

Writing Wrongs, (Re)Righting (Hi)story?:
“Orthotita” and “Ortho-graphia”
in Thanassis Valtinos’s *Orthokosta*¹

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I should like to show you that the tendency of a literary work can only be politically correct if it is also literarily correct.

– Walter Benjamin, “The Author As Producer”, 1934

Όλη τη μέρα μας έφερνε ο αέρας αποκαΐδια. Αλλά ήταν ησυχία [“All day the wind brought us cinders. But it was quiet.”] It is with this atmospheric line that Thanassis Valtinos’s novel *Orthokosta* (1994) begins, and immediately recalls the landscape of his first novella, *Η Κάθοδος των Εννιά* [Descent of the Nine], which appeared in 1963. Valtinos’s first novel is acknowledged as one of the most significant Greek Civil War novels. In it, Valtinos follows a group of nine weary, defeated communist fighters, right at the end of the war, as they make their way, through a devastated landscape from the Parnon mountains to the sea. It is a landscape evocative of Sinopoulos’s scorched earth, with Biblical overtones and a spare syntax. In a blend of existentialism and allegory reminiscent of some of Albert Camus’s works, it focuses on the broken protagonists’ search of quenching their metaphysical thirst.²

The burning described at the opening of his more recent novel harks back to the aridity and parched locale of this first book. *Orthokosta* takes place at the time of the barbaric events that unfolded in Valtinos’s native region of southern Kinouria, in the Peloponnese, around the years 1943-47. The action chiefly revolves around an event that took place in 1943-44. More specifically, the communist burning of Valtinos’s home village Kastri (he was absent), the forced internment and execution of non-combatants by communist rebels in the monastery of *Orthokosta*, and the subsequent revenge killings by rightist and collaborationist Security Battalions. Even though these events unfolded in the latter stages of the Nazi Occupation, the nature of these events and their protagonists classify the work very much as a Civil War novel.

Though Valtinos asserts that it had been finished since 1983, *Orthokosta* appeared thirty-one years after the *Descent*, in 1994, and caused quite a stir. This is

not altogether surprising, but the vigor of criticism from the Left was noteworthy. Thirty one years on, both Greek society and the Greek readership is very different from the one that first came into contact with the *Descent*. Greek public opinion has gone beyond—and to an arguable degree, worked through—both the erstwhile Right-wing statist narrative of the *συμμοριτοπόλεμο* [guerrilla war] and the many revisionist leftist films and writings of the socialist eighties. Communists who fled to the Eastern bloc after their defeat in 1949 have since returned to Greece, and the majority have, since the early eighties, been granted pensions for their wartime resistance. In the world of literary fiction, too, writers had already broached the issue of allegiances in the Civil War and depicted the agonizing compromises that were wrought on families, friends and villagers. Alexandros Kotzias in *Πολιορκία* [Siege] (1953, revised 1961) shows how human beings feeling the pinch of their times are forced to take calculated decisions and often switch sides and doctrines. His depiction of retributive Communists sparked controversy in the ranks of the Left back then. So why the fuss over *Orthokosta* thirty years on? *Orthokosta* prompted a vigorous attack against Valtinos, a vitriolic debate, chiefly among the ranks of the Left, which may prove informative not only for understanding the state of the debate over the Civil War and its representation in the 1990s, but also for considering the novel as a genre and the vexed question of fiction's relation to "fact" and "history". For *Orthokosta* positions itself, alarmingly, between genres and disciplines, in dialogue, in the space between history and literature. While Valtinos's treatment of his narratives is not postmodern,³ the effect of his rewriting of narratives of history has fueled a controversy that resembles, in certain ways, some debates over postmodern approaches across academic disciplines. It has also affinities with controversies over reconstructions of historical events elsewhere: Oliver Stone's conspiratorial *JFK* film, released in the United States at about the same time as *Orthokosta*, raised the objections of many historians and commentators for the liberality of its disposition of "facts".

Furthermore, the attack on Valtinos raises interesting theoretical issues which also belie some other landmark epistemological debates prevalent in studies of modern Greece in the 1990s. In its own way, the *Orthokosta* debate echoes ongoing bouts between positivists and relativists, historians and anthropologists, formalist philologists and literary theorists about the *orthotita* (rectitude) and *ortho-graphia* (correct writing [literally spelling]) of encoding Greek reality, or contending Greek realities). In a world of collapsing disciplinary boundaries, of no clear metanarratives, the *Orthokosta* debate is a symptom of its times. And Valtinos's "ethnological" and "anthropological" bent, as one critic has characterized it,⁴ brings him close to recent academic work in the social sciences that treats the Greek Civil War in refreshing ways. Mark Mazower, Riki van Boeschoten, Janet Hart, Yiorgos Margaritis, Stathis Kalyvas among others have used oral histories and more local fieldwork in exploring the Civil War. *Orthokosta* appeared at a time when such work was beginning to pick up speed and achieve a critical mass.

All this when, as I shall contend, the debate that transpired had already been staged by the author himself in the novel itself, a fact which has gone largely unnoticed. Those critics who, in the name of truth, charged Valtinos on counts of a dangerous misreading of history are themselves guilty of an egregious case of misreading literature. If Eric Hobsbawm can inveigh against the perils of leaving history in the hands of practitioners of “lit crit” like Edward Said in his review of *Culture and Imperialism*, it may be time to warn against the pitfalls of allowing historians to read—purport to read, or not read at all—literature.

Picking Up The Pieces

Orthokosta is divided into forty-seven chapters, a series of first-person accounts of events with a handful of chapters that appear as interviews—in the main, given from the perspective of non-communists, rightists, civilians, and those leftists who justify their turn to the Security Battalions. The narrators of specific chapters are rarely clearly identifiable; more often they are not identified. On occasion, such narrators do reappear in the action, but only rarely. And when they do, their identity is obscure. They rather resemble disembodied voices.⁵ Names appear and recur more frequently, so proving that proper names, when repeated, have the incantatory power to conjure up whole cultures in their very enunciation. Yet these names sound similar and often melt into each other.⁶ A tenacious philologist may, in the future, seek to find tidy patterns among characters in the text, yet will not, I fear, find rich reward for his or her efforts. The forty-seven chapters are divided into alternate long and very short chapters and Valtinos, in his interviews, draws attention to the number of twenty-four chapters, or rhapsodies, to cast a Homeric shadow.⁷ However, Valtinos’s allusion to Homer as an underlying structure does not help especially in asserting order on the plot in any manifest way; despite its dramatic and stylistic effect, the novel’s purposeful cultivation of contingency depends on the loose interplay of myriad characters and an ironical interplay with the *notion* of a submerged structure. It is the positing of structure, or generic typology on that which defies such ordering, that is ultimately thematized. For *Orthokosta* offers many dispersive strands of past narratives, *istoires*, that are, in their studied and frustrating disparate-ness, a sign of their contingency. Indeed, this contingency is of a different variety than that seen in another text with a Civil War theme, a concern for reconstructing the past—Costas Vrettakos’s film *Ta Pαιδιά της Χελιδόνας* [Children of the Swallow] of 1987. In this film, a present-day film crew tries to reconstruct a traumatic event of the Civil War by piecing together a number of interviews given by the clearly defined cluster of five or six chief actors. Though Vrettakos’s film is, among other things, a textbook critique of grand narratives and its diffusion into contradictory micronarratives, it is structured around a final *mise en abyme* of a restored wallpainting of a guerrilla fighter and his female co-fighter which, by its self-reflexive and easily recognizable metanarrative posture, structures and reins its narrative strands in a somewhat reassuring way.

Orthokosta has no such mechanism and offers no such consolation. Valtinos collectivizes the disorienting subjectivity of Chronis Missios's narrator in *Καλά εσύ σκοτώθηκες νωρίς* [It is Good that You Were Killed Early, 1985]. Valtinos's work, more generally, has long been preoccupied with encoding the voice, its rhythms, its cadences, with little or no narratorial intrusion. The *Συναξάρι του Ανδρέα Κορδοπάτη* [The Synaxarion of Andreas Kordopatis, 1964] purports to be from the immigrant eponymous hero's very lips; and in his *Φτερά Μπεκάτσας* [Wings of a Woodcock, 1992], only for a rare, crucial moment does he allow the narratorial voice to intrude on a symphonic exchange between warring partners. Valtinos is, undoubtedly, the Greek novelist today most attuned to questions of voice and style in his work. Though many of Valtinos's monologues in *Orthokosta* are highly individuated at the time of their reading, stepping back from the novel at its end, the narratives have the effect of coming back to their reader *post-facto* as a uniform Voice. It is, you could say, the sound of those left out of History's Narrative, "History's mute subject ... the people."⁸

These voices, as they speak, defy those who are, by nature, prone to pick up the pieces. The reader is being challenged to do just this. It is Valtinos's delicate authorial feat to set up a scenario whereby the reader is enticed to synthesize and order only as he or she is also led to acknowledge the pitfalls, and discontents, of such an endeavor. This has led one critic, in an overly static and misguided formalist evaluation, to criticize this difficulty, this contingency, and its challenge to synthesis as a mark of the work's aesthetic failings.⁹

The work's portentous epigraph—*ως σκεύη κεραμέως συντρίψεις αυτούς* [dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel]—epitomizes the task set to the reader. Taken from *Psalms*, Book I, 2 in the *Old Testament*, it directs us to a passage where God, angry at the kings who conspire against him, speaks out and grants powers to those who delight in the law of the Lord. He sets his earthly king on the holy hill of Zion:

You are my son, today I have begotten you.
 Ask of me, and I will make the nations
 your heritage,
 and the ends of the earth your possession.
 You shall break them with a rod of iron,
 and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.

The shattering or diffusion of the Nation, like the diffusion of its Narration or its History, undoes, and encumbers, a synthesizing reading of it and this work. *Orthokosta* the novel, like the Civil War and the Greek nation of the time which endured it, now challenges us with the task of its own reconstitution. Its violence is excessive and matter-of-fact; its myriad details and personal retellings each significant yet unassimilable; it leaves the reader exasperated and defies him or her "to pick up the pieces."

Remembering and Dismembering

Ernst Renan, and more recently Benedict Anderson, have impressed on us how the narrative of the nation involves a problematic engagement with the tasks of remembering and forgetting.¹⁰ The critique that sparked controversy over Valtinos's *Orthokosta* was concerned with this very same process. It was written by a respected marxist commentator, Angelos Elefantis, in the June/July issue of the highly respected cultural and political periodical, *O Πολίτης* [*O Polites*], and it addressed precisely issues of truthfulness and forgetfulness [αλήθεια-επιλησμοσύνη].¹¹ Indeed, the word for truth in Greek refers explicitly to the ability to not forget. The debate that ensued was mostly carried in two interviews with Valtinos in August 1994; a follow-up *Polites* piece by Nikos Theotokas in September 1994; and a number of book reviews that referred to the debate; and the occasional longer critical piece.¹² Elefantis's initial salvo initiated the "scandal";¹³ Theotokas's later article, in large measure, reiterated many of Elefantis's arguments, at points quite felicitously.

Elefantis's original article begins with a cordial (largely rhetorical) and condescending concession which grants that the literary endeavour should not be held up to the standards of historiography. *But*, predictably, it is not long before Elefantis's opening gives way to censure. Elefantis criticizes Valtinos for painting an animalistic "dance of death and blood" in only one area of Greece, with little regard for the broader picture. Elefantis is mostly critical of Valtinos's processes of selection of material and his lack of historical perspective, for such endeavours must be conditioned—so the critic chides—by the fact that history must pre-exist, and inform, the literary undertaking. Valtinos must not tell only part of the story; he must step back to tell the whole story or read any and every story through a conceptual frame. For, Elefantis can accept Valtinos's wish to demythologize some of the well-trodden mythical historiographical narratives that have long formed the contours of the Civil War tale; however, Valtinos's dismantlement of such edifices has led him to an equally serious *faux-pas*. His tendency to focus on the representation of all-too-human motives and fears legitimates a belief in "a red and black fascism." That is, if we discount the extremists on the side of the fascists and on the side of the communists—the orchestrators of such carnage—we are left with yet another mythical construct—the grieving and much-suffering populist middle, the *λαός*, or long-suffering multitude. This interpretation would seem to depart from Jina Politi's reading of these microhistories. Where Politi reads *approvingly* of these unassimilable *istories*—(hi)stories—as the "pre-literary, pre-historiographic discourse," occupying a space before ideological discourse, Elefantis reads this same characteristic as highly suspect and dangerous. For this people of lived passions should not be placed beyond the causology of History for Elefantis. Nor should Valtinos be for that matter. The bloodied hand must be reattached to the body politic; the suspended oral testimony must be contextualized in a larger ideological discursive field. As Elefantis sees it, Valtinos adopts a view that is the effect of a hindsight acquired by

one section of the Left after the events of 1989. This conciliatory perspective on Right and Left appeals not to memory, but only elicits forgetfulness. Οι φόνου είναι φόνου [murders are murders] on all sides, sure enough – Elefantis reassures; but lived passions do not wash away guilt or the reasons behind the events that elicited such guilt. The subtext of Elefantis’s comments implies that Valtinos has not laid out the causes that led the communists to do what terrible things *they* did, and that what is wiped out in his “regional” account, are the causes for such actions (αυτίες).¹⁴ A maelstrom of hateful passions and detestable impulses that provoke the butchering and slaughter of the novel need to show themselves responsible to History itself. As a result, Elefantis deems the book unworthy of the title “novel” emblazoned on its cover, since this title properly belongs only to works that speak “the truth of the writer, of his readers, and of things.” Valtinos’s book is, he concludes, only a “fable” [μυθολόγημα].¹⁵ When, as Elefantis cautions, two or three hundred years hence, at a moment when all traces of our civilization have been mysteriously wiped out and our epigones come across only Valtinos’s “fable”, what will they think? As if to work against such an eventuality, Elefantis appends a postscript to his article that quotes an extended extract from the memoirs of a lieutenant-colonel with ELAS, the military wing of the wartime communist resistance to the Nazis and then to the government forces during the Civil War. Lt. Colonel Emmanuil Vazaïos’s account, Elefantis asserts, may not be the whole truth, but it is not a lie, a myth, or a fable.

Nikos Theotokas takes up the gauntlet on behalf of *Polites* in the same periodical two months later, in the very next issue. He reminds the doubtless noble, yet forgetful, Valtinos of what motivated him to write the book. (Valtinos avows that he has forgotten what prompted him to write the book).¹⁶ Theotokas asserts that Valtinos’s motive was to vivify the pain felt by the members of the collaborationist Security Battalions and their families, and so honor their own blood spilt. “Blood is blood”, proclaims Theotokas; and so rivals Elefantis’s “murders are murders” in literalist gesture. He echoes Elefantis’s position too. In Valtinos’s laudable attempt to ease or erase passions, Theotokas argues, Valtinos manages only to erase history. Despite Valtinos’s claims to the contrary, in the final analysis, Valtinos does posit a truth. History *is* contested and contradictory, yes; open to domestication and reordering with time, yes; yet Theotokas warns against reworking the rhetorics or the narrative of a usable past even for the laudable purpose of reconciliation – “the dead, victims and victimized both, can leave us without their apologies” [οι πεθαμένοι, θύτες και θύματα, μορδεί να μας αφήσουν χωρίς τη συγγνώμη τους]. Politically correct revisionism, however noble, that leads to Valtinos’s assertion that “there were no defeated in the Civil War, only a defeated people,” is only for those who stand above the fray, for those leftists post-1989 who adopt a concessionary logic. In other words, Valtinos is *in* his text, *in* the myth, and *in* history.

For Theotokas, Valtinos’s liberal truth should not seek refuge in ύφος [style], or in his work’s fiction. Both Elefantis and Theotokas are firm in their resolve to tease him out; and, in disciplinary terms, to tease literature back into history.

Strong words from critics whose journal has spent much time down the years attacking conventional wisdoms, populist slogans, and “catechistic thinking” (as Valtinos would say).

Valtinos’s response appears in two interviews, the first in another reputable left-wing periodical *Avτί* [Anti] and the second in the left-wing newspaper *Eleftherotypia*. Perhaps the interview is not a genre suited for a sustained rejoinder. However, in his characteristically very direct style, Valtinos does manage to respond to a series of points. Not least, he expresses his apprehension at the idea of claiming truth in any artistic practice. In the stead of so dubious an undertaking, Valtinos confesses to a greater overriding concern with the persuasiveness of his literary creation. In literature, one “fabulates,” one strives for an equipose of language and form—he expounds—capturing often through a long memory, and on occasion by cassette recorder (very much like an anthropologist), the oral tales, voices, and the tone of people’s accounts who lived these very experiences. This, from the author of a novel titled *Χρονικό της Δεκαετίας του ’60* [Data from the Decade of the Sixties]¹⁷—which announces itself as a chronicle but everywhere, by its artful construction, is always *more than* the register of facts or events. Valtinos insists that, with *Orthokosta*, we are dealing with a novel, and not a chronicle. And it is a novel built on a conventional relation with a reality of events; however, the aesthetic construct “presents” such a reality through this set of parallel aesthetic conventions. As a result, Valtinos places his emphasis on *ύφος* or expression which, he is quick to affirm, is not to be understood as a literary formalism or an exteriority.

While Valtinos admits to the historical dimension of the text, his comments underscore his belief in a realm of artistic endeavour and practice that is being grossly disrespected by those carrying the attack on him. While he adjudges himself to have worked through the intense emotions of the Civil War—no-one could produce a work of art with such emotions—Elefantis, he remarks, is still beholden to them and so appeals not to memory, but on “persistent ideas” and a catechistic way of thinking. Furthermore, it is evident that Valtinos reads in Elefantis’s response an inability to distinguish between forms of expression, for those who respond in agitation [*εν βρασμώ*] remind him of “someone who gets up from his theatre box seat and shoots the bad guy on the stage.”¹⁸ Or, again, in commenting on Elefantis’s inclusion of an account by a combatant, Valtinos is little impressed by Elefantis’s use of such “authoritative” sources and so reasons that “to talk of a painting—*Orthokosta*—with the negative of a photograph is hardly satisfying.”¹⁹

Both statements from Valtinos seem to wish to preserve explicit realms of activity, to maintain a cultural and conceptual space between the audience and the stage; between painting and the negative of a photograph. The literariness of his endeavour, its very literary conventionality, is one which he tries to preserve by such statements. Some would argue that this is a tacit retreat: to be primarily concerned with *ύφος*, tone or expression, is read as a step away from the historical nitty-gritty? Opposed to this perspective, the critic Nikos Fokas distin-

guishes that the truth recounted by true people may not in any sense be true;²⁰ the truth of *Orthokosta's* personages, or rather its voices, underpins its literary persuasiveness. It is this *persuasiveness*, stresses Fokas employing a word favored by Valtinos, that elicits intense reactions in ideologically informed readers. The truth, the historical truth, recounted by these voices may not be true; but the recounting of them is true.²¹

It is clear that, as a critic of his own work, Valtinos wishes to preserve a space for his literary world—some would say seek refuge in a literary shelter—even as, on the other hand, his work's effect depends greatly on the ability to flit in and out of the realms of literature and history. The Benjaminian quality of events that speak for themselves depends on this interdependence; as it also does on the flitting persona of “Valtinos” lurking somewhere in and out of the text. Elefantis is “enraged” not by his engagement with the accounts themselves, but by the version of history they tell. Two reasons lie behind this. First, he can not ignore the leftist shadow that the real Valtinos casts over the book and the interplay of this shadow's position inside and outside the text. It is that an affirmed leftist, Valtinos, tells these tales that seem to bother him. Secondly, he is unsettled by how this self-professed “novel” lies in the unsettling in-between of literature and history—often oral and certainly local and anthropological. It is the collapsibility or porousness of the line of demarcation between novel/ chronicle, or literature/history, or local lore/world politics that unsettles Valtinos's detractors so.

But, Elefantis can, at the same time, be criticized from a literary perspective. Dimitris Raftopoulos has characterised Elefantis's reading practice as one that is bred on a solid Realist aesthetic, “somewhere between scholasticism and social realism.”²² Elefantis's political reading of History is driven by a theory of the novel built on Hegel's reading of Balzac for the diagnosis of society's ills. And his reading is reminiscent of the way Party devotees attacked the historical avant-garde, especially the Surrealists in the 1930s. Walter Benjamin's position on this issue in his essay “The Author As Producer” of 1934 is worth quoting here and extending it to the Valtinos affair:

I should like to show you that the tendency of a literary work can only be politically correct if it is also literarily correct. That is to say, the politically correct tendency includes a literary tendency. And I would add straightaway, this literary tendency, which is implicitly or explicitly contained in every *correct* political tendency of a work includes its literary quality *because* it includes its literary *tendency*.²³

Hors-Texte

It is surprising how little the *Polites* critics refer to the forty-seven chapters of the novel. This may go some way to explaining some of Valtinos's exasperation. To the degree that Elefantis misreads, his misreading may be more properly a

symptom of non-reading. Valtinos declares that: “I think that all those who were incensed by the book, did not read it. They stopped after its first lines, and essential elements of the book passed them by.”²⁴ There is some truth to this, and Raftopoulos is right to pick up on this to observe that Elefantis proves himself a “bad reader” at the point when he demands “causes” for this “dance of death and blood.” Are not these personal narratives precisely a humanistic response to this very question? There is no doubt that *Orthokosta* is a difficult book to read; indeed, the critic Maro Triantaphyllou states unequivocally that it often obliges the reader to skip passages: “The length of the paragraphs causes panic, whole pages, chapters follow without drawing a breath; with no visual respite, with not time enough for you to think about, to process, what you have just read. The writer’s motive is clear in all this, but the reader reaches a point of exhaustion and becomes impatient to finish the book, at times s/he feels the need to breeze through a few pages or even to skip them completely.”²⁵ This candid, yet almost sacrilegious, confession does capture the rigors of the book. And, while this aspect is a tribute to the work’s unswerving formal tailoring to its narrative objectives, and not a sign of its formal deficiencies as Triantaphyllou implies, the fact remains that *Orthokosta*’s challenge to synthesis in the reading-process makes it a difficult read. The challenge to the reader to resist his own self in reading aspires to a momentous moment in the developing Greek confrontation of this chapter of Greek history. If anything, in challenging the reader to resist ideological impositions at every turn, *Orthokosta* – by its long paragraphs, its repetitions, its painstaking detail – forces the reader to seek a lifeline in ideological simplification or total surrender. The *Polites* critics have fallen victim to both misdemeanours.

As I have largely affirmed already, the decipherment of the book’s details might prove too unfulfilling, too Herculean. Herculean, and not Joycean. And so, in this short piece, I, like others before me,²⁶ cast my critical gaze away from the main body of the text to its paratexts, to deliver a close reading of one aspect of this work. After all, paratexts often provide a guide for the explaining how the reader should read a given text.²⁷ It will be my contention that a careful reading of such sections – the book cover, the epigraph, a short preface, and the concluding page – will reveal Valtinos’s staging, or preemptive theorization, of the very critical debate that we have set out above. In these in-between segments of the novel,²⁸ those telling parts of the book *outside* the central body of forty-seven first-person accounts, the *hors-texte*, the status of the novel itself in interceding from within and without History is, in fact, highlighted by Valtinos. In their un-literary reading, Valtinos’s detractors overlook the way that this porousness of different forms of narratives is signposted in the very parts of the text that are themselves *in-between*, that meet the inside and outside halfway. In short, Valtinos’s suggestive choice of the name for his book, *Orthokosta*, underscores his concern for problems inherent in locating what is ορθό – that is, variably, what is right, straight, true, exact, or safe.²⁹ The claims for *orthotita*, correctness, and ortho-graphia – not how correct is the spelling but how right is the

(re)writing, or here (re)righting, of history in *Orthokosta*—is a matter that Valtinos himself first brings to our critical attention.

Reading Paratexts

Alekos Levidis's illustration on the book cover shows a series of figures and profiles, heavily clad and some gun-totting, looking in different directions. A set of frames depict a man in a black hood, a potential executioner. Up above an iconographic scene of threnody, with halo-bearing figures stooped over a naked body, angels and centurions are seen fleeing from the scene as Christ, we suspect, is taken down from the Cross. This religious first contact with the book is further reinforced by the book's epigraph from *Psalms*. In both instances, a diffusion away from a central event is highlighted, as if to conjure up the deposition from the Cross and the apostles' dispersion, to all points of the compass, with the purpose of spreading His Word.

The second text the reader encounters, a preface of sorts, purports to be an extract from the work of one Isaakios, Bishop of Reontos and Prastos, Γης Πρασιών και Θυρεάτιδος καταλογή.³⁰ The Diocese of Reontos and Prastos once spread itself across the two mountainous communities of the old Tsakonian area of Prastos and the now ruined Reontos (Rionta-Oreion). It had jurisdiction over twelve Tsakonian monasteries and five from outside the area, as attested to by the Διαθήκη [Will] of Jakovos the Pale, Bishop in 1803-12.³¹ The extract is a *katalogi* [καταλογή]. As Margaret Alexiou has shown, such a description in the popular language of the romances refers to a love song, a message, or an encomium; in some dialects, in Lesbos for instance, the *katalog* signifies the *epitaphios thrinos*, or funeral dirge, since both the verb *katalogiazō* [καταλογιάζω] and the noun *katalogistra* [καταλογίστρα] are used interchangeably with *moirologo* [μοιρολογώ] and *moirologistria* [μοιρολογίστρια]. More significantly, the classical *katalogizomai* [καταλογίζομαι], a counting up, is here evocative of a counting up or a listing of reasons to love, but also to mourn, for the place described in this passage. The narrator, Isaakios, gives a poetic and florid account of the history, the resources, and the idyllic landscape around *Orthokosta* from his vantage point high up at the monastery, the house on the holy hill. With this Romantic prospect, with its matching motifs and language, the piece takes on an elegaic quality in *katharevousa*, far removed from the staccato, asthmatic, and faltering rhythms of the most demotic colloquialisms that will predominate in the main body of the text.

A second short piece at the back of the book, some 336 pages on, sets out to cover, literally, much of the "same ground" as that covered by Isaakios.³² It does so in a very different tone, language, and perspective. Italicized like Isaakios's account, it is divided into two parts. The first part offers a topographical description of the precise area survey coordinates of *Orthokosta* according to the Greek Army's Geographical Service Map of 1938. There is also mention that the monastery may go back as far as the time of the Iconoclast debate,

another time of intense internecine conflict.³³ The monastery is dedicated to the Dormition of the Virgin Mary and celebrated on its nine days, and that the name is, according to one account, taken from the Tsakonian toponym *Orthokosta*. Throughout this account, sources are ascribed scrupulously and origins attested to with reserve and precision. This punctiliousness contrasts it to Isaakios's earlier account; and, indeed, also to Elefantis's placing of it in Gortynia, and not Kinouria.

With the same degree of certainty, but somewhat dismissively, there follows, after a one line break, a strange discreditation of the details of ψευδής, or mendicant, Isaakios's account. Isaakios's geographical descriptions are flatly rejected, his claims of reserves of lead or silver are denied, and—we are advised—should be read as flights of fancy, poetic licence. We are even given evidence for believing that Isaakios is not to be trusted, for, we are told, the Patriarchate had confined him to the walls of *Orthokosta* for his *κακοδοξία και σιμωνία*, for his “ill-repute” and “simony.” The first is more than ill-repute for the word means “believing in false religious dogma.” Simony, the buying and selling of Church office or preferment, is named after Simon Magnus, the first century Samaritan sorcerer rebuked by Peter for offering money in order that he might purchase the power of giving out the Holy Ghost. Isaakios, we are led to believe, is also a seller of false pardons.

This description of Isaakios sends us back to the book's epigraph, for we are faced, after all, with a man who, while ruling over his diocese from high up on the holy hill, can not be associated with the “king” that God empowers and urges to smash the nations in pieces like a potter's vessel, with the power of the Holy Ghost. For he is not in possession of the Holy Ghost: indeed, the Patriarch, no less, has punished him for his presumption and his false powers.

Should we, however, believe all that we hear about Isaakios? Why should we set store by the faceless, “authoritative” account that refers to the Ordinance Survey Map? Do we accept this authorized version or the subjective and “wayward” version of Isaakios, the writer, who was, like the rightists in the main part of the novel, imprisoned up on the holy hill, in the monastery? Do we believe the distant, objectified account or the tale of the man who—if nothing else—was *there*? Do we side with the authorized history or with Isaakios, the author, and Valtinos's precursor? Foreshadowing Elefantis's question, do we embrace the painting of a locale or the photo negative of a geographical area?

What parallel is being made between Isaakios and the events that unfolded behind the walls of *Orthokosta*? Do we relate the imprisoned Isaakios with the imprisoned rightists? Were their dogmas as false as his? And if Valtinos sides with Isaakios, and by extension with the rightists killed, does his identification amount to a pardon for them? Even if it is a pardon, will it, in the end, prove to be a false pardon? Just like the ones Isaakios was punished for selling.

Are the *Polites* critics punishing Valtinos for selling a false pardon to the Greek rightists and collaborators? The questions posed here foreshadow the very

dilemma the reader faces in choosing between the *Polites* critics and Valtinos's narrator.

The Writer As Simoner

The writer is a simoner of sorts, using his magic to suspend reality, to offer brief respite, to challenge and undermine the constraints of his predicament, to reinvest things with the Holy Ghost. In the in-between of the text, Valtinos problematizes the impossibility of the very task that the book sets itself and, on this point, establishes a postmodern aesthetics of memory that is self-doubting and self-reflexive, a Nietzschean critical history of sorts that questions the sound of its own voice. The text emphasizes its own dilemma and the inability of both the writer and the text itself to place themselves in any one place, in any one genre, in any one approach, without undoing themselves and the terms by which they understand themselves.

These oral narratives remain a site of unresolved tension. This is nowhere better, or more beautifully, captured than in the best known aesthetic composition of *Orthokosta's* epigraph from *The Book of Psalms*. "Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron/and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel" appears near the end of Part II of Handel's *Messiah*. The song, placed immediately before the liberating Hallelujah Chorus, is characterized by the operatic exchange and tension between the tenor's declamatory cry to "break them" and the defiant response from the violin's *obbligato*. As the composer Christopher Hogwood has put it, "the creation of unresolved energy is the main justification at this point in the drama." We are at a similar point in our ongoing (re)reading of the Greek Civil War.

For its part, *Orthokosta* captures this unresolved tension. And, in 1994, it not only writes about rewriting the past, but it also foreshadows the future as it anticipates and responds to the debate in *Polites* before it even took place. Or so it is, if one reads the text, or if one can bear to listen carefully to its speakers' voices.

Notes

1. A preliminary version of this article was originally presented at the Modern Greek Studies Association Symposium, at Harvard University, in October 1995.
2. The desperate escape to the sea is a reference to another descent, Xenophon's *Descent of the Ten Thousand*. For a discussion of this and other comments, see Charalambidou (1992). For parallels with the atmosphere of Camus's existential works, see Camus's descriptive use of landscape in his classic *La Peste* [*The Plague*] and, in particular, his use of the sea as a locus of respite and consolation in the plague-ravaged town of Oran.
3. Charalambidou is right to bring up this point. She argues that the traumas of the Civil War are too painful to allow for the "innocent" games of postmodernism" (1995: 272); though I would caution against believing that postmodernism is always quite so playful or innocent.

4. Raftopoulos 1994a:32.
5. See Politi 1996; Charalambidou 1997.
6. See also Fokas 1995:133 and Politi 1996:236-7.
7. See Valtinos's comments in his interview in *Anti* (1994:49) for his allusion to Homeric forms.
8. Politi 1996:237.
9. See Maro Triantaphyllou's article (1995: 163): e.g. "Events presented as the protagonists' personal testimonies create an asphyxiating context of details, a sea of facts and pieces of information which are not beneficial, they only confuse"(163).
10. Renan's now oft-cited lecture entitled "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?" was delivered at the Sorbonne on 11th March 1882. It can be consulted in Renan's *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris, 1947-61), vol. I, pp. 887-907. An easily available English translation: "What Is A Nation?" In Homi Bhabha (ed.). *Nation and Narration*. Translated by Martin Thom. (London & New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 8-22. Anderson draws attention to the dynamics of remembering and forgetting in the eleventh chapter of the revised second edition of his *Imagined Communities: Reflections On the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (London: Verso, 1991). For a discussion of remembering and forgetting within a broader matrix of habits and facilities of communication that allow for the function of a "people," see Karl W. Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication*. 2nd edition (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966).
11. The journal will hereafter be referred to as *Polites* in my article.
12. See Raftopoulos (1994a; 1994b); Faos (1995); Fokas (1995); Triantaphyllou (1995); Politi (1996).
13. The characterization, in quotation marks, is attributed to Vena Georgakopoulou, Valtinos's interviewer in the *Eleftherotypia* interview of 24 August, 1994. Certainly, the ensuing polemic was the most vivid cultural debate in Greece in that year, 1994.
14. See Elefantis 63.
15. *Polites*, 126.
16. Valtinos 1994c:50.
17. The work has recently seen an English translation: Thanassis Valtinos, *Data from The Decade of the Sixties*. Translated by Stavros Deligeorgis & Jane Assimakopoulos. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000).
18. Valtinos 1994b:4/28.
19. The quote is taken from his interview in *Eleftherotypia* (1994b:5/29).
20. In one of his interviews, Valtinos characterises Lt. Colonel's Vazaïos's account of events at Orthokosta as "lies at every turn" (Valtinos 1994b:5/29).
21. Fokas 1995:130.
22. See Raftopoulos (1994b: 50).
23. Benjamin 1986:221.
24. *Eleftherotypia* (1994b:5/29)
25. Triantaphyllou 1995:163.
26. Elefantis and Theotokas are typical in this regard and many of the work's critics follow suit; Politi, on the other hand, focuses a great deal on the work's paratexts and builds many of her arguments on these before moving on to aspects of language in the book's testimonies.
27. Genette 1997:238, 265.
28. Jina Politi focuses on these very same paratexts in her consideration of *Orthokosta*. It

may be that facing up to the forty-seven first-person accounts requires a more sustained type of critical engagement, longer than an article.

29. See Faos 1995:39.

30. Valtinos 1994:9-10

31. See Thanos Vayenas 1965:129-132.

32. Valtinos 1994:337-8.

33. Politi 1996:231 draws attention to this parallel. As for the historical record on the church, one ethnographic account mentions an epigraph to be found on the church's façade that memorializes an original building of 1425. The monastery must have been from the same time. The same epigraph states that the current building stands from 1711, during the second Venetian occupation of the Peloponnese. A partial reconstruction must also have taken place in 1626 (Xyngopoulos 1956:12-13).

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