

# When the Tree Sings: Magic Realism and the Carnavalesque in a Greek-American Narrative

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American immigrant and ethnic writers have often chosen to unfold the action of their personal and fictional narratives in their ancestral country. Isaac Bashevis Singer, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Vance Bourjaily, Jerre Mangione, Helen Barolini as well as many others, have made such a choice and explored creatively its narrative possibilities. Two patterns of development seem to emerge as far as the plot of these texts is concerned. In the first, there are direct references to American circumstances; often the protagonist, a hyphenated American, undertakes a journey to her/his ancestral country and in its course undergoes a change of deep spiritual significance. In the second, the references to America are rare or nonexistent and the narratives focus exclusively on the historical or social reality of the ancestral motherland.

Like other hyphenated American writers, the Greek-Americans have structured their "homeward-bound" plots according to one of the two patterns. There are a number of such narratives which deserve more attention, including Thalia Cheronis-Selz's, Konstantinos Lardas's, and Corinne Demas-Bliss's short stories, Harry Mark Petrakis's *The Hour of the Bell* (1976), Daphne Athas's *Cora* (1978), and Stratis Haviaras's *When the Tree Sings* (1979). These works share a prevailing awareness of the multilayered reality of Greece. The prehistoric, the Homeric, the Classical, the Hellenistic, the Roman, the Byzantine, the Slavic, the Balkan, the Turkish, and the Neohellenic appear to harmonize in a landscape that, nonetheless, easily betrays their violent encounter and the attempts of one to impose on the others.<sup>1</sup> Undertaking to convey the polyphony and cacophony of their pre-American motherland, Greek-American writers inevitably turn to either a "perceptual" or "narrated" magic realism.<sup>2</sup> They identify the anarchy of the past with popular culture and vernacular vitality, whereas they naturally associate the forces that endeavor to impose uniformity with state-controlled culture. Mikhail Bakhtin has defined this anarchic element in popular culture as the culture's "carnavalesque" sense of the world. It predicates a world turned upside down and is characterized by eccentricity, profanation, free and familiar contact among people (dissolution of hierarchical order), carnivalistic *mésalliances*, and the pathos of shifts and changes, of death and rebirth. What essentially underlies these categories is ambivalence—what Bakhtin calls joyful relativity—and the concomitant ideas of subversion and renewal. This profoundly anarchic nature of popular culture, according to Bakhtin, crosses swords with and explodes the seriousness, hier-

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Georgakas, "An Interview with Stratis Haviaras," *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 8.4 (1981): 77.

<sup>2</sup> Fredric Jameson. "On Magic Realism in Film," *Critical Inquiry* 12.2 (1986): 302.

archy, and dogmatism characteristic of official culture.<sup>3</sup> Such a confrontation between popular/magical and official/rational engages the narrator's interest in Haviaras's novel *When the Tree Sings* (1979).

Haviaras's anonymous narrator is a young boy who manages to survive a war, a foreign occupation, a struggle for liberation, a new occupation by Allied forces and a period of "reconstruction." Although the historical particulars are never explicitly stated, there is no mistaking that the author has in mind Greece's traumatic experiences. However, this absence of explicit historicity in the novel is significant; what matters is the presence of a suprachronic, multi-layered, magical popular culture which strives to survive despite unpropitious circumstances. Historical specificity always manifests itself in negative terms; occupation army, quisling government, Allies, all identified as the enemy. Each sets out to vanquish the people's spirit by suppressing those fundamental categories which threaten the status of the official order. More efficient than the others, the Allies will attempt not so much to suppress as to "rationalize" the magical and to rewrite popular culture within a historical present that will subsume and eventually eliminate its anarchic activity. On the personal level, the narrator/protagonist takes it upon himself to stave off this alienation by educating himself in his ancestral cultural "grammar." Consequently, the totalization of his memory and consciousness becomes his primary objective and the act of storytelling the means to accomplish it.<sup>4</sup>

From this perspective, it is significant that the narrator is introduced to, and eventually becomes a puppet master in, the shadow theater.<sup>5</sup> Structured in short chapters, Haviaras's novel is a tale of tales. The core story encompasses and evolves around the folk, magical narratives the different characters relate. The narrator receives these narratives and for every storyteller he fashions a different puppet which he subsequently adds to the permanent collection of his shadow theater. Thus storyteller and story are integrated not only within the core narrative of the novel but eventually become part of the narrator's shadow theater. As part of the latter, they underscore the communal identity/ethos that unites them all. The people's individual voices and stories are by definition "conservative"—minus the ideological connotation of this word. They preserve and communicate a communal cultural "grammar" in terms of which the new experiences—the clash of the villagers with the occupation army and then with the Allies—are placed and interpreted. The fundamental principles of this "grammar" are ambivalence/joyful relativity, subversion and renewal. The narrator is educated in these principles through the stories of the people he associates with the shadow theater; the communal ethos he assimilates and

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<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1984) 122-37.

<sup>4</sup> Manfred Pütz, *The Story of Identity: American Fiction of the Sixties* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1979) 14.

<sup>5</sup> Yiannis Kiourtsakis, *Proforike Paradosis ke Omadike Themioourgia: To Paradigma tou Karaghioze* (Athina; Kedros, 1984) 74.

expresses by means of the shadow theater enables him and his culture to stave off the alienating influence of official order.

Phlox, the veteran puppet master, introduces the narrator to the shadow theater. Moreover, his life and words reflect the philosophy of the theater's central character, *Karaghiozis/Blackeye*. Much like the fictional character *Karaghiozis*, Phlox is distinguished by the ambivalent, paradoxical discourse which continually subverts and which allows both puppet and puppet master to renew themselves and survive: "sometimes Phlox moved the wrong words in their [puppet's] mouths, naming heroes after their defeated enemies, and the tyrants seemed to live forever. 'But why?' 'So we can have new heroes all the time.'"<sup>6</sup> Still not only new heroes emerge, but also new narratives. On old canvases, Phlox reassembles and rearranges old elements into new configurations and the old/new stories perpetually satirize and expose the injustices people suffer under the official/enemy order. It is no wonder then that, "the enemy outlawed all shadow theater performances as subversive, and Phlox had to take his puppets and run" (17). But the narrator and his puppets remain behind; he watches and enriches his collection with stories and storytellers. Suggestively enough, Phlox is the first storyteller to acquire a counterpart in the narrator's collection.

This instruction in ambiguity, subversion, and renewal is reinforced and strengthened by the lessons of the other characters whom the narrator encounters and adds to his puppet collection. Their discourse too aims at neutralizing the effects of intimidation, hunger, torture, and executions. Grandmother is like Phlox, a master of paradoxes and ambiguity; her words consistently elude the specificity of traditional interpretation. Furthermore, they insinuate new ways of looking at enemy facts: "the enemy thinks he's superior," said Grandmother, "but that doesn't necessarily make us inferior!" "What's that supposed to mean Grandmother?" "We can be as brutal as the enemy" said Grandmother . . . "Then how come we don't kill fifty soldiers when they kill one of us?" "Our kill has quality" she said" (21). Thus, by means of ambivalence, she undermines and "rewrites" facts to create new hopes. Like Phlox, her ambivalent, paradoxical, and ultimately satirical discourse is intended to relieve her audience from the oppressive spirit of the times of wrath.

Phlox's and Grandmother's examples, however, reflect the ethos not only of the individual storyteller, but of the popular culture as a whole. The story of the prisoner who jumps off the promontory with an open umbrella to escape torture in the hands of the enemy is significant not so much because it is founded in the magic element which characterizes the world of village and tribal myth; more importantly, it demonstrates how the people's imagination scores a victory over the atrocities and frustration of the foreign occupation: "No one knew if his umbrella had turned inside out from the pressure, or if the Coast Guard got him back or if he drowned. Some said that even if his umbrella had held, he'd still have gone down too fast not to drown . . . Others said that the

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<sup>6</sup> Stratis Haviaras, *When the Tree Sings* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1979) 11. Subsequent references are to the same edition and are indicated by page number in the text.

said that the wind blew so hard that day that it carried the man away, landing him on the rocky island, and that he stayed on that rock a hermit for the rest of his life" (24-25). They turn the ambiguity of the circumstantial into a joyful relativity of their own. The lack of closure in the story enables them to fabulate and gain comfort in the face of the enemy's inescapable facts.

Their joyful relativity is inextricably associated with subversion. The manipulation Capetan Perseus's tale undergoes, more pronouncedly than the earlier story, underscores the connection between the two. This narrative, like the previous one, consoles the people for the death of a mountain fighter; however, more clearly than the other, it emphasizes how people living with despair, helplessness, and silence resort to storytelling in order to impose their truth on that of the enemy's; or better, how they undermine the enemy discourse by means of the ambiguity the circumstantial lends itself to: "Capetan Perseus wasn't armed with the so-called magical S's, which stood for shield, sword and sandals so the monsters trapped him and wounded both his arms so he couldn't escape. . . Capetan Perseus rolled over, face down, and remained still. The enemy soldiers reached him and tried to lift him up. Instead, they lifted up an explosion. How did it happen? Some said that the original Perseus had heard the pleas of his namesake and pitied and delivered a shell, another of his magical S's blowing up the hero and the monsters" (46-47). The ambiguity of the circumstances is reinforced by the merging of the historically specific, Capetan Perseus's death, with the mythological, the legend of Perseus.

The enemy occupation poses another serious threat for the people; the frustration of helplessness might lead them to create imaginative constructs which they treat as an absolute truth. Grandmother warns the villagers of such a danger. When they hypothesize about the enemy's kindness, she, who has lost a son-in-law and pregnant daughter to the enemy, cuts through their sentimentalities pointing out that in difficult times, "we'll dream up anything, even a swine with angel wings" (33). Old Petros's story of agent R serves a similar purpose; it prepares the people to deal both with their own sentimentality and the unanticipated dangers it might entail. In his story, Agent R is betrayed by the Allies who use his idealism; eager to further their plans, they do not hesitate to sacrifice him in the name of political expediency. The villagers are not moved by a tale that lacks for them ontological status, since it lacks the magic element all stories ought to possess. Yet Old Petros's point is clear; joyful relativity and subversion should not be employed exclusively to relativize, undermine, and deny; they should also spark a reevaluation and a renewal of the popular culture itself.

The principle of renewal is ultimately captured in the schoolteacher's fable of the singing tree. Appropriately, she will narrate it at the burial of Aunt Liberty who is a victim of her own heroism before the enemy. According to the teacher's story, a bee is imprisoned in the flower of the pomegranate tree, dies but is miraculously resurrected; and the tree sings. The teacher concludes: "death is ephemeral; life is not forever" (47). She fabulates and her tale evinces the characteristics of mythologizing thought which according to Lévi-Strauss,

"progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution."<sup>7</sup> In this case, it is a resolution centering, in the face of death, on the idea of perpetual renewal. By using ambivalence the teacher undermines in the consciousness of the bystanders the fact of Aunt Liberty's "big sleep." In other words, employing an imaginative construct, she "rewrites" a given fact abiding by the fundamental principles of popular culture. The motif of the singing tree resurfaces several times in the course of the novel; it emphasizes the importance of imaginative constructs that incorporate the principles of the "carnavalesque" and the role of these constructs in the formation of the narrator's consciousness and memory.

This gradual formation is indicated by the narrator's increasing ability to assimilate and to produce stories. For instance, he falls desperately in love with the priest's daughter, Angelica; the girl, however, is dying of consumption. The narrator tries to relativize and subvert this fact by associating his beloved with the mermaid of Greek folklore. Likewise, he will attempt to reverse his cousin Mikes's fate, investing his avenging, death-bound figure with the attributes of Archangel Michael, another enduring figure of Greek folklore. His imaginative constructs, drawing on the world of village and tribal myth aim to help him transcend the reality of Angelica's and Mikes's deaths. The combinatorial games he plays in the stories of the sparrow, the mouse, and the dog permit him to triumph and survive. The sparrow which dies to satiate the narrator's hunger, the mouse tortured sadistically by the enemy, the dog the narrator shoots to save Ermina, are identified in his storytelling with the narrator himself. He relativizes and subverts the meaning of the stories, rearranging their elements in different configurations so that he becomes the sparrow, the mouse, and the dog; but the outcome is different. Unlike them, he survives hunger, pain, and finally death. So his imaginative constructs, reminiscent of Bakhtin's *mésalliances*, offer a catharsis; they allow him to transcend the reality of the days of wrath which seem to close down upon him.

The narrator asserts his newfound knowledge throughout the novel. At his friend Dando's funeral, for instance, he encourages the other villagers to give vent to their frustration by desecrating the face of a God who allows innocence to be destroyed and whose ministers play up to the perpetrators of evil on earth. Through profanity and laughter, the people avenge themselves and goad their indifferent God to change His ways. Furthermore, soon after the liberation, he and his friends defy the church's admonitions and participate along with the other villagers in the ancient rites of spring in the sacred Grove.

The rites encompass all the categories which Bakhtin has identified as the "carnavalesque." In an atmosphere of anarchic relativity, subversion, and renewal, the narrator sees in all their glory those principles of popular culture predicated by the stories he heard and included in his shadow theater. The celebration exalts the triumph of the anarchic spirit of the popular culture over the institutionalization; it is a celebration of the survival and renewal of that

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<sup>7</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. by Clair Jacobson and Brooke Grudfest Schepf. (London: Allen Lane, 1968) 224.

spirit over the stifling forces of official order. In this respect, it is significant that the participants first defy the priest's admonitions, then they humiliate him, and finally they rid themselves of him, symbolically; after all, he is the advocate of the hierarchical structure which official order seeks to impose. Their animal masks grant them anonymity, which permits uninhibited sexual union with their partners. Thus the narrator and his friends are initiated to the sexual "mysteries" of adulthood in the ancient rites. Yet this celebration does not conclude the novel. The suprachronic clashes once again with the historical. This time the historical is represented by the Allies who come into the country after the mountain warriors chase the enemy away. A new official order is in the making; a new attempt to subvert the anarchic spirit is implemented. The Allies enjoin the organization of institutions and they offer their "know how;" when the people and the mountain fighters resist, the Allies undertake to subvert their spirit by subverting their discourse. In its place, they offer "logic": "You need to have money. Nothing can be done without money' . . . And they said, 'You have to have financial aid, if only to be able to pay your old debts. But who's going to give you financial aid, if you don't have responsible government?' they asked" (197). Moreover, they work at fixing meaning to fit their own plans. For instance, they mystify the populace with a new word, "impasse," and soon afterwards they send their indoctrinators to explain it. Finally, they employ this new word to sabotage the status of the real liberators of the country; they accuse the mountain warriors of bringing about this "impasse."

Furthermore, in subverting people's discourse, in appropriating meaning, the Allies mobilize the aid of technological culture. Radio and newspapers mystify with the introduction of a whole universe which "robbed our attention and which was too vast to resist and too elusive to grasp" (206). The occupation army fought popular culture on the latter's "turf;" enemy facts concerned a physical and psychological landscape familiar to the villagers. The village and tribal myths this landscape easily evoked allowed the people to evaluate and place the enemy facts and, consequently, survive their impact. Now the Allies raise a world of abstractions which baffles an imagination used to respond to sensuous, magic reality. The more the people are baffled by this world the more the anarchic spirit is sapped. And as their bafflement at the new world displaces the villagers' interest in their own, so the radio/newspaper discourse displaces the folk/anarchic discourse. Suggestively the language of the media replaces the language of storytelling. The narrator's conclusion that "we had won the war, but it seemed as if we had lost our country" (206) marks the end of an era. When his mother returns from the concentration camp and commits his shadow theater puppets to flames, it seems inevitable; what they represent has been dislocated and subdued.

The destruction of the shadow theater deprives the narrator of a repertoire of stories which granted him the strength to situate himself within his tradition, then to sustain the vicissitudes of a life under an enemy and finally to enter adulthood. However, in spite of the Allies' efforts, one final story emerges; the most persistent of the narrator's culture: the story of *xenitia*--departing for foreign lands. Interrelated as it is in the book with the myth of the Minotaur, it emanates both hope and fear, hope for a new life, fear for the encounter with the most primitive sense of alienation; the journey its protagonists take might revitalize or it might extirpate the cultural seeds they carry. Moreover, it is a tale without Theseus, the mythological guarantee of a safe return. So this last

tale of the book remains true to the spirit of popular culture; inconclusive and ambiguous, it is a story of potential renewal but also one whose meaning is suspended and therefore open to interpretations and counterinterpretations. Into this final tale the narrator walks.

Thus ambiguity and the concomitant ideas of relativization, subversion, and renewal inherent in an oral culture's discourse warrant this culture's "difference" and naturally its survival. The magic element and the performative function of storytelling corroborate this salvaging operation. Thus, to spin stories is not an act of metafictional despair, or a textual suicide; it does not constitute the fictional subject as a syntactical function of the same order as the sentence's pronoun. On the contrary, it prevents the subject's dissolution into its surroundings and precludes at the same time the demise of the stories. *When the Tree Sings* takes its readers beyond the dead ends of the metafictional novel.