ως τη δικτατορία του '67*, vol 1., Σοκόλης, Athens 1989, p. 164, 242, 374 and cf. p. 308, 383 and 425.
- 26 See D. Tziouvas' seminal attribution of "heteroglossia" to Alexandros Kotzias' *Αντιποίησης Αρχής* (1979) in *Το παλιμψηστο της ελληνικής αφήγησης. Από την αφηγηματολογία στη διαλογικότητα*, Οδυσσέας, Athens 1993, p. 210 and 213. Chrysomalli-Henrich refers to "fragmentation... dialogism... heteroglossia... and polyphony" in *Three Greek One-Act Plays* in "Το ύφος της αμεσότητας..." op. cit. p. 32-4. See also a later bypassing of *Three Greek One-Act plays* in M. Kakavoulia "In and Out of the Text: Games across Genres in Modern Greek Fiction" in P. Mackridge and E. Yannakakis (eds) *Contemporary Greek Fiction in a United Europe: From Local History to the Global Individual*, Legenda, Oxford 2004, p. 117-8.
- 27 M. Chartoulari, "Η κακοπιστία είναι πάντα κακοπιστία" (interview with Th. Valtinos) *Τα Νέα* (24 January 1996) p. 12.
- 28 Th. Pylarinos, op. cit., p. 25-29.
- 29 Th. Pylarinos described it as a "cryptic... anti-novel". Th. Pylarinos' "Τρία ελληνικά μονόπρακτα. Τρεις μικρογραφίες από τον μυθιστορηματικό κόσμο του Θανάση Βαλτινού (η μετεμφυλιακή Ελλάδα σε τρία πολυσήμαντα κρυπτικά καρέ)", Αφιέρωμα στο Θανάση Βαλτινό, *Πόρφυρας* 103 (April-June 2002) p. 49-61. Chrysomalli-Henrich, refers to «μυθιστόρημα ψηφιδωτικής τεχνικής... σύνθεση που εκφράζει την κοινωνική παθολογία της εποχής της», in "Το ύφος της αμεσότητας" op. cit., p. 33.
- 30 V. Chatzivasileiou, "Εικόνες και ρόλοι της Χούντας στη σύγχρονη ελληνική πεζογραφία" *Νέα Εστία* 1766 (April 2004) p. 519-20. Chatzivasileiou's later discussion of the text on the basis of the antithesis between the individual and the collective is perhaps more fruitful. See his "Άτομο και Ιστορία στην πεζογραφία του Θανάση Βαλτινού" op. cit., p. 58-9.

- 31 See, e.g. E. Kotzia “Το έργο των μεταπολεμικών πεζογράφων στη μεταδικτατορική περίοδο” *Αντί* 688 (Second Period - June 1999) p. 33. See also D. Kourtovik’s disapproval of the themes of the Resistance and the Civil War in post-1974 literature in D. Kourtovik, *Ημεδαπή εξορία*, Opera, Athens 1991, p. 39-40.
- 32 See P. de Man, “The Concept of Irony” in A. Warminski (ed.), *Aesthetic Ideology*, THL 65, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London 1996, p. 170 and H. White *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1973, p. 37-8. Claire Colebrook has also referred to “situational irony”, “dramatic” and “tragic” varieties as well as to “irony of fate” as modes of thinking about the relations between human intentions or expectations and contrary outcomes (C. Colebrook *Irony*, New Critical Idiom Series, Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, London and New York 2004, p. 13-15).
- 33 L. Hutcheon, op. cit., p. 67-8 and S. Dentith, op. cit., p. 33-4.
- 34 These are reports by General Gerakinis (p. 15 and 24-5) and the Democratic Army (p. 28)
- 35 V. Rafailidis correctly notes that “What has precedence is uniformity of an opinion”, op. cit., p. 69.
- 36 From a National Army point of view, the Vitsi events are described as “ατυχείς” (p. 13) and “ατύχημα” (p. 19).
- 37 See M. Pimplis, “Θανάσης Βαλτινός ‘Η ισχυρή οικονομία δημιουργεί πολιτισμό’” *Τα Νέα - Πρόσωπα* (14 October 2000). Valtinos also stated to me in a personal interview (17/8/2003): “Εγώ έμαθα πολλά απ’ το στρατό” where he served as a lieutenant in the Commando Mountain Units in the beginning of the 50s.
- 38 V. Rafailidis observes: “Το δράμα δεν είναι τόσο δικό του, όσο των συγγενών του και κατά συνεκδοχή, ολόκληρου του λαού...”, op.cit., p. 70.
- 39 «Από τις διευθύνσεις στους φακέλους τεκμαίρεται ότι ο παραλήπτης τους είχε εκτίσει μέρος της ποινής του και στις φυλακές Κερκύρας, Τρικάλων, Αιγίνης» (p. 64).
- 40 Chronologically the trial is interpolated between the fifth and sixth letters received by Thomaidis (p. 47-8).
- 41 See, e.g.: «[π]αρακαλιέμαι στον Ιησού Χριστό και σε αυτόν να έχεις κάθε μέρα τα θάρρη σου, όχι άλλού» (p. 50).
- 42 See: «πρέπει να γίνει το νομικό και το θεικό» (p. 56) and «[ό,τι κι αν συμβεί μην στενοχωρηθείς, αυτά είναι του θεού» (p. 59).
- 43 See, e.g. the potentially humorous reference of Thomaidis grandmother to Russian medicine: («εγχειρήσεις [που] μόνον στη Ρωσία μπορούν να γίνουν αλλά και εκεί δεν γίνεται τίποτα», p. 55).
- 44 See, e.g.: “θα περιμένουμε να έλθει το μοιραίο” (p. 55) and “η μαμά είναι καταδικασμένη... ό,τι θέλει ο θεός θα γίνει” (p. 57).
- 45 Th. Pylarinos “Τρία ελληνικά μονόπρακτα...” op. cit., p. 55.
- 46 See, e.g., “Σε περίπτωση που διαπιστώσετε ότι ένα από αυτά [τα εξαρτήματα] λείπει ή είναι κατεστραμμένο, αποταθείτε αμέσως στο κατάστημα από το οποίο εξυπηρετηθήκατε” (p. 68), and “[ρ]ίξτε μια ματιά στα σχέδια που σας δόθηκαν μαζί με την συσκευή” (p. 71).
- 47 “Ευτυχία είναι η δυνατότητα να ανταποκρινόμαστε στις μικρές καθημερινές μας επιθυμίες” (p. 67).
- 48 E.g.: “[κ]αθαρίζει ταχύτατα πατάτες, καρότα κρεμμύδια. Ξεφλουδίζει λεπτότερα και γρηγορότερα από το χέρι, αφήνοντας ανέπαφο το καλύτερο μέρος του λαχανικού”

(p. 73), “[α]ν το ξεχάσετε αυτό, τότε και πάλι το CHEF σας θα κάνει καλά τη δουλειά του” (p. 77) and “αποφεύγετε τις άσκοπες ενέργειες και ακολουθείτε πιστά τις οδηγίες των συνταγών” (p. 78).

- 49 E.g. “ΕΞΑΡΤΗΜΑ ΑΠΟΦΛΟΙΩΣΕΩΣ ΔΡΑΚΑ ΚΑΙ ΚΟΠΗΣ ΦΡΕΣΚΩΝ ΦΑΣΟΛΙΩΝ. ΜΟΝΤΕΛΟ Α760 / Κόβει τα φασολάκια και ξεφλουδίζει τον αρακά” (p. 74). Use of foreign loans such as “μίξερ” (p. 71), “μπλέντερ” (p. 75), “τσιπς” (p. 76), “μπαιν-μαρι” (p. 79), hellenised words such as “κροκετάκια” and “αντζούγες” (p. 80) and expressions such as “έως ότου πήξει και γίνει παπάρα” (p. 80) in conjunction with pseudo-formality (e.g. “Ολίγος βασιλικός”, p. 80) also contribute to humour.
- 50 E.g. the references to food, wellbeing, safety and care for the elderly are in stark contrast with the conditions of Thomaidis’ relatives. According to one of them: “τρώμε πότε εδώ και πότε εκεί” (p. 58).
- 51 In a personal interview (12/9/2004) Valtinos stated to me: “Εγώ ήθελα να σκανδαλίσω τότε και με το εξώφυλλο”. For the cover of the 1978 edition the author had proposed a dated photo (17/7/77), showing a female pubis. The resulting layout was turned down “for reasons of decency”. In the second edition (1989) the painting of the German artist, and Valtinos’ long-time partner, Sigrid Hacker, features on the cover. It shows the upper part of a naked female figure. The third edition shows the picture of a house with a red flag by the same artist. It is a palimpsest painted on a page torn from a copy of Valtinos’ *Data for the Decade of the Sixties*.