The Greek Civil War: Exploring Friction in Fiction

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Shots are being fired and men killed in Greece in the same war which is elsewhere waged with words .
A.C. Sedgwick[1]

The ordinary acceptation of words in their relation to things was changed as men thought fit.
Thucydide[2]

Contemplating the events in Corcyra and the inauguration of the archetypal Greek Civil War, the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides exposes the psychological factors and the behavioral patterns at work, with particular attention to the relation between the new realities and *language:* "The sufferings which *stasis* brought on the cities were many and terrible, such as have occurred, and always will occur, as long as the nature of mankind remains the same." "From city to city, *stasis*" –like some virulent disease– "ran its course," and amidst the turmoil, the atrocities, the shifts in power and allegiance, the breakdown in social niceties and religious observance, *words* could be seen to change their accepted valuation: "Reckless audacity was identified as the 'courage' of a loyal ally, and prudent hesitation as 'cowardice.' 'Moderation' became a cloak for unmanliness, and ability to see all sides of a question 'inability to act' on any. ... A man with violent impulses was invariably 'reliable,' anyone who opposed him was 'suspect.'" Words connoting value are, no doubt, the most sensitive in a language. At a time of social crisis and internecine strife, the very meanings of such words may be subject to challenge, along with more obvious challenges to society itself. Thucydides, we can see, accepts the unpalatable truth: it will be so "as long as the nature of mankind remains the same."[3]

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Indeed, language seems to have failed, once again, in front of the animosity and the terrifying images of the turbulent period of the Axis occupation in Greece and the subsequent Civil War, as Sedgwick's laconic epigram reveals. Admittedly, there were linguistic fragmentations and unintelligible historical lacunae within which a writer was obliged to work in order to rephrase and convey even a glimpse of the bitter divisions and violence that engulfed Greece in the 1940s, and which resulted from the overlap of conflicts that were fought intermittently with varying degrees of intensity and at different levels, from the strictly personal and local to the national, and from the regional to the broadly international. This violence began in the countryside under enemy occupation, flared up in Athens soon after liberation, and exploded into full-scale war in 1946 until 1949.

In his *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice,* Michel Foucault posits a so-called effective history, composed of counter-memories, as a necessary opposition to traditional history. Foucault claims that:

> *The traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled … "Effective" history deprives the self of the reassuring stability of life and nature … [and instead] deals with events in terms of their most unique characteristics, their most acute manifestations. An event, consequently, is … the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it.*[4]

The Greek literary works that will be discussed in this volume fulfill roughly equivalent roles as contributions to "counter-memory" or "effective memory" for Civil War history and culture. Authors who were pre-occupied in their works with narratives of the Greek Civil War have been repeatedly rewriting the frictional past not as an objective and unified panorama of history, but rather, in terms of the "most acute manifestations" of experience and historical appreciation, emphasizing thus the subjectivity and fictionality of any record of events. Such writing seeks to liberate the reader from an often dogmatic perspective on, or blindness toward, the events and legacies of the Greek Civil War, and to provoke instead a more active participation in history. After all, histories, as Ann Rigney thoughtfully maintains, are imperfect in the sense that they are never closed and complete, but permanently subject to question and revision as new knowledge is discovered and new perspectives are opened up. For this reason writers of historical fictions often try to represent a past that

always extends beyond their grasp and beyond the power of language to represent it.[5]

One such endeavor is Valtinos' novel *Orthokosta* (1994); it strives to fill a lacuna of the (pre)history of the Civil War with a series of anecdotal accounts that deliberately oscillate between history and fiction. In fact, *Orthokosta* appears to fully subscribe to New Historicism's discourcive rhetorical tropes and narratological techniques in which anecdotes are "broken in pieces, the pieces altered, inverted, rearranged," so that the historical events they refer to may diverge from received renditions of the same events. The anecdote, accordingly, remodels historical reality "as it might have been," reviving the ways history is experienced and concretely reproduced by contemporary readers of literary history.[6]

Orthokosta's quasi-revisionist approach to historical veracity and representability is examined in this volume by Dimitris Paivanas, who meticulously details and construes the friction that was stirred among critics after the publication of Valtinos' controversial novel. The novel, Paivanas proffers, through a series of testimonial accounts, appears to absolve the Security Battalions from the stigma of their violent past, and to deprive at the same time, on historical, as well as, aesthetic terms, the cathartic pleasure by its leftist reader. Moreover, Valtinos' fiction manages to challenge the leftist ideological tone of the period and to highlight, if not steer, the shifting trends in Civil War Greek historiography.[7]

Examining the same text by Valtinos towards the end of the volume, Iakovos Anyfantakis retraces the structuring of *Orthokosta's* testimonies in the historical context of their formulation. These counter-mnemonic, micro-historical accounts, Anyfantakis claims, attempt to articulate a communal, albeit fragmentary, recollection which at times is mis-retrieved due to the ferocity and brute violence of the reported events.

The question of history *qua* narrative and representability has implicitly or explicitly revolved around the Civil War, since it's an event that defies the categories we have for understanding and talking about reality. It rather forces us to continuously probe the "limits of representation" and stimulates us to see traumatic experience as paradigmatic for our relationship with the past.[8] In Apostolidis' *Pyramida 67* (1950), the *problematique* of historical representation due to the fragmentariness of the apocalyptic world of the Civil War and the limitations of diction to convey it, force the author/eye-witness narrator to move beyond objective historical truth and into the phenomenological realm

of perception and consciousness. Moreover, as Kersitn Jentsch-Mancor suggests, with his recurrent self-referential emphasis to a disjoint (hi)story, self, and text, Apostolidis' novel oscillates between modernism and the post-modern historiographic metafiction.

The *Mission Box* (1975), is another seminal text on the limitations and tribulations of language to (re)-iterate historical truth re the Civil War. Alexandrou's confessional narrative, as Emmanuela Kantzia through the lens of speech-act theory observes, is an attempt to break the barriers of language through gesturing and performance. Accordingly, the *Mission Box*, as a performative discourse, abstains from laying hold to the historical past per se; instead, through language and praxis, it attempts to re-inscribe, if not transcend, that past into the present.

For some, the Wars' (World War II and the Civil War) devastation and the subsequent socio-political uncertainty created more than a physical trauma and rupture; as Stamatia Dova argues, it called into question traditional ways of thinking about the individual's relation to self and others. In fact, the Civil War and the ensuing socio-political instability provoked a reassessment of the representation of the individual. In Zei's *Achilles's Fiancée* (1987), this takes the form of mythological paradigm. Unfolding *mise* en *abîme* (it is set inside a contemporary movie script about the now aging Resistance activists going on a train journey) on a vast canvas (Athens, Rome, Paris, Tashkent, Moscow), the novel traces the lives of Greek refugees from December 1944, through the Civil War, the Colonels' Junta, and the thaw in the Soviet Union. The story is a post-Homeric attempt to re-appropriate the representation of the 'self' *vis*-à-*vis* the 'other' and society in general and to re-align it in a post-heroic, post-Civil War era.[9]

The present volume brings together a group of critics who are in the process of reconfiguring the intricate instabilities and contingencies that emerge in conversations "about" and "between" the fiction and friction of the Greek Civil War. Certainly, the present climate of disciplinary shifts and cross-disciplinary allegiances constitutes an ideal moment to reassess past critical strategies and to experiment with or reinvent new ones. The voices represented here constitute a "beginning again" – a double witnessing that, while courting continuities between past and present, seeks to reshape critical practices, critical re-performances and critical receptions. Like the subject examined, these essays are complex, diverse, and even contradictory at times. The volume is, therefore, a fine addition to the burgeoning canon that strives to make sense of an absurd tragedy of history. It is a collective work which, despite its

diversity in terms of research, approach, and academic language, delves to expose and explicate some very important social, critical, and literary repercussions of the Greek Civil War.

NOTES

1. Sedgwick 1948: 486.
2. Thucydides, 3.82.4.
3. Ibid., 3.82.2-5.
4. Foucault 1977: 153-4.
5. Rigney 2001: *passim*.
6. Laden 2004: 8-9. See also Fineman 1987: 57, who refers to the anecdote as a *historeme*, that is, as the smallest minimal unit of the historiographic fact. And the question that the anecdote thus poses is how, compact of both literature and reference, the anecdote possesses its peculiar and eventful narrative force.
7. For the changing trends in Greek Historiograpy re the Greek Civil War, see especially Marantzidis and Antoniou, 2004: 223-31.
8. This topic has been only tangentially discussed by Ambatzopoulou, 1998: 123-30; and Liakos, 2007: 225-8. For a similar awareness of traumatic (un)representability of the Holocaust literature, see Friedlander, *Probing the Limits of Representation.*
9. See Ricks 2007: 231-44, who analyses how Greek writers resorted to Homer in search of mythological paradigms to be used in response to the grievous conditions of fratricidal strife.

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