

University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies

April 9, 2007

Speaker: Dr. Miltos Pehlivanos, Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki

Topic: “The Punctuation Marks of Reading: Stratis Tsirkas from *The Club* to *Drifting Cities*”

Presiding Chair: Vangelis Calotychos, Columbia University

Rapporteur: Karen Emmerich, Columbia University

Attendees: Nikos Alexiou (CUNY), Liana Theodoratou (NYU)

Summary of presentation:

The topic of Pehlivanos’s talk, which focused on the writing, publication, and reception history of the three novels that came to constitute Stratis Tsirkas’s *Drifting Cities*, was the interaction between criticism, combative engagement, and creative writing: how does writerly composition proceed by adjusting itself to readerly responses?

Pehlivanos opened up his talk by explaining some of the theoretical background to his work on Tsirkas, through the lens of the Borges text “Borges and Me.” He referred to Barthes and Foucault and the death of the author, which marked a foundational turn in the history of literary studies: the author was no longer something that could be taken for granted, and attention turned to other ways of grappling with the historical and social reality of texts, the text as a constructed thing, as an intertext from the very beginning. But how do we read a text if we try to get outside of the distinction between what is internal and what is external to the text? Pehlivanos cited four separate theoretical trends in recent literary studies that have helped us to approach these issues: reader response theory, deconstruction, genetic criticism, and new historicism. Genette’s notion of paratext has also been helpful in redrawing or rethinking the boundaries between the text and its exterior.

As in Borges’s short story, in a letter written by Tsirkas that Pehlivanos quoted, we have an author who is multiple—and that multiplication has to do with the author’s relationship to his readers, to the criticism and responses he gets from those readers. Pehlivanos is trying to show how that web of readerly responses that surrounds the composition of *Drifting Cities* puts *simeia stixeos* (punctuation marks) into the writing itself; we must try to dig beneath the typographical surface of the book on the shelf and see what it is that makes the text exist in the way it does, to understand what Jerome McGann calls the dialogical processes by which a text comes into being.

As is common knowledge, Tsirkas’s *Drifting Cities* did not appear at once, as a three-volume and yet unified publication; instead, the three novels were published at intervals within a five-year period: *The Club* in December, 1960 (with the date of completion stated as August 9, 1960), *Ariagne* in 1962 (it was finished on August 9, 1962), and *The Bat* in 1965 (the “Epilogue” was completed on May 5, 1965). As a consequence, it is a kind of novelistic composition in progress, and that under-recognized aspect is the primary focus of this talk, as a writerly but also readerly “becoming” from the point of view of literary communication.

When *The Club* was published, nothing in its paratextual apparatus indicated that it is the first volume of a trilogy; on the contrary, it is presented as a self-sufficient novel; thus we can only imagine that that is how it was encountered by its first readers. Yet *The Club* met with a deluge of different and conflicting responses, many of which concerned the continuation of the events of the novel, opinions as to what should happen to the characters of the book. It was through his interaction with critics and readers that *The Club* actually turned from a stand-alone novel into the first book in a trilogy.

Only with the publication of *Ariagne*, the second of the three novels, is the overarching title of *Drifting Cities* made public, and is the first volume placed on a horizon of narrative continuity. Moreover, the general nature of the trilogy changes with each subsequent novel. With *Ariagne* the emphasis shifts from love to history; one of the primary reasons behind the composition of this book is to go back to the beginning and interpret events, to explain why history unfolded in the way it did. This, in turn, brings about certain responses that push Tsirkas again in a different direction: Hatzidaki, for instance, writes from Bucharest asking Tsirkas to move away from the very close details of what happened on a historical level, to return to the project of *mythologia*. Tsirkas's response is to return to the issue of the political: *The Bat* is reacting to a series of renunciations, a rethinking of the left in Greece.

Summary of Discussion:

Q. Is there a continuation of the discussion with Raftopoulos?

A. There is, but it is more a spoken than a written conversation, and chiefly undertaken by people who wanted to support Tsirkas against the charges of aesthetic and political conformism. It's an issue that's taken up later by Vassilis Hatzivasiliou and Elizabeth Kotsia.

Q. And by Anagnostakis, of course, earlier.

A. It's primarily a conversation about which of the books is better on aesthetic grounds, though the political also comes into play, of course, in any determination of aesthetic success. The point I'm trying to make is that the critical intervention is precisely what made Tsirkas: censorship constitutes that moment that shapes a certain reaction; it's the thing that makes it possible for Tsirkas to write. Kotsia's book came out in 2003, so this is certainly a conversation that is continuing today.

Q: I liked very much the point you made, and I agree entirely, that the work becomes what it is because of the criticism, the reactions from critics and readers, as well as from the Party. I want to ask, just to clarify: you're saying that this has already begun from *Ariagne*, and not just with *The Bat*?

A: I would say that this kind of negotiation (*diapragmatevsi*)—not accommodation (*simvivasmos*)—is taking place on an aesthetic level with *Ariagne*, and on a political level

with *The Bat*. From *Ariagne* on we have a positive hero, Fanis. In *The Club* there is no positive hero—Garelas doesn't quite fit the bill. *The Club* offers a positive form that is still not quite complete, whereas from *Ariagne* on we have Fanis, who becomes an even more central figure in *The Bat*. I want to stress here that I'm talking about a negotiation rather than accommodation or conformism. This is important. The experiment with Anna Feldman and the interior monologue that we saw *The Club* doesn't happen again. Instead, we have this sudden opening up into a historical panorama in *The Bat*. So there is this aesthetic question of whether or not they're good novels—and yes, all three are, but the demand shapes the offering, in a way. The criticism shapes the product.

Q: It's a dialectical relationship.

A: And of course Tsirkas himself is worried. He gets lots of letters from readers, and is very worried because he knows what he's going to change. There's a poet living in Pireus, for instance, a member of the circle of leftist intellectuals associated with the magazine *Avrio*, and she thinks *The Club* is great, and loves Anna Feldman and the interior monologue. So he writes back to her to say that he's going to cut that.

Q: And can you clarify exactly what you see happening with *The Bat*, what are the changes you see taking place there?

A: I think on the level of history he decides to cut certain basic things. Something that annoyed the critics within the Party was an episode in which Manos meets Rigos, a fictionalized version of Andreas Martis. Tsirkas sets a scene in which Fanis and Manos are asking for the Party line, saying that the Party takes its line from the Soviet Union. Nothing in *The Bat* draws any line between the events of 1944 and the Soviet International; instead we get an image of isolated action, ELAS, EAM, and the KKE don't have anything to do with this. This whole scene between Rigos, Manos and Fanis is taken from the end of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and the horizon of writing was critical realism. In *The Club* Tsirkas was operating on the level of psychological realism (his own term), which he read through French existentialism. Then, through the work of Lukacs, which he knows very well, he almost does an about-face, and switches to this brand of critical realism.

Q: A similar story with the Party is what we see with Aris Alexandrou and Manos Hakkas.

A: Except each circumstance is different. Tsirkas tries to negotiate from within Party, where as Alexandrou just leaves. When Pieridis, the secretary of the Party in Alexandria, leaves for Bucharest, Tsirkas becomes secretary until 1952, when there's a change of policy and they prefer non-intellectuals, proletariats to be Party cadres. This is the kind of relationship between intellectuals and Party cadres we see in *The Club*. From 1952-60, there's a lot of talk about this issue of what it means to be a Communist in the community of Alexandria, which all feeds into the writing of *The Club*, though this question of the role of the intellectual doesn't really enter into the other two novels.

Q: What do you mean by “negotiation from within”?

A: Tsirkas tries to stay in the Party and change it from within, to change the very status of “within.” But within what? He’s both a member of the EDA and a writer trying to do something new. But through what means? Through what kind of modernism? And how does that modernism negotiate his political position?

Q: In other words, he was a writer of the left.

A: Or perhaps we should say he was both a writer and a leftist, he was trying to be both.

Q: When he decides to write *The Club*, regardless of whether or not it was billed as the first part of a trilogy, does he know he’ll do the other two?

A: In his diary he says he wants to do the four, and of course we have Durrell and the *Alexandria Quartet*, the superego behind this. When in 1965 he finishes *The Bat*, he knows he can’t write anything more about the civil war. He writes the epilogue, which is the most moving moment of the book, and takes us up to 1957. What’s missing is period between ’46 and ’57, which would have been something like Alexandrou’s *Mission Box*. It’s a book that Tsirkas will never write. To return to the more philological question, of how he takes different things that he has ready in his drawer, it’s interesting that in the archive we find, in June 1961, “the new novel” (*to neo mythistorima*), with a hero called Paraschos, who narrates in the first person his childhood years coming to visit his cousin Tony in Alexandria, from Constantinople. This Paraschos still has nothing to do with Manos, but if we look at these two texts, he creates a relationship with the hero of *The Bat*. So the process more or less is that he already has a novella in the drawer, the creates a relation with the characters from his first novel, writes it over again much better, and this becomes one of the three voices in *The Bat*. Genetic criticism helps us see these relationships between the texts. In the spring of 1961, he starts with sketches for a novel about Cairo during the Occupation. And when he proceeds towards *Ariagne*, he takes parts of those sketches and creates Manos, who enters into the realm of *Ariagne*. He creates novelistic ideas on the basis of historical events. And there is also the issue of the editions. If you look at the first edition of *The Club* you see that it has no subtitle mentioning the trilogy as a whole. But when *Ariagne* comes out, what does he do with the copies still left of *The Club*? Tsirkas has to make a dust-jacket, to cover up the cover. When those copies run out, they make a new cover with the subtitle of the trilogy written on them. If you look at the publishing history you see this displacement in the paratext.

Q: What about an annotated edition?

A: Critical editions always have that problem: they annotate. Where do you stop annotating, and who is hiding behind whom? After the white edition that most people have, we have the 2005 annotated edition, which did very well. Tsirkas is a steady best-seller, one of the very few books that is still read to that extent. But there is always this problem of how much to annotate. Do you say that Fanis is a fictional Yannis Hallas? Do you or do you not give that kind of information in an annotated edition? This particular

annotated edition gives much less information than is actually at the editor's disposal; he tries not to create a scandal, keeps the names of the people behind the characters. But there is the question, too, of to what extent the trilogy can be read, these days, without an annotated edition. It is so historically specific that it is almost impossible now for readers of younger generations to understand what is going on.

Q: Do your students at the university read it? How is it taught?

A: Our students have to read the book as part of their exams. But I'm sure that what gets studied and tested is Tsirkas's narratorial techniques, not the historical issues. At the time when they were first published people understood the events. And then came the age of "endotextual reading" (*endokeimeniki anagnosi*), or reading from within, once that historical knowledge passed away. With my book I try to combine the exo-textual and endo-textual. Today Tsirkas, like most others, is read largely endo-textually.

Q: I make my students read history.

A: And this brings us to the question of the historical novel. *The Bat* isn't a historical novel, it's Party literature. Because the history is still unwritten; he's trying to tell a story from things heard and lived, a history that still has to be finished before you can pronounce it, or you won't know how. But this is probably my own provocative hermeneutic theory.