



POLIS

Hyperreal Athens: Phantasmatic Memory and the Reproduction of Civic Alienation

James Faubion

Rice University

I'm very pleased to be able to be with you today. Before I begin, I must take a moment to thank the very gracious hosts who have brought me here: the evidently irrepressible Vrasidas Karalis, first of all, but also all of the other officers of the Modern Greek Studies Association. *Khronia polla*.

Those of you who are familiar with my past work on Greece are perhaps expecting from me a lecture about to burst with its stuffing of eclectic and impenetrable theoretical verbiage, hopelessly distant from the reality of everyday life, confusing the marginal with the central, blithely offensive to nationalist and culturally conservative sentiments and peppered to top it all off with a generous serving of minor but distracting errors of factual detail. I will do my best to satisfy such expectations, but I must confess that I can do no more than take as my initial point of departure here what any of you who have spent any time in Athens will recognise as the most familiar and readily repeated of commonplaces. The question that preoccupies me is that of why the commonplaces at issue are quite so familiar and quite as durable as they are. A ready, a commonsensical answer might be that they survive because they are true. That answer is, however, anthropologically insufficient in at least two respects. Grounded in common sense, it cannot acknowledge that common sense, which varies considerably with variations of cultural tradition and historical experience and social organisation, itself merits being put into question, being made into an object of inquiry. It further presupposes a somewhat presumptuous perspective on our human relation to the truth, as if – beyond the insular enclaves of the academy (?) – we tend to reject falsehood and believe what is true, and that we believe what is true simply because it is true and not because it is also satisfying, for example, or

James Faubion, "Hyperreal Athens: Phantasmatic Memory and the
Reproduction of Civic Alienation", *Culture & Memory*. Special Issue of
Modern Greek Studies (Australia and New Zealand), 2006: 175-190.

because it serves our purposes or perhaps contributes to the maintenance of the systems of practice we embody and enact without ever thinking about what we are doing. Beginning in the 1920s and until recently, anthropologists customarily set aside the matter of the truth or falsity of the exotic or unexpected beliefs they encountered and focused instead on other of their properties – such functional properties as the one to which I have just alluded, for example, but also analogical or more broadly semiological properties. For my part, I see no point in ignoring or denying that the commonplaces that I will be visiting shortly have their truth and that what truth they have contributes to what tenacity they display. I am nevertheless primarily interested in the collectively shaped and collectively shared dispositions of perception and feeling and thought – in short, the “habitus”, to use the first of that imminent flood of jargon that I am even now struggling to contain – of which such commonplaces are at once prompts and reflections, signals and signs.

*

I was most recently in Athens for about five weeks during May and June of 2004. I had the pleasure then to introduce myself for the first time to Vrasidas Karalis, who had previously invited me to this conference and who was visiting Athens to participate – and in a decidedly irrepressible way, too – in a conference on another theme. I went not actually to begin a new research project, but to determine whether I might be able to find a project worth beginning. As in the past, I was looking for “intellectuals”, or – to avoid a term almost as ambiguous and as much belaboured in English as its counterpart is in Greek – knowledge workers. I did indeed find a very interesting consortium of them, all at work on the completion of an EU-mandated and EU-wide endeavour called FORESIGHT and devoted, as its name might suggest and as those of you who heard Demosthenes Agrafiotis speak yesterday know to be devoted, to the systematic imagination of civic, regional, national and international futures. Due to the embarrassing, unquestionably excessive generosity (some at least of the classic Greek virtues are alive and well) of Dr. Agrafiotis – poet, essayist, lithographer, serigrapher, photographer, painter, installation artist, Professor of Sociology, current Chancellor of one of the institutional centres of FORESIGHT in Greece, Athens’ National School of Public Health and analyst of FORESIGHT as well – I was able to make respectable headway in discerning just what the defining parameters of the systematic imagination of civic, regional, national and international futures might be. Work, in short, went well.

But then (and so the commonplaces begin...) there was getting to work and leaving it and occupying the hours before and after and in between. I have friends in Athens – Demosthenes and his wife Andiklia included. I saw them. I saw some of my friends regularly. Our conversations, however, tended to turn with considerably more than the typical insistence to that most common of Greek commonplaces – *e zoê einai duskolê*, “life is hard” – and with every other common man or woman interviewed on the nightly television news, I could only agree. I won’t go into the deficits of the hotel room that I had reserved, suited precisely for the sort of pious ascetic that I am not. Nor will I lament my sad discovery that my capacity to read Demotic – which I had maintained through regular exercise despite the distance between Athens and Houston, my home of something more than eleven years now – was no guarantee of my capacity to produce the language verbally. Nor will I blame the unusually mild weather that I encountered in the first days after my arrival in the capital for the severe sunburn I acquired, nor for the daily cosmetic anxieties – which in the case of a person as vain as I am can run quite high – with which I had to cope as a consequence. At the moment at least, I can’t authentically join Greek complaints over retirement pensions being cut since I have not been expecting any pension whatever from the Greek government. I will rest with the *duskolies* – and I merely mean “difficulties” – that my Athenian friends and those Athenians interviewed on the television news and I could claim that we all recognised as our own, however truncated my own obligation to cope with them may have been.

Need I even bother to mention that the capital is crowded, and far more crowded than it has ever been before? Perhaps not – but it is at least appropriate to note that the demographic trends that led, in the 1960s and 1970s, to its attaining the proper status of a megalopolis are not the same as those that have led more recently to its attaining the status of what some of my more sardonic friends and acquaintances pronounce a *metapolis*, a “post-city.” “Every single Greek” may own an apartment in Athens, and Greek youth especially may continue to migrate to it from birthplaces insular or rural, but not at nearly the pace that they did previously. Athens and Thessalonike are no longer the only places in Greece in which one might hope to thrive and prosper in the most up-to-date of capitalist terms. Yet Attica remains the greatest magnet of unskilled labour and entrepreneurship and from shortly before the turn of the current century until this year its attraction drew increasing numbers of able-bodied and ambitious non-nationals seeking opportunities of employment that Greeks themselves either disdained or were simply too few to exhaust. The vast enterprise of construction and renovation that unfolded in preparation for

the Olympic Games and the Paralympics was one source of those opportunities, but it was not the only one. If the journalistic exposés of the (northern hemisphere's) past autumn are to be believed, the accountancy that established that Greece was qualified to participate fully in the European Economic Community (and so to replace the *dhrahma* with the euro) was less than fully accurate, but what is done is done and, in its wake, the gross national product and the national standard of living have both increased at a pace well in excess of the pan-European norm, though I have been told that a good number of Athenians are ready to pronounce that "the numbers lie."¹ Athens may thus still seem poor if one is peering at it through lenses manufactured in Bonn or Paris. It evidently seems little short of El Dorado to the supernumerary citizen of Islamabad or Dhaka or New Delhi or Kinshasa or Timbuktu or – I wouldn't dare fail to mention – Tirana. I was never able to obtain a secure or precise estimate of the number of foreign migrants – not even to mention the quasi-foreign Roma – living in the greater Attic metropolis for the very simple reason that only imprecise estimates are to be had. Something in excess of one and a quarter million is the rough mean of the range I encountered and it surely tends toward the conservative. It could plausibly be doubled. An hour's walk around the precincts of Omonia Square was more than enough to convince me that the number must be very high indeed.

These migrants – with their often itinerant (because illegal) displays of plastic shoes, sunglasses and pirated CDs and with a growing number of panhandlers, the latter including what in my experience was a novel contingent of vaguely Danish and vaguely atavistic new-age hippies who would sit or lie on University Avenue or its intersections with an air of satisfied desperation and the obligatory baby in their arms – add palpably to the already nagging pedestrian density of the capital's central triangle, but they contribute only marginally to what reports released earlier this year asserted to be a domestic para-economy amounting to some thirty percent of the whole. Nor can they be blamed for the unprecedented density of the vehicular traffic that I encountered in the same triangle during every one of the various rush-hours – early morning, midday, early afternoon, early evening, mid-evening – that can punctuate any given Athenian day. And everyone knows the story behind that, doesn't he? Doesn't she? More than two decades ago, the Ministry of Transportation imposed measures intended to ameliorate what even then was widely considered to be an intolerable excess of traffic in the capital's core. Only those privately owned vehicles with odd-numbered license plates would have access to the

¹ I am grateful to one of my graduate students, Aimee Placas, who has in the past two years been investigating the consequences of the introduction of credit cards into Greece, for this qualification.

centre on any one day; only those with even-numbered plates the next. Metropolitan car dealers must still be rejoicing at the result: that many of the affected drivers undertook to secure a second car, which for an "additional fee" could be provisioned with a license plate ending in an odd number if that of the first was even, even if that of the first was odd. Athens has long had an elaborate network of buses, of course, but they have been and remain for the modest – the moralistically modest, the militantly modest, and the all too modest. It has not until this year made a metro available to the majority of its suburban populations. It does now, but the beautiful new string of stations that decorate the urban underground can already be as crowded and – in spite of ample air conditioning – as emotionally overheated during rush hours as the streets above.

Neither pedestrian nor vehicular traffic benefited at all during the past Athenian May and June from the urban infrastructure being in great stretches in a condition of ongoing repair – or of lingering if officially temporary disrepair, or yet more accurately, of countervailing but inextricable deconstruction and reconstruction, all in the name of the Olympics and national honour. Some of what had already been accomplished was to my mind genuinely distinguished. The metro stop at Syntagma Square, for example, is entirely classical at once in its proportions and its sensibility. Its scale is monumental, but not inhuman. Its open spaces invite an openness of the gaze, even reflection. The skeleton it preserves still resting in its ancient grave behind the glass of a vast cross-section of archaeological stratigraphy emanates a sad dignity and a very intimate mortality. Proceed on the metro from Syntagma to the similarly classical Acropolis stop and you will be only a few blocks from the broad, marble esplanade beginning just across from the Temple of the Olympian Zeus, passing in the long dale between the Acropolis and Mount Philopappos and culminating in a string of fashionable cafeterias and restaurants in the Theseion district at the western edge of the *agora*. The esplanade is bright and beckoning and affords what is surely the greatest single archaeological walking tour in all the world. Tourists make use of it, of course, but so – with regularity and often with transparent pleasure – do native Athenians. During my original fieldwork, I lived in Kolonaki, but seeking a change of scene – with a vengeance – I have stayed during my last two visits in Koukaki, and so have found myself within easy walking distance of the rough midway point of the esplanade and of the stairs that meander casually upward, through an austere wood of pine and cypress, to the entrance to the Odeon of Herodes Atticus. Perhaps not all of you would think that there is something ecstatically singular about sitting beneath the southern arches of Herodes' Odeon on the wind-polished remnant of the

foundation of some lost Hellenistic or early Roman edifice in the half-shade of pine and ageless cypresses, writing postcards to home. I myself do, but have to admit that while indulging myself in the experience on several occasions, I could only note with some distraction that the tourists and the natives exercising themselves on the esplanade were very often in the uninvited company of stray dogs, which roam for the most part in nonchalant but subtly threatening packs through a large swath of a city once governed exclusively by its rag-taggle kingdom of cats. The cats have not disappeared, by any means, but they are now forced to be more discreet.

In the course of more than a month, through a hundred conversations and hours of that sort of eavesdropping in which anthropologists believe they have professional license wantonly to engage, I never once encountered any native praise the completed metro stops. Instead, I heard a great many complaints about how far behind schedule the completion of the remaining stops was, and about how the noise and the dust and the blocked lanes of traffic and the worsening of pollution and the piles of detritus and the magically disappearing sidewalks and the relentless noise and the pall of the pressure and the anxiety of being a part of a whole nation facing a crucial deadline that it might fail to meet – and the anticipation of the shame that would ensue if it did so fail – had everyone even more ready than usual to scream at anyone who got in his way and had put a good three-quarters of the Attic population on elephantine doses of Xanax (probably an exaggeration).² I heard not a single native express approval of the expansion of the long-planned archaeological park with its marble esplanade. Instead, I heard much mockery of the scaffolding that had surrounded the Parthenon for more than twenty years – hastily but temporarily dismantled before the Olympic athletes and their fans began arriving – and indeed any number of complaints about the stray dogs and the “selfish”, “rude” people who had abandoned so many of them after the brief fad for owning large dogs had waned. I was treated to story after story – probably largely true, but I cannot verify them with certainty – of how a “corrupt” official had accepted bribes in exchange for the contract to rebuild the Athens-Marathon highway, which had to be torn apart and rebuilt a second time after inspectors determined that the first effort was structurally flawed. I was regaled with almost gleeful accounts of how the “incompetent idiots” who had designed and executed the renovation of Omonia Square – worse even than those responsible for the dysmorphic Foivos and Athiná, the Olympic mascots – produced an uncanny imitation

² Once again, I am indebted to Aimee Placas for this report from the field.

of a war bunker even uglier than what had preceded it, hot and unhygienic and destined by common consensus only to be razed. I met with the already familiar litany of railing against “developers” and other “private interests” who were seizing every opportunity to make all of modern Athens even uglier than it already was and destroy what little was left of the Attic ecosystem in the process. And so on. You can consequently appreciate my surprise when, on a most unique evening, I happened to pass a woman declaiming in tones nothing short of revelatory to her thirty-something companions, *M’aresei ê Plaka*, “I like the Plaka!” No commonplace there, I assure you.

*

Whatever might be made of the very odd exception, metropolitan discourse about the metropolis itself is overwhelmingly negative. In short-form, I’ll call it “the Athenian negative.” In my personal experience, it has always been so. But I can already sense some committee of Athenians forming to publish an official response in *To Vêma*:

Once again Professor Faubion proves himself to be completely blind or completely indifferent to the most inescapable and self-evident of the conditions that, every single day and night of their lives, citizens of the capital are forced to endure. If what he casts in his habitually abstruse and precious jargon as “metropolitan discourse about the metropolis itself” or, “in short-form”, the “Athenian negative” is indeed “overwhelmingly negative”, this is because it is an honest discourse. Life is hard and life in Athens is harder still. Public servants are liable to corruption and no one suffers their corruption more frequently or more injuriously than Athenians themselves. The government is inefficient. It is unresponsive. It panders far too often to private interests. It fails to enforce the very laws it enacts. As a consequence, it finds itself presiding over a city that has become ever more unliveable. Athenians enjoy complaining no more than anyone else. But this does not mean that they do not have the right and the cause to do so...

In good part, I would in fact have no argument with such a response. Yet, I would press for qualification. First of all, its accuracy *stricto sensu* aside, it lacks the tempering of perspective. From Sydney harbour, Athens perhaps

does look a touch shabby. From Islamabad, again, or Dhaka or New Delhi or Kinshasa, it may well have all the radiance of paradise. Second, the “Athenian negative” isn’t merely permissible. It is normative, as I can once again report from consistent and often reiterated personal experience. I have no objection when Greeks whom I know well presume that I must share the great bulk of their own feelings and attitudes. Thus, Greeks (and Americans, too) construct and construe friendship. My friends accordingly presume that as soon as possible after my arrival, I will be leaving Athens for one or another island or perhaps some picturesque Peloponnesian retreat. When they ask me whether or not I am departing and (presuming that I am) when and where, they can only look at me with pity if I have to say that I am planning to be nowhere else than in Athens itself. When I remind them that it’s really all right, that (as I have typically told them before) I like Athens (not just this, that or the next part of it, either, but more or less all of it, in all its chaotic grumble) their expression tends to transform into a mixture of puzzlement and bemusement but always also a clear register less of moral disapproval than of doubt of my sanity. It isn’t merely that it isn’t right to like Athens; for many natives at least, it seems not to be even right-minded to do so. Finally, the Athenian negative is at once a recirculation of commonplaces and an ever-new pronouncement of insight and discovery; it is at once formulaic and filled with the freshest of pathos. It is a paradox, but a paradox that has the precise form of ritual, which in its effective expression is always a union of the formulaic and the deeply felt. This suggests that the paradox has work to do in the cultural and social present and that what it is doing is, like most other rituals, aiding in the reproduction of certain aspects of the cultural and social present and carrying them forth largely preserved into the cultural and social future. Just which of those aspects are so transported remains to be considered.

*

Someone in the marketing department of North Point Press, an imprint of New York’s Farrar, Straus and Giroux, surely deserves and probably received a bonus for staging George Sarrinikolaou’s *Facing Athens: Encounters with the Modern City* to appear only slightly more than two months before the opening ceremonies of Olympiad 2004 were set to occur.³ It received what at any other time would have been a surprising amount of attention in the national press and reviews were by and large very favourable. A guidebook it is not. The synopsis included in the inner

³ George Sarrinikolaou, *Facing Athens: Encounters with the Modern City* (New York: North Point Press, 2004). Page references henceforth given in the text between parentheses.

dust jacket of the hardcover edition instead promises that the book will reveal to the reader a “demythologized” Athens “that even many Athenians see only in passing.” It anticipates with all the high-pitched tones of American enthusiasm a “rare and vivid glimpse of one of the world’s great cities.” Turn the book over, however, and travel writer and essayist Mary Mahoney’s endorsement presages a quite different sort of reading pleasure. She encapsulates *Facing Athens* as “a sober and haunting ode to a lost city, to memory, to the passage of time and the folly of men.” Endorsements tend toward hyperbole and this one is no exception, but it does alert us that what is in store for us will be neither *Gulliver’s Travels* nor *Video Nights in Kathmandu*. What is in store for us is the Athenian negative.

What is in store for us, more precisely, is the Athenian negative with an American twist. George Sarrinikolaou was born in Athens in 1970. He lived there, in various humble neighbourhoods, until he was ten. Then he moved with his parents and his sister to join a maternal uncle in New York’s Astoria district. Someone in the family did quite well, or at least well enough to send George to two distinguished private universities, Cornell and Columbia, from the latter of which he earned the credentials that would qualify him for a career as a journalist. Somewhere along the way, he would become a vegetarian. Though retaining – as he takes pains to point out – his Athenian pronunciation of Demotic and visiting the capital regularly, he seems never to have taken up smoking. He is American enough to be proudly moralistic about both of these modalities of abstinence. He is American (that is, Protestantised) enough to devote a full chapter of the slim volume that *Facing Athens* is to the condition of the Gypsies and the Greek “racism” that accounts for it (8, 56). He is American enough to dwell more than once on the spiritual emptiness of the local priests (73, 120).

Yet, the tropology of *Facing Athens* is natively Greek. The visit on which it is largely based occurred not on the actual eve of the Olympics but instead in the spring of what appears to be 2002. The author is not precise about the date. *Facing Athens* is not, however, a vague book. Its critical commentary is often blunt and the critical apparatus on which it rests is less vague than subtle. Whether or not intentionally, irony propels it from the start. In his Prologue, Sarrinikolaou tells us that, even if troubled, his childhood memories “store what I love – what I first learned of Athens and its people.” If his “distance from the city” has produced a “sense of loss,” it has also produced “a perspective that” – so he says – “is different from, but no less clear than, that of anyone who lives there” (xii). Still, it was not until his visit in 2002 that, he writes, “I mustered the courage to honour my love of the place and speak of what goes on in the city” (xii). The reader

would at this juncture have every right to expect not dark ode but gay paeon if the author did not immediately resort to subversion. He hastens to tell us that what he witnessed on his daily walks was nothing to be praised but instead a “city gripped by greed, corruption, and racism. I saw a few people take for themselves as much as they could, leaving the rest to compete for the little that was left. I spoke to children who slept on the ground” (xiii). He inaugurates his first chapter with general observations on the “revolutionary” technological, economic and political changes that Athens has undergone, some of benefit, others creating “serious problems.” He continues:

People here say that life is rotten. The theme is a favourite of radio disc jockeys and anyone who learns that I am writing about Athens. Nothing works; nothing ever gets done; the government is corrupt; people cheat; traffic is unbearable; crime is on the rise; blame it on the Albanian immigrants. (5)

Sarrinikolaou does not blame crime on the Albanian immigrants. Perhaps this is the respect in which his own perspective on Athens differs from that of the Athenian Everyman. For the rest, the disc jockeys and he turn out to see almost completely eye to eye. A paragraph placed – whether strategically or accidentally – in the middle of the book’s first chapter already reads like a conclusion:

... much of life feels to me like a competition, whose prizes are money, space, sex, even air. In Athens, the winners reward themselves with opulent villas, chauffeured German automobiles, Filipino maids, yachts, casinos, high-priced prostitutes, and, most important, distance from the city centre. The closer one gets to downtown, villas turn into apartment buildings, manicured gardens into sooty balconies, big cars into small cars, Filipino maids into Albanian day workers, yachts into ferries, casinos into lottery games, the expensive hookers trafficked from Russia into cheaper ones from Greece and Eastern Europe. And everywhere there are cracks filled with the destitute, the hustlers, the immigrants, the forgotten. No one, though, is ever beyond the game. (10-11)

At the end of his second chapter, Sarrinikolaou summarises the dissonance of what he witnesses in and around Omonia Square:

Over the junkies, the immigrants, and the poor, the national fantasy still looms. The city’s vibrant past is evidenced in the restored neoclassical buildings and the nation’s future promise in the modern Metro station. I wonder if any of the people who drive by are fooled. (34)

The speculation is merely rhetorical, its resolution the realisation that “most Athenians”, shunning a once fashionable destination, “may never even see the place for years” (34). He seems not to be aware of the extraordinary urban ritual of the purchasing of weekend newspapers that brought thousands of Athenians to Omonia every Saturday night and early Sunday morning until the latest round of renovations forced a change of venue. Much more startling than this oversight, however, are the remarks that open the final paragraph of the second chapter: “in Athens, I find no place truly different from Omonia Square. There are, it seems to me, only varying degrees of unease and ways of coping” (34). On the one hand, such remarks temper the sociological inflatedness of his characterisation of Koukaki – where, following in my footsteps (I like to think), he rented a sparsely appointed room in 2002 – as a “middle-class neighbourhood” (xii). On the other hand, they suggest that the author might have stayed in that sparse room in gritty, socially disjoint Koukaki a few days longer than was wise. Odd way to honour one’s love of the place, isn’t it?

In any case, the Bleak House into which Sarrinikolaou builds his Athens allows of little if any light. Nor is the domestic metaphor inapt. Manifestly a prose documentary of the quality of life in the contemporary capital, *Facing Athens* is also a screen allegory of a Family Romance – a failed one – and the screen itself is sometimes very thin. The text is organised as an ensemble of extended opinion pieces interrupted by brief, always fragmentary but always contextually pointed excerpts of the memories of the child George with his mother, his father, his uncles, at school. The trajectory of this shatter of childhood past is downward, toward disintegration and decadence, with one exception. In the book’s final chapter, directly preceding the recollected scene of George’s departure from Greece, we meet him with schoolmates – Elias, who ties his shoes for him before he has learned how to do so (137), and a larger company, who walk with arms around one another’s shoulders, talking of girls and soccer, on their way to their houses and to the “little block” where they play (138). The former stands in juxtaposition with the report of a young “Asian girl, speaking perfect Greek”, playing with native friends – the sort of scene, the author offers, that “might save this country from racism” (137). What memory cannot escape is the shattering of the bond between the child’s

parents and the gradual realisation that the father is cold and despotic, ready in his sovereign disapproval to wash his hands of his young son's clumsiness (132) and ready in his sovereign rages to exploit, to insult and threaten and physically abuse his wife (133).

This is Sarrinikolaou's Primal Scene. Like all such scenes, it is generative and its generativity is nearly as inexhaustible as it is incontrovertible. It does not merely endow the real with sense. Elaborating those "irresistible analogies"⁴ so dear at once to every modality of Platonism and to every mythological imagination, it is the matrix of a fractal series that renders the *oikos* the microcosm of the *polis* and the *polis* the microcosm of the *ethnos*. It suffuses each with an Oedipal violence all the more compelling for being so often oblique. It throws into high relief two remarks that seem at a first reading to be so matter-of-fact as to be incidental. The first appears early in the Prologue: "As time passed, I would come [back to Athens] *seeking out my estranged father (my parents divorced shortly after we arrived in New York, and my father moved back to Athens), for a friend's wedding, or as a journalist*" (x, my italics). The second appears very near the book's end: speaking of the neighbourhoods in which he resided as a child, Sarrinikolaou adds that "in Petroupolis and Bournazi, we were living near some of my mother's relatives; in Dafni, we were going to be close to my father's family. An aunt and a cousin of mine still live here, and *it is they who have kept me coming back over the years*" (133-134, my italics). If such remarks allow us to interpret the feeling of "loss" with which the author's distance from the capital fills him (xii) as the emigré's quintessential burden, if they allow us to interpret his lament over the time that he cannot recover and the years that he has spent without the grandfather whom he has just lost (122) as the emigré's catastrophic realisation of the impossibility of perfect reunion, this is because the libidinal economy in which most of us live renders the lost parent, the lost *oikos*, the lost *polis* and the lost *ethnos* sentimental transformations, each of the other. They are alike traumas of delocalisation, of the abjection of homelessness. They are alike traumas of deprivation, of the diminishing or retraction of the plenitude of the self. Yet, because they are all traumas, they can themselves directly be generative only of *Traume*, of dreams, of "memories" that distort and disguise their actual referent and of memories that can consequently only be simulacra, presumptive copies that lack any genuine original. In the disconsolate consciousness they dominate, the real has little power to function as a corrective, the source of an alternative

⁴ See Pierre Bourdieu, 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, UK: New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

representational material. It is largely subordinate to senses already given. It is very often the sheer instrument of simulacra become hyperreal.

In *Facing Athens*, the capital is itself hyperreal and its persistently double face, its phantasmatic being (in) the world at once as object of condemnation and object of longing, is the hyperreal correlative of the father who is bad but also lost, the *pater malus* who is also the *pater absconditus*. The hyperreal is, however, wondrously hermaphroditic and a feminised capital, with the Parthenon as its crown and Athena as its namesake (20), has no less being in the very same world than does her masculine counterpart. We meet one of her microcosmic personifications in "Marie," the "weathered" but "sexy" (59) habituée of a second-tier nightclub in which the author's "coarse" (60) and blatantly nouveau-riche host rapidly runs up a tab in excess of \$1,000.00 on bottles of whisky and baskets of carnations while "memory" is being "exorcised" (65). We meet another in the anonymous woman whom the author overhears dismissing the elaborate entourage of the metropolitan archbishop with an acerbic "all of them we pay for" and because of whom he finds himself "in the perfect Greek moment, where notions of official prestige, institutional power, and high-minded ideals fizzle" (100). It stands in almost lurid contrast to another moment, far from perfect but perfectly masculine, in which a bevy of doctors in blood-stained coats confront the author and his relatives with the demand for extra compensation for the operation that they are in the process of performing on the author's grandfather, who was still alive at the time (116). The place that the author loves is in fact the feminine Athens, Athens as *alma mater*. She is the city to whom he pays honour – and pays it in great part in revealing just how *malus* Athens as *pater malus* can be.⁵

*

In such particular refractions, hyperreal Athens is perhaps the product of a distinctive perspective. But it is far from being the product of George Sarrinikolaou's particular psychology alone. It is not a fundamentally psychological phenomenon at all. It is a collective, an intersubjective and social phenomenon and its ethnographic and anthropological interest resides precisely at the level of the collective, of the intersubjective and of

⁵ One of the participants in the conference approached me after my presentation with a telling comment "Whenever I'm in Athens," he said, "I feel rejected by her." The disdain of the feminine city also belongs to Sarrinikolaou's phenomenological universe, perhaps all the more palpably for being, once again, noted only in passing. Though he notes that his flirtation with "Marie" becomes explicitly sexual as the evening at the nightclub grows old, its innuendoes remain unconsummated; the author returns to his apartment alone and so he appears to remain during his entire sojourn. The comfort of the feminised Athens is itself cold.

social organisation and process. In what I have to offer in the way of a conclusion, its ethnographic and anthropological interest will be what interests me and, I hope, what interests you as well. Yet, if you expect a proper conclusion to be at once wholly original and entirely exhaustive, you are bound to be not bored, perhaps, but disappointed. For better or worse, Athens ancient and modern has been too often visited and too often observed to permit sojourners as belated as I to aspire to radical novelty. The best I can hope for is that I will not be radically trite. Any attempt to account exhaustively for the Athenian negative and the hyperreal city that it sustains in the course of five hundred words or so would be vain. Too many factors are in play. Too many causes and inspirations need mentioning to permit of such brevity. To deploy that favourite term of the Althusserians, the Athenian negative is not merely determined; it is “over-determined.” Yet, the moral of the story is not that it is thus necessary, inescapable and incapable of revision. Here, the anthropologist finds himself not resting with the “native’s point of view”, or in any event with the point of view of quite a number of natives, but instead running counter to it. Once again, for better or worse.

The discourse of the Athenian negative has, as I have already pointed out, all the trappings of ritual. It is a ritual discourse. One of the most fundamental functions of ritual is that of fostering and sustaining a sense of common belonging, of common social membership, of common imagined community among those who participate in it and take it seriously. This is among the reasons why uninitiated outsiders who wittingly or unwittingly take up the terms of a ritual discourse of belonging as their own very often meet with the hostility of those who have earned the entitlement to speak, the “real natives.” It is also among the reasons why even insiders who treat the terms of a ritual discourse as if their audience were or could be perfectly general and impersonal also very often meet with native ire. It remains to be seen whether Athenian readers regard the author of *Facing Athens* as having overstepped the bounds of propriety, as having committed a sort of blasphemy. Suffice it to say that I am myself quite happy not to be the author of that book.

All rituals have their characteristic psychology – or concatenated psychologies – of form: dramatic, sublime, ecstatic, grotesque, comic, elegiac, from one case to the next. The Athenian negative is ironic and allows of humour, but its prevailing form is tragic and its ironies often terrible in tone or implication. It is thus far from formally unique. On the contrary, it shares its tragic tenor with many other discourses, many other stories that rival its own cultural entrenchment: that of the Biblical fall of humankind; such other “refractions of the Fall” – so Michael Herzfeld

would have them be – as the loss of Constantinople or the subsequent era of the Turkish Domination; such national ordeals as the Asia Minor Catastrophe.⁶ Greece is not a tragic culture, nor even a culture of tragedy. The full range of psychologies of form are available within it and in any two- or three-hour period on any busy Athenian street, the full range will likely have been on overt display. I am even inclined to doubt that the tragic perspective dominates the native recounting of ethnic or state history; at the very least, it mingles with far too many references to the miraculous and the triumph of the soul to dominate convincingly. Herzfeld, for his part, sees in the often tragic refractions of the Fall a reflection of the broad Greek internalisation of Western European condescension and especially of Fallmerayer’s racialist judgment that the Greeks of his time were Turkicised mongrels of peasant predilections no longer possessing the right to claim the glories of the ancient past as their own.⁷ I do not deny that an element of anxious inferiority lingers in the Greek present and inflects contemporary debates over the relation between Hellenism, hellenicity, and the actual population of the Greek state. It should not, however, be exaggerated. Twenty years ago, for example, such greenhorn ethnographers as this one had several native Athenians tell him that the influx of “peasants” from the countryside had rendered virtually unliveable a capital that had previously been able to boast of true charm. But of course, the Athenians who were telling him that were distinguishing themselves categorically from the peasants in the process. Not even then was the Athenian negative simply the self-pity of the culturally degraded. If it included the occasional rueful allusion to the glory of the ancients – now even more than then one is likely to hear the great beauty of the acropoline temples set in stark and critical juxtaposition to the “ugliness” of the modern city that fills the Attic basin – it had its climax not in the apocalypse of the fated or fateful fall from former grace but of the stubborn persistence of decadence and stagnation in the very midst of cataclysmic change. Even before it engages fate, the tragic psychology engages the *agon* of the human confrontation with human limits and human limitations. The Athenian negative is a tragic assessment, at once critical and aporetic, of the repetition of the confrontation with limits and limitations, some generally human but many to all appearances peculiarly, bafflingly specific to the capital itself. In just this sense, it is a discourse of civic alienation.

⁶ Michael Herzfeld, *Anthropology through the Looking-glass: Critical Ethnography in the Margins of Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁷ Vrasidas Karalis has pointed out to me that Fallmerayer’s pronouncement is not as anti-Greek as it is widely taken to be – but here as elsewhere, the Common Reader prevails over the Ideal.

Alienation is unpredictable. It can fuel revolutionary fire. It can ossify into feckless irritation. It can crystallise into benign indifference. It can dampen all fervour and leave only the dead embers of resignation in its wake. The French, looking down from something like the civilisational heavens, aphoristically distil alienation into benign indifference and claim it as their own. They are the aphoristic comics of repetition in difference: *Plus ça change*, they say, *plus ça reste la même chose*. The general run of Americans, pragmatic utopians who cannot face the tragic even to reject it, simply don't acknowledge the existence of such unqualified impasses. All they'll admit is that "some things never change." Aphoristically at least, the Greeks and any number of Athenians among them have yet a third stance, considerably less general and less indifferent than that of the French and at once less pragmatic and utopian than that of the Americans. *Edho einai Valkania*, so the saying goes, *dhen einai paixe-yelase*. I'll somewhat freely translate: "It's the Balkans here, not a cakewalk." It's a wry little idiom, but it stops short of being merely amusing. Its irony has something more vicious than a merely comic bite. It evokes *agon*, struggle; it evokes repetition in difference. As Sarah Green argues in her splendid *Notes from the Margins*, it evokes all the metrics of the experiential geography of the marginal in modernity.⁸ Approached from without, that geography yields both the cartography and the master trope of the fractured, impassable, uncooperative, unproductive, self-repeating, self-defeating hinterlands that one or another modern civilizing mission must either tame or keep ever at bay. Examined from within, it resolves into a hyperreal terrain of fractal patterns that vary in substance even as they endlessly repeat the same form and so reproduce themselves as the very hinterlands that the intrinsic restrictions of every modern civilizing mission would always have them remain. And what of the actual denizens of these appointed preserves of marginality? They hope for better from one another. Yet, they see their hopes all too often thwarted. They expect better of themselves. But they also recognise the foolishness of taking the high road only to tread it alone. So matters devolve into joining – and why not? – those whom one cannot beat. The question with which I'll close is that of whether the Athenian negative does not all too often devolve into much the same thing.

⁸ I had the opportunity to review Dr. Green's manuscript, now published as *Notes from the Balkans locating marginality and ambiguity on the Greek-Albanian border* (Princeton, NJ; Oxford, Eng.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

On Cavafean Irony and the Elusive 'Wholeness'

Anthony Dracopoulos
University of Sydney

*Irony is to know that islands are not continents and lakes
are not oceans...*

V. Jankelevitch

I

Irony has arguably been regarded as one of the pivotal characteristics of Cavafy's poetics, a distinguishing feature of the poet's personal style, tone of voice and choice of language.¹ Despite the general consensus regarding the determining role of irony in Cavafy's work, critical approaches to the issue are diverse, reflecting each critic's point of view and interpretative approach. Vagenas, for example, argues that the function of irony in Cavafy's work is to convey emotion. "In my opinion" he writes,

the only way language in poetry can communicate emotion, when it does not have an adequate degree of sensuality, is through an adequate degree of emotion.... Irony drags out emotion by means of a vacuum because it functions through an apparent absence – that is, through the action of thoughts and feelings which are suggested or left incomplete.

According to Vagenas, the distinctiveness of Cavafean irony lies with the unique "integration of verbal and situational irony".²

¹ For a synopsis of critical approaches and the basic typology of Cavafean irony see βλ. Κ. Κοστίου, «Ακόμη λίγο για την Ειρωνεία του Κ. Π. Καβάφη», in *Η Ποίηση των Κράματος*, (Μ. Πιερίδης επ.), Ηράκλειο Πανεπιστημιακές Εκδόσεις Κρήτης, 2000, σ. 227-244.

² N. Vagenas, "The Language of Irony (Towards a Definition of the Poetry of Cavafy)", *The Mind and Art of C P Cavafy. Essays on his Life and Work* (Athens: Denise Harvey & Company, 1983), p.109 and p. 108 respectively. The strong Seferean influence on Vagenas' perspective seems to have restricted the scope of Vagenas' study. A considerable difference exists between the question: "How is it possible for someone to write poetry with the means of literature?" and 'convey emotion' with a language that is not 'emotional'; and the question: "How does irony function in Cavafy?" The first question definitely leads to Cavafy through Seferis, while the second one is more likely to lead to Cavafy through Cavafy.

Anthony Dracopoulos, "On Cavafean Irony and the Elusive 'Wholeness'",
Culture & Memory. Special Issue of Modern Greek Studies
(Australia and New Zealand), 2006: 191-201.