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Sarantaris and Prometheus, the Idiot and the Thief

You're wrongly named, Prometheus, Wise-before-the-event!
Wisdom is just the thing you want, if you've a mind
To squirm your way out of this blacksmith's masterpiece!
Aeschylus, Prometheus Bound

To leap or to dance, that is the question.[1]

Abstract

George Sarantaris wrote at a time when Greece, emerging from the traumas of the Great War and the Asia Minor Catastrophe, struggled to construct its national physiognomy. Joining the ranks of his better-known contemporaries, Sarantaris endeavoured through a noteworthy body of poetry and philosophy to grapple with the ambiguity of the human condition; an ambiguity that found its most tragic historical expression in the juxtaposition of the compassionate Christ-figure and the sanguinary war machine. Combining Dostoevsky's social Christianity, Eastern Orthodox asceticism and Kierkegaard's psychological (and proto-existentialist) orientation of faith, he created the model for a spiritual anti-polis that would address in a timely and positive manner the angst and nihilism of his age.

Sarantaris and the spiritual anti-polis

In an age where science is the new faith, forever absorbing human truth into itself by offering new ways to perpetuate life, to improve it and ultimately to raise man above the limitations of his very nature and the frightening spectacle of his own death and decay, one wonders what room there is for the kind of faith that grounds itself on metaphysical truth or reflection. And yet, faced with the prospect of living longer, of realising psychotherapy's ideal of an unrepressed existence, man still despairs, still finds overwhelming this age-old sense of his own creatureliness. Man still clings tenaciously to the notion,

ideal or myth of a higher being or power, irrespective of whether this power is perceived as residing in the vacuum of a transcendental resignation or as being a benevolent force operating actively within the world through the enlightened vision and faith of its believers. As the eminent Ernst Becker once remarked, 'we need the boldest creative myths, not only to urge men on but also and perhaps to help men see the reality of their condition' (Becker 1997: 280).

In the final analysis, human beings do not act simply on the basis of empirical truths. They may do so in the cocoon of a laboratory or in the ever-diminishing ivory tower, but in the matters that shock, devastate or captivate the very depths of their being, they generally act on what they *believe* to be true (rather than on what they empirically *know* to be true) and on what is true for *them* (rather than for some impersonal erudite consensus). Any system of thought that does not address the existential concerns, anxieties and hopes that human beings feel in their most private and personal moments, on a subjective plane, has a somewhat lopsided view of the world and of human beings as they stand within it. Ernst Becker summed this idea up nicely when he said (Becker 1997: 283):

> Whatever man does on this planet has to be done in the lived truth of the terror of creation, of the grotesque, of the rumble of panic underneath everything. Otherwise it is false. Whatever is achieved must be achieved from within the subjective energies of creatures, without deadening, with the full exercise of passion, of vision, of pain, of fear, and of sorrow.

The philosophy and poetry of George Sarantaris, ignored for decades by Greek critics for various reasons, is the kind of artistic and intellectual corpus that brings balance to the prevailing views of his time, especially because it is neither simply despairingly descriptive of the horrors of a world ravaged by war nor a desperate grasp at a panacea that will make man forget his smallness in the immensity of the forces of nature and world history. Writing in the 1930s, Sarantaris was concerned with addressing the powerlessness and despair felt by his contemporaries as a result of the war experience, and which seemed to find their apocryphal expression in Friedrich Nietzsche's proclamation that 'God is dead' – in the courageous acknowledgement, that is, that the 'objective' values upon which human action and thought had thus far constructed their cultural artefacts were no longer valid to the individual who had seen behind the veil of civilization and into the abyss. This peering into the abyss of maddening existential possibility or of spiritual emptiness beyond

an 'objective' body of values ensured, as Professor Weidle has argued, that any 'subjective' representation carried the onus of proving its own legitimacy (in Kumar 1962: 2). Kumar (1962: 2) added that the works of writers of the first quarter of the twentieth century who had experienced the dissolution of social myths and the unitary self, and who had experimented with the stream of consciousness method (Woolf, Richardson, Joyce and others) embody 'an integrated form of *principium individuationis*' and 'render in a literary medium a new realization of experience as a process of dynamic renewal' (Kumar 1962: 2).

Sarantaris himself experimented with the stream of consciousness method in his poetic prose and prose poetry, which have to some extent been misconstrued by the Greek monocultural gaze as evidence of the linguistic weaknesses considered 'typical' of his Greek-Italian hybridity. Sarantaris was very aware of the spectrum of literary methods that flourished within the framework of the modernist enterprise, but seemed more comfortable with the notion that literary expression (especially poetry) could affect a revolution (artistic and social) when it functioned as, or was informed by philosophy. This conviction crystallised into a relatively large corpus of poems (in Greek and Italian) and three philosophical essays (*Contribution to a Philosophy of Existence, The Presence of Man, An Essay on Logic as a Theory of the Absolute and Non-Absolute*), which outline not only the connection between foreign and Greek literary works to certain philosophical systems and artistic movements, but also the role that poetry and philosophy can play in enabling modern man to fashion a vision of the world and himself that addresses his anguished soul searching in a manner both functional and edifying.

Sarantaris's philosophical essays bear the unmistakeable mark of youth (with all three being published consecutively from the age of 30), steeped as they are in a naïve enthusiasm that very comfortably paints sweeping extravaganzas of world emancipation through a 'distinctly' Greek Orthodox Christian perspective (Sarantaris, 2001:135), and against the backdrop of a war experience that exposed an image of humanity at great odds with the Christ-figure. Having said this, it is not unreasonable to see the destiny of human culture as connected to an ultimate destiny of man, especially if the times are such that individuals are compelled to probe deeply into the meaning of their existence. Doing away with a prime mover may certainly turn one's gaze away from a greater end or existential purpose, but it may also inspire others to explore the reasons why their world-view is no longer

relevant and to find new ways to adapt it to the demands of the times. Sarantaris certainly fits into the latter category and in a way that has perhaps exceeded the expectations and estimation of his critics. To his credit, he did not commit the fallacy of confusing a definite historical formation with the idea(l) of Christianity.[2]

His attempt to counter the despair and fragmentariness of his age through an adaptation of Christianity to the needs and concerns that he perceives as being central to modern man's sense of self and understanding of the lived world is perhaps not so different (at least on the level of intent) to Nietzsche and Heidegger's re-interpretation of the pre-Socratic philosophers as a way of 'setting right' the 'errors' in the voluminous dialogue of western philosophy. Sarantaris is cognizant of the historical function of Christianity which 'entered the world precisely at one of the most critical periods of history, at the time of a momentous *crisis of culture*' (Florovsky 1974: 21). More importantly, he does not ground his image of Christianity on dogma or theology, but on philosophy, and in particular, on existentialist thought, which was the new gospel of the modernist self.

While Sarantaris's main claim to an Eastern Orthodox view of Christianity is largely based on his reverent appreciation of Dostoyevsky, one gets the sense that his affinity with Eastern Orthodoxy stems also from an asceticism that is not only in keeping with his personal living habits (he chose to live a life of frugality and ethical austerity and of complete devotion to his writing) but also with a view of Christianity as a desert-style *spiritual polis* in opposition to an empire in decline. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find in Sarantaris's work any mention of the church or of scripture for that matter, in spite of his very apparent preoccupation with God, Christ and Christianity (Zoumboulakis 2008: 903). His stance is a little reminiscent of John Chrysostom for whom, according to Georges Florovsky, 'the real danger of true piety began precisely with the external victory of the Church, when it became possible for a Christian to "settle down" in this world, with a considerable measure of security and even comfort, and to forget that he had no abiding City in this world and had to be a stranger and pilgrim on earth' (Florovsky 1974: 124). The model of the homeless or *aoikos* monk would certainly not be out of place in the world of the de-centred, fragmentary self, except for one important difference, the inner freedom of the individual to choose this state of homelessness. The modernist and the existentialist

arrive at this same feeling of homelessness, but chiefly because disheartening circumstances beyond their control have *thrown* them into it. They are *aoikoi* out of powerlessness and their freedom is an un-centred or de-centred one, based ultimately on an 'existential anguish among possibilities' (Brown 1989: 31).[3] The monk chooses to embrace this homelessness as an expression of his faith in a centre that is located in another realm but with which he communes through his active creation of an *anti-polis*. His homelessness is thus an expression of an empowered and empowering self and of a radically centred and centring freedom. As Florovsky observed (1974: 127):

> *Ascesis does not bind creativity, it liberates it, because it asserts it as an aim in itself. Above all – creativity of one's self. Creativity is ultimately saved from all sorts of utilitarianism only through an ascetical re-interpretation. Ascesis does not consist of prohibitions. It is activity, a 'working out' of one's very self. It is dynamic. It contains the urge of infinity, an eternal appeal, an unquenchable move forward. The reason for this restlessness is double. The task is infinite because the pattern of perfection is infinite, God's perfection. No achievement can ever be adequate to the goal. The task is creative because something essentially new is to be brought in existence. Man makes up his own self in his absolute dedication to God. He becomes himself only in this creative process.*

The ascetic is not perturbed by the fragmentation of the unitary self of Western Man, because his selfhood has never been a static image of a self-possessed ego, but a creative project of centring between existential potentiality and idealised actuality presided over by a workable, enduring, and above all, actualizing faith in the paradox of the Incarnation. Sarantaris took the 'Social Christianity' (Florovsky 1974: 136–37) espoused by Dostoyevsky, which sees the ideals of Christianity realised in the projects of social action and in a church built on a sense of common responsibility, piety, compassion and humility, and combined it with an existentialist view of Christianity that is indebted to Soren Kierkegaard, and odd as it may seem, to the Eastern Orthodox ascetic ideal. Sarantaris's praise of Dostoyevsky in *Contribution to a Philosophy of Existence* (in Skopetea 2001: 136) was unreserved:

> ... *in answering age-old questions, he exceeds the limits of the most recent philosophies, those which modern man escapes with difficulty in his quest for other limits; and I am thinking here of Hegel, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. For Dostoyevsky bore with the full breadth of his soul the primordial and collective problem of civilization, the problem of Christianity. This action was that of a*

powerful person, of a person who feels the fate of his people as his own fate, of a
person who did not seek power in solitude as did Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.[4]

However his appropriation of Kierkegaard's thought was not. Sarantaris
(2001:143) rejected the isolationist bent of Kierkegaard's thought because
he perceived Christianity as having a social (though not necessarily
institutionalised) dimension, and therefore, a social responsibility:

For whosoever has faith, there is no truth other than his truth; for there cannot
be two truths. Doubt must not be able to be accommodated by your life, so that
it does not spread to your thinking, to your logical reasoning and to your world-
view to a point where you corrupt other people.[5]

The individual may feel the full measure of his fallenness in his existential
anxiety over his sins, but his redemption is a collective endeavour. (I am
reminded here of the observation by Florovsky who in quoting a Russian scholar
remarks that 'man falls alone but is saved collectively'). The religious emphasis
should accordingly shift from the liberation of man from the consequences
of his 'original' failure to the 'fulfilment of God's design for man' (Florovsky
1974: 20). While sin is felt in aloneness or inwardness, in hermetic subjectivity,
faith and hope in redemption reach outwards in acts and words of love and
compassion. Faith and hope are in Sarantaris's estimation essentially associative
and should enhance societal consciousness. For a Christian, as Simone Weil
(1957: 73) put it, 'there is no greater sacrilege than insensitiveness toward those
who suffer'. The nightmare spectacle of a creation 'that has been soaked for
hundreds of millions of years in the blood of all its creatures' (Becker 1997:283)
rather than prompting the Christian to despair, acts as the impetus propelling
the believer forward in acts of kindness and humility and in fidelity to a vision
of heaven on earth (*anti-polis*). As Sarantaris pointed out in his *Contribution to a
Philosophy of Existence* (2001: 141):

The border of the Anthropos is eternity; The Anthropos does not cross this border
except in returning, so long as he still has time, to the test of the mortal self of
his changing nature. And he returns in an attempt to make a single moment of
his life tantamount to the time of his life; in an attempt on the part of his self
to be justly convinced that a single moment of his life has the same absolute
significance of the time of an entire life (The moment, as Kierkegaard teaches, is
not a unit of time, but a unit of eternity) ... [6]

The actualizing power of faith is precisely what makes it an expression of inner freedom. Standing before the chaos of existential possibility, which in the mind of the modernist writer often leads to paralysis and self-fragmentation (Brown 1989),[7] the Christian chooses to believe and to act on this belief. His faith *endures* through all adversity and emotional confusion because he must actively and freely choose between despair and faith, Kierkegaard's either/or, at every moment of his existence. It is precisely this durational movement, expressed in Kierkegaard as the dialectic of inwardness, which makes the Christian leaning towards eternity a temporal project. For Sarantaris, the real significance of the Danish philosopher's concept of inwardness is that it centres power in the individual, who in facing the possibility of despair before the horrors of daily existence and before the breakdown of a unitary social self into a multiplicity of potentialities, chooses the hopeful creativity embodied in a leap of faith. Faith presupposes determinacy, as opposed to determinism or indeterminacy. Powerlessness that culminates in despair can perceive life as meaningless either because it is based on natural or physical laws that it can never control and thus never transcend or be accountable for or because it is lost in a confusion of existential possibilities (of equal and, therefore, no distinct value). While the human intellect may in detaching itself from the concrete specificity of existence play with possibilities and even synthesise the very antinomies its reasoning has fashioned for the purposes of identity and generalisation, the human being as an ambiguous totality of mind and body and anchored within the contingency of its situatedness in time and space must choose between either/or if it is to act (freely and responsibly). It must, in short, move within the realm of contradictions which it perceives to be real and attached to particular outcomes both for itself and for others:

> *We do not possess nor are we able to attain to a representation of the presence*
> *of man. Our life neither moves nor wishes to move between representations*
> *and concepts, as do, for instance, Descartes, Kant, Schopenhauer and Hegel.*
> *(1987:156)[8]*

Clare Carlisle in analysing Kierkegaard's understanding of becoming maintained that 'in its *existential* sense, the either/or is connected to the individual's active power to make decisions' (Carlisle 2005: 55). The source of this power, which Sarantaris quite emphatically identified with faith, is in Kierkegaard aligned more closely with passion. As Carlisle elucidated (2005: 56):

... Climacus suggests that passion is the existential correlate of Aristotle's 'unmoved mover', which provides the ultimate source of motion in the cosmos. Like Aristotle's God, passion functions to anchor the flux and relativity of finite existence. Because the aesthete has no passion, his inner world resembles Heraclitus's cosmos: without any fixed points or solid ground, everything is true and so nothing is true; everything is in motion and nothing is in motion. Affirmation and negation become identical: 'What am I good for? – for nothing or for everything,' sighs the hopeless young man.

Although the empowerment of the individual rests on his fidelity to his faith, a fidelity which is experienced as repetitive inward movement, this faith is not felt intensely and to a point where its perpetuation and dissemination become imperative until it passes first through the filter of *thanatophobia*. The fear of death and its associated anguish are precisely what the individual must experience in order to gain an understanding of the eternal underpinnings of his mortality and ultimately the responsibility of communicating these to humankind through the creative praxis of art and culture:

Only through the contemplation of death does an unbeliever gain the necessary power not only to reach faith but also to create works that will endure, to create, in other words, culture. (Sarantaris, 1987:168)[9]

Mortality anxiety can become, according to Sarantaris, the most powerful impetus behind creativity not simply in the silent endurance of faith, but also in the poetry, that in aspiring to capture the spirit of man in the corporeality of the poetic symbol, pays tribute to the human ambiguity of beast and angel. Poetry is the anguished cry of the individual, who removed by self-consciousness from the blissful ignorance of nature, feels his body's resistance to the spirit's call for transcendence in the 'elusive longing' of existential anxiety (Sarantaris, 1987):

The View of the World[10]

Time, unseen, corrupts
the view of the world;
man becomes absent-minded
and doesn't look,
and if he looks
he doesn't see;

until death
he is tormented by an elusive longing
while he is corrupted by
some force
more elusive than time.

Becker's (1997: 69)comments on the relationship between human ambiguity and anxiety in Kierkegaard are particularly enlightening on this point:

Man's anxiety is a function of his sheer ambiguity and of his complete powerlessness to overcome that ambiguity, to be straightforwardly an animal or an angel. He cannot live heedless of his fate, nor can he take sure control over that fate and triumph over it by being outside the human condition.

The feelings of insecurity, isolation, thrownness and meaninglessness that culminate in 'attempts to find non-idealistic understandings of cultural artefacts' and which Ronald Schleifer posits within the context of European Modernism's 'generational mood of crisis' (Schleifer 2000: 221) prompt a re-evaluation of social and cultural nomic structures (Marks 1974). In Sarantaris's mind, this questioning of societal structures is inextricably linked with the lot not only of the nation but of humankind. The rise of existential angst is not simply a mark of the decline of civilization. It is the dynamic and responsible choice between radically altering dysfunctional nomic structures on the basis of humanity perceived *either* as a *species* governed by the deterministic laws of Freud's psychoanalytic theory and Marx's historical materialism *or* as a *spiritual fellowship* grounded in the cosmic (because truly existential) heroism of the *Theanthropos*:

Marxism and Freudianism are theories that sacrifice the person to death without even being aware of it. They are perversions borne of an unbridled hedonism. On the surface they grant hate and in essence the conviction of death ... the pleasure of death, of the death of the entire world, pervades them. This is why our faith in existence has a duty to become a world-view. (Sarantaris 1987: 151)

Sarantaris renounced these two important influences of the generation of the 30s, because both Freud and Marx dismissed faith in God as the symptom of a mass neurosis. While Freud's discovery of the subconscious points to an acknowledgement that the whole self can never be represented

in consciousness and thus outside the temporality of its existence, it fails to go beyond the libidinal impulses to longings that would urge the individual towards a discovery of his eternal self, the *anthropos*, felt within time as existential angst. This would also probably account for Sarantaris's suspicion towards surrealism. While Marx's theory of historical materialism rightly considers man as anchored within his temporality and ideally enlisted in the struggle for emancipation from the shackles of necessity, it sacrifices the individual's potentially divine consciousness to a matter that is indifferent to man's concrete uniqueness. For Sarantaris, literature, the kind of literature that truly honours man's potential to realise the eternal self within him, the historical example of the *Theanthropos*, equates with social action, because it bravely confronts death in its bid for immortality, and more importantly, it opens up the consciousness of man to the wonder of learning the diachronic truths of his existence within the synchronic act of poetic creation and interpretation.

Existentialism, in exposing the nothingness of man, the inauthentic selves of his complacency and his imprisonment in a civilization that obscures this inauthenticity, steers thought towards the importance of seeing the self as the locus of durational and existential creativity rather than as a static monad or identity. In so far as it emphasises the inauthenticities involved in the individual's entanglement in a culture-bound existence and the need for re-assessing the Cartesian *cogito* as an identity created *in abstracto*, existentialist thought is quite compatible with Sarantaris's emphasis on the historical presence (*Theanthropos*) of the Divine Logos and on the imperative of treating the here-and-now of existence as the uniquely human opening towards the eternity intuited within anxiety and as the other face of despair. Kierkegaard's Christian (proto)existentialism with its psychological orientation of faith[11] as the antidote to existential anxiety offers to Sarantaris the perfect platform from which to address the angst and despair of his own age in a manner that adapts his Christian viewpoint to new trends in philosophical thought and literary expression. It allowed him to demonstrate, as T.S. Eliot succinctly put it, that 'the life of a soul does not consist in the contemplation of one consistent world but in the painful task of unifying … jarring and incompatible ones.' (Brown 1989: 32)

Sarantaris and the Promethean leap

In writing the second part of this paper, two notions stand uppermost in my mind. One notion came from a friend who wisely observed that time stands still for punishment, while the second came from an article in the *Australian* newspaper, in which its author argued that the greatest motivator of human behaviour and cultural endeavour is a fear of death. One might well ask what connection these two notions have to the work of Sarantaris. Aeschylus's depiction of the punishment of Prometheus at the hands of an enraged Zeus is, I think, a good visual distillation of the point at which these two notions converge.

Prometheus, a symbol of the defiance inherent in the human consciousness and will, embodies both the fear of the forces (known and unknown) which are greater than him (empathic awareness of the finitude of mortals) and the reaction to that fear through theft or displacement (hope in his ability to create a uniquely human legacy for posterity). The urge to deceive Zeus is ultimately the urge to stand outside the circular or natural time (anachronistically, Nietzsche's eternal recurrence) into which his very existence throws him by realising his historicity in an act of supreme defiance. The limitless repetition of an immortal time is in this single act reduced to the conditional and contingent time of mortality, and the divine punishment that ensues simply emerges to amplify this single moment of human πάθος (suffering/endurance) and defiance. Prometheus' act of defiance is expressed as freedom of the human will (with which he empathically identifies) measured against the constraints of the immortal forces that would limit and contain it. The very act of binding Prometheus only serves to highlight the freedom that is implied in this act of 'human' defiance. More importantly, Zeus's decision to punish Prometheus repeatedly reflects in a way the kind of angst that is later, in a post-Christian age, associated with guilt or shame. Prometheus is reminded constantly of his transgression by being imprisoned in the dialectics of a punishment that sees him vacillate between the fear of pain (a human fear that makes him recoil) and the decision to defiantly endure bondage (a divine will that makes him transcend his pain by looking toward the future with the very hope he has given to humans so that they 'no longer foresee their death') (Vellacott 1961: 28). The angst he feels is experienced as the personal duration in which he is continuously reminded of the pain that

he alone feels and endures in the prison of the mortality-immortality paradox that his love for humanity thrusts him into. He is quite prepared, however, to stand his ground, to endure the pains heaped upon him by an unrelenting and unforgiving Zeus, because he has complete faith in a prophecy that tells him that he will eventually be released and that his suffering will act as a precursor to the fall of Zeus's tyrannical reign and the birth of a new world order in which humankind will enjoy greater emancipation from the bonds of necessity. Prometheus stands as the ultimate visual representation of the freedom of the human will, which in the face of extreme punishment still chooses to defy Zeus repeatedly and in so doing to transcend his order. Prometheus's relentless defiance is thus the image of the movement of the human will and ultimately the freedom inherent in its becoming. The repetitive nature of the punishment Prometheus endures is the impetus for the movement that characterizes his fidelity to his prophetic vision, to the future. This fidelity enables πάθος to become an embodiment not simply of suffering but also of the profoundly personal passion that both prompts and endures it.

I have opened with this image of Prometheus bound but defiant because I wished to establish a parallel with the image of Sarantaris as he emerged in the testimonies of his friends and biographers, an image that seems to have, at times, eclipsed even the need for a systematic and in-depth assessment of his unique contribution to Greek letters. The parallel with Prometheus may seem strange, given that Sarantaris is often presented as a young intellectual who was completely devoid of the social graces or practicality that were expected of an artist of his era.[12] While poets of his generation were attempting to adapt their poetry to the immediate demands of their society and to the ideal of the 'action man', Sarantaris chose to live on the meagre rental income he earned from a small inheritance and to devote his time and energy to his writing. He had attained a doctorate in law, but never practised as a lawyer, much to the dismay of his entrepreneurial father. He has been described as awkward to the point of appearing somehow otherworldly, indifferent to politics and laughably naïve in behaviour and outlook. Overall, the image that emerges from the testimonies gathered posthumously by his critics is that of a feeble young man with an intelligence and world-view that were removed from the harsh realities of his time, and more importantly, from the methods and movements adopted by his contemporaries to

address them. The literary historian Mario Vitti (1979: 94) maintained that: 'Sarantaris' experiences occurred within a context that was consciously and obstinately kept narrow for the sake of intensity. His experience appears all the more limited and stifling when we compare it to the breadth of interests and combative vigour of Nikita Rantos, the social revolutionary who discarded Karyotakism using entirely different means'.[13] Sarantaris's apparent indifference to politics would certainly have made him appear somewhat of an anomaly to his contemporaries. However, his regular contribution to several literary journals in Thessaloniki and Athens, including the famous *Nea Grammata*, together with his consistent participation in philosophical debate at the University of Athens (which the Nobel Laureate Odysseus Elytis admiringly comments on in his 'Chronicle of a Decade')[14] point to a thinker that is very interested in the issues of the day, and who rather than being politically apathetic, perceives politics as either irrelevant to these issues or an ineffective way of addressing them. It is important to note here that Greece had in its liberation from the Ottoman yoke, and especially in its subsequent project of nation building, perceived itself through the eyes of a (western) European centre.[15] The quest for Greekness that characterized the work of many of the writers of the generation of the 30s was a telling symptom of precisely this. Sarantaris differed from his contemporaries in that he was not merely indifferent to the predominant European influences of his day but was diametrically opposed to them (Sarantaris 1987: 135):

> I think that modern day Greece can critically assess so-called Western Civilization; it can and must critically assess such a civilization, if it wants to escape the influence that Europe has had on us for an entire century, if it wishes to discover the clarity of a pristine view of things and the authentic beauty of our country and its people; a criterion of truth for all of the people of the earth.[16]

Moreover, Sarantaris promulgated a redefining of the Greek *geist* through less popular currents of thought that he felt were closer to an 'authentic' rather than 'European' Greece. He envisaged the establishment of a spiritual fellowship grounded in an Eastern Orthodox and Existentialist (both as he defined them, of course) Christianity as a counter-position to the more popular nihilistic theories of his time. Finally, he saw poetry as an important antidote to (rather than chronicle of) the greatest malady of modernity, despair. In the light of all this, he can perhaps still be understood as 'otherworldly' but only in the sense of exemplifying the kind of creative

anomie that the death of God invites. God, or any other image of immortality, is not unlike Prometheus's liver in this respect. Its death becomes the necessary precursor to regeneration and rebirth. *Anomie* through punishment and suffering becomes not the reaffirmation simply of concrete instances of the nomic but an affirmation of *nomos* proper. Poetry within the context of a culture in crisis can perform an associative function; it can tap into the fluid and 'obscure collective consciousness' of society, which Durkheim deemed 'unconsidered' and inaccessible (Marks 1974: 342), and creatively transform the anomic, the mythic and the otherworldly into nomic structures within a more broadly realised societal and human consciousness:

God[17]

> *Poetry The world is sea My mind*
> *invisible it suffers*
> *My mind I wants to receive body*
> *consubstantial*
> *blossom on the surface of vision*
> *susurration upon the flux*
> *The sun song relieves the sea*
> *it fashions the clarity of its waves*
> *I feel everywhere:*
> *I see the sea*
> *the sun*
> *nothingness perhaps*
> *I'm dreaming of a human being*

To return to the parallel I have drawn between Aeschylus's Prometheus and Sarantaris, I would venture to add here a third image in the hope of synthesizing the former two. The image is that of Dostoyevsky's Prince Myshkin in the *Idiot* who beautifully encapsulates an inversion of Durkheim's concept of *anomie*. Dostoevsky's Idiot can perhaps be linked to Prometheus on the basis of the words spoken by Ocean to Prometheus in Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, and quoted by Simone Weil in her marvellous book *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks* (1957: 59): 'There is no greater gain than to appear mad because one is good'.

Further, Dostoevsky's idiot can be linked to Sarantaris on the basis of his realisation that 'I loved generously, without foresight, without ulterior motive, without the prospect of gain; I was, in other words, a perfectly undignified person in the eyes of many. And one day I realised that I had never been taken seriously.'[18] Just as Prince Myshkin endures the relentless ridicule and inauthenticity (that is, punishment) of those around him to a point where he retreats from the world in a state of resignation or 'enlightened' madness, so too does Prometheus withdraw from the world of mortals and immortals to endure the punishment and suffering at the hands of Zeus. In both cases, a deeply personal conviction or passion opens a divide between both (anti) heroes and the accepted (nomic) order of things. The suffering in both instances is connected to the getting of a wisdom that is both transcendental and concrete; transcendental in so far as it understands and knows beyond the confines of logic and reason, and concrete in so far as it can only come to an individual through the suffering that he endures alone, in and with his body and his time. Simone Weil conveys this notion with her usual eloquence when she says (1957: 57):

> *Unlike certain morbid valuations of our time, the Greeks never attributed value to suffering for its own sake. The word they chose to designate suffering, πάθος, is one which evoked above all the idea of enduring more than of suffering. Man must endure that which he does not want. He must find himself in submission to necessity. Misfortunes leave wounds which bleed drop by drop even during sleep; and thus, little by little, they break a man by violence and make him fit, in spite of himself, to receive wisdom, that wisdom which expresses itself in moderation. Man must learn to think of himself as a limited and dependent being, suffering alone can teach him this.*

In both cases the prospect and experience of suffering do not culminate in despair, for suffering is embraced as the only path to wisdom. The force that mediates between the πάθος and the μάθος is hope precisely because it gives ἔσχατον, that is, meaning or purpose to the suffering, as well as movement to the inwardness or self-consciousness that persists in repetition through the forbearance of pain. Simone Weil expressed this very notion when she noted that (1957: 75): 'All Greek civilization is a search for bridges to relate human misery and divine perfection.' Hope, by this reckoning, is ultimately the impetus behind the movement involved in the willing to endure suffering. It

is the kind of movement that makes the invisible manifest in the unfolding or *becoming* of revelation, a movement expressed perhaps in Heidegger's analysis of *aletheia* as the shift from concealment (oblivion) to unconcealment (un-oblivion).

Through their lack of fit with the questionable nomic structures of their societies, both Prometheus and the Idiot become living embodiments of the compromise that is forged between the higher consciousness of the powers that be and the lower consciousness of the masses. In other words, their suffering is an aspect of their gatekeeping. Aeschylus's Prometheus gives fire and knowledge to mortals, so that they might achieve through these tangibles an indirect understanding of things invisible and divine. Dostoevsky's Idiot in his anomic withdrawal from Petersburg society offers through his Christ-like example a reflection of what his society has become. The Promethean leap, therefore, consists in the bridging of a divide between the highest level of consciousness, epitomised in the omniscient Zeus, and the lower level of consciousness, embodied in the yet unenlightened masses of mortals. Prometheus's theft is essentially his assertion of his role as 'gatekeeper',[19] his attempt to render an inaccessible divine consciousness (Zeus's omniscience) accessible to humankind through the structures of societal consciousness (fire and the arts and sciences). His defiance is a symbol of the *anomie* inherent in the transition from old gods to new ones (a transition that, incidentally, does not admit the possibility of an annihilation of gods altogether). The Idiot's leap consists in the faith that makes every instance of suffering a piece in the edifice of the alternative world he creates with his duration and with his painful alienation.

Sarantaris, who lost his life (to the indignation of many of his friends and critics)[20] at the hands of nomic structures that placed a sensitive intellectual in the frontline of war rather than in an office position commensurate with his skills, seemed very much the Idiot in terms of his child-like faith in and honesty towards others. However, what the Idiot in him inscribed on the minds of those who remember him with fondness or regret, the Prometheus in him achieved in a leap of faith not only in the future of Greece but in the future of poetry. The poetic word, according to Sarantaris, is the greatest leap of faith because it offers a cross-section of the complex moments of an individual's duration; it houses both the temporality that

engenders it and the yearnings that compel it to seek the eternity that it intuits in the lacunae of existence and in its quest for meaning:[21]

An evening[22]

An evening
the most tame evening,
finds us alone
in a corner
of the town
where the children have left
and also the dogs,
they've closed the shops
they've put out the lights
and no-one stands guard

Starving
thirsty
we are not devoured by despair

When all social myths stand in ruins, leaving the cultural self in a 'tame darkness', bereft of any support or consolation, and without even the facade of a complacent social existence, the poet, and the spiritual fellowship that he sees himself as part of, uses the longing for immortality and meaning (here starvation and thirst and perhaps an allusion to the Eucharist) and the poetry this gives birth to as weapons against doubt and despair.[23] Poetry in an age that has no adequate code with which to articulate its angst is a leap of faith over the divide between a past whose relevance has expired and an uncertain future, whose relevance has yet to be discovered. It is the poetic imagination which opens up vistas of existential possibility for the self, removing temporality from the mire of a disappointing 'everydayness' and a traumatic recent history and placing it on the level of an achievable, universally significant selfhood.

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Notes

[1] To contextualise this statement, see Deleuze as quoted in Clare Carlisle (2005: 139): 'It then becomes easy to speak of the differences between Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Even this question, however, must no longer be posed at the speculative level of the ultimate nature of the God of Abraham or the Dionysus of Zarathustra. It is rather a matter of knowing what it means to "produce movement", to repeat or to obtain repetition. Is it a matter of leaping, as Kierkegaard believes? Or is it a matter of dancing, as Nietzsche thinks? ... Nietzsche's leading idea is to ground the repetition in eternal return on the death of God and the dissolution of the self. Kierkegaard dreams of an alliance between a God and a self rediscovered. All sorts of differences follow: is the movement in the sphere of the mind, or in the entrails of the earth which knows neither God nor self? Where will it be better protected against generalities, against mediations?'

[2] 'When "Culture" is resisted or denied by Christians, it is always a definite historical formation which is taken to be representative of the idea. In our days it would be the mechanized or "Capitalistic" civilization, inwardly secularized and therefore estranged from any religion.' (Florovsky 1974: 22).

[3] This comment by Brown (1989: 31) was made in the narrower context of an analysis of Eliot's Prufrock and in the broader context of a view of the modernist self as being self-consciously fragmented, caught in a paralysis of existential possibility and uncentred freedom.

[4] This is my translation.

[5] This is my translation.

[6] This is my translation.

[7] See Dennis Brown(1989: 51): 'The Great War, then, enforced a twofold message on those who were to produce its literature: the final fragmentariness of the self under fire, and the socialism of the serving self as self-distribution into disparate army roles and functions. Both are expressed in war literature. And both have their legacy in post-war Modernism where the disjunctive self is simultaneously the socially dispersed self.' Also: 'The tendency of Modernist literature, of course, is to explore the dynamics of this paradox rather than to resolve it rationally, stressing both the absurdity and the poignancy of the inauthentic man. At the same time, its discourse, which stresses the fragmentary nature of selfhood, dissipates the notion of 'the unity of a single consciousness' which informs Sartre's neo-Cartesian approach. It is closer to Lacan's formulation: "I think where I am not, therefore I am not where I think".' (Brown 1989: 110).

[8] This is my translation.

[9] This is my translation.

[10] This is my translation.

[11] See 'The Psychoanalyst Kierkegaard' in Ernst Becker, The Denial of Death, (1997: 68): 'There have been several good attempts to show how Kierkegaard anticipated the data of modern clinical psychology. Most of the European existentialists have had something to say about this, along with theologians like Paul Tillich. The meaning of this work is that it draws a circle around psychiatry and religion; it shows that the best existential analysis of the human condition leads directly into the problems of God and faith, which is exactly what Kierkegaard had argued.'

[12] See especially Elytis' description of him in Anoihta Hartia, 3i ekdosi, Ikaros, Athina, 1987, 'To Hroniko mias Dekaetias', pp. 344-346.

[13] This is my translation.

¹⁴ See Odysseas Elytis, *Anoihta Hartia*, 3i ekdosi, Ikaros, Athina, 1987, 'To Hroniko mias Dekaetias', pp. 343-344.

¹⁵ Elytis also saw Greece as being misunderstood by Europeans. See Odysseus Elytis, op. cit., 'To Hroniko mias Dekaetias', p. 454: 'The difficulty of connecting the Western spirit to the Eastern; the misinterpretation of the depths of the Greek spirit by foreigners, which encumbered communication between us and for which we were responsible; the mission of Poetry in our age; the metaphysical need beyond the typology of any religion; the significance of language and its relationship with other phenomena of nature and the spirit; the resurgence of the problematics of form and in the context of modern poetry ... would come to constitute the axis of the codification of my conclusions.' This is my translation.

¹⁶ This is my translation.

¹⁷ This is my translation.

¹⁸ «Αγαπούσα αφειδώς, χωρίς προνοητικότητα, χωρίς υστεροβουλία, χωρίς να ζητώ ανταλλάγματα, ήμουνα δηλαδή ένας άνθρωπος με τέλεια αναξιοπρέπεια στα μάτια του πλήθους. Και μια μέρα κατάλαβα πως δε μ' έπαιρναν στα σοβαρά». This is my translation and my emphasis.

¹⁹ In answering the question: What structural counterpart could possibly give rise to a distinctively societal culture? Dukheim outlined two alternatives: 'The first was that everyone in society may somehow interact with everyone else. Unfortunately, "[the mass] has no unity, is not gathered within one enclosure, and its attention cannot be applied at the same moment to the same object". The second seemed to be the only solution, and this was to look for "gatekeepers" to the society – persons or associations whose members were recruited from the society at large and served a function of mediating and articulating "society". It would be possible, at least in theory, for everyone in the society to receive information from these gatekeepers and relay feedback in various ways. The result would still be an emergent societal "nomos," only obtained through means of social interactions that were indirect.' (Marks 1974: 338).

²⁰ Elytis expressed his pain over the loss of his friend in Anoihta Hartia: 'He was the only and most unjust loss ... I would like at this moment, and very frankly, to accuse the army mobilization system which prevailed at that time and which (I still am at a loss to understand how) managed to retain in its Offices and Commissariat all of the thick-skinned beasts of Athens' patisseries and to send to the front the purest and most defenceless being. He was a fragile intellectual who could barely stand, who had just managed to come up with the most original and benevolent ideas for Greece and her future. It was more or less an assassination. He was a graduate of an Italian university – perhaps the only graduate in the entire army – he could have been indispensable to whichever of the Services had undertaken the counter-espionage or the interrogation of hostages. But no! He had to bear the burden of the heavy knapsack and armaments, so that yet another poet could be lost in the snow-laden gorges, another innocent sacrificed on the road of torment.' This is my translation. Odysseus Elytis, op. cit., in 'To Hroniko mias Dekaetias', p. 393.

²¹ Julia Kristeva (1993: 53) made an interesting observation that seems relevant to this point: 'Perception of present reality is a disappointment, and only the imagination can provide lasting enjoyment, in its quest for what is absent...'.

²² This is my translation.

²³ Ernest Becker (1973: 91) expressed this notion very aptly when he said: 'Out of the ruins of the broken cultural self there remains the mystery of the private, invisible, inner self which yearned for ultimate significance, for cosmic heroism. This invisible mystery at the heart of every culture now attains cosmic significance by affirming its connection with the invisible mystery at the heart of creation. This is the meaning of faith.'