

Apocalypse (*Little Dorrit; The Way We Live Now*)." Weiss's interest lies less in bankruptcy itself in fiction than in its metaphorical possibilities for charting changing attitudes toward a capitalist society. Her treatments of the novels support her argument that as bankruptcy is treated less as a plot of convention and more as a social barometer, the worldview of the novels becomes darker, leading to novels such as *Little Dorrit*, in which a morally bankrupt world makes it difficult for goodness to survive, much less thrive.

Stratis Myrivilis

LIFE IN THE TOMB

Translated by Peter Bien

Introduction by Peter Levi

Hanover/London: University Press of New England, 1987 Pp. xxiv + 328, \$12.95

Reviewed by John Taylor

Stratis Myrivilis's *Life in the Tomb* (1923-1924), a classic well-known in Eastern Europe, Italy, and France, is, as the translator Peter Bien remarks, "the single most successful and most widely read serious novel in Greece in the period since the Great War, having sold 80,000 copies—an astonishing figure for that small country" (xv). This excellent translation (a first edition appeared in 1977) could not be more welcome. To date only two other works by Myrivilis (1892-1969) have been available in English, *The Schoolmistress with the Golden Eyes* (1933) and *The Mermaid Madonna* (1949), novels which with *Life in the Tomb* form, in fact, a trilogy.

The novel consists of fifty-seven short chapters, every chapter except the first purportedly a letter written during the trench warfare on the Macedonian front in 1917-1918, by one Sergeant Anthony Kostoulas, "a university student, tall and olive-complexioned" (2), to his beloved. In the first chapter (or "prologue") the author employs the literary artifice of claiming that he himself had fought with Kostoulas during the war—Myrivilis indeed spent the decade 1912-1922 fighting in the Balkan Wars, the First World War, and the Asia Minor Campaign—and that while rummaging through an old chest he had come across a bundle of copybooks, the Sergeant's manuscripts. (Kostoulas, the reader learns, had been accidentally incinerated by a flame-thrower while in battle with the Bulgarians.) The author resolves to publish the manuscripts, remarking that if the "girl is real, not imaginary, and if she is still alive, I must ask her to forgive my audacity" (3).

This rather sophisticated narrative structure—the author finds not a bundle of letters, but indeed a bundle of copybooks containing the manuscript of an epistolary novel—has other subtle qualities. Many of the letters can be read independently, as if they were short stories, to the extent that while in the early midst of a first reading one might sense that the book, as a novel, exemplarily lacked "the immense force derivable from totality"—to recall Poe's criticism of novels in general. Yet it is precisely this heterogeneous aspect of the anecdotes, vignettes, and transcribed thoughts which verily mirror the

Sergeant's life as a volunteer in the Greek army: the "monotonous, sluggish, wearying [days]" (70) while the soldiers seek out distractions and await battle, "the irremovable shadow of death which weighs relentlessly upon [them]" (85). Instead of appealing to plot in the traditional sense, or appealing to the facile narrative cohesiveness that battlefield suspense would provide, Myrivilis chooses to grip his reader on a more profound level; beneath the many digressions flows a single, not always visible undercurrent: the inexorable progression of a human being towards the front, towards combat, towards death. It is only by revealing the everyday life of a soldier in this haphazardly anecdotic, or sometimes nearly ethnographic fashion that Myrivilis, through the Sergeant, can towards the end of the book convincingly ask this question: "How could the 'human being' inside me have disappeared so completely, leaving only the patrol-leader and warrior behind?" (257) *Life in the Tomb* is thus also the diary of a man, a volunteer, who loses his illusions while growing capable of the most penetrating self-observation.

It is a book which, focused well beyond ideological and nationalistic considerations, well beyond the historical realities of the war in question, the First World War, examines above all human behavior. The battlefield might have been any battlefield from the Troy of Homer to the Skra di Legen here depicted, the war any war of brutal carnage fought in "darkness . . . so that [that] probably even God himself was unable to witness it" (295). Soldiers, officers, friends, enemies, prisoners, mothers, children, loved ones are all portrayed in turn, with realism and with humanity, are stitched one by one into this Bayeux Tapestry *à la grecque*, of memorably epic proportions.

Park Honan

JANE AUSTEN: HER LIFE

New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987. Pp. 408. \$24.95

Reviewed by Glenda A. Hudson

In his Preface to *Jane Austen: Her Life*, Park Honan explains that he has tried "to expand the usual viewpoint of the biographer." By providing new data about Austen's close circle of family and intimates, he seeks "to afford a more thorough examination of her own life and character." Honan's wide-ranging work offers plenty of illuminating insights into Austen's family and the setting of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. However, although his biography, like a panoramic stage production, impresses us with its rich backdrop and host of elaborately costumed performers, it fails to increase our understanding of the protagonist and her art.

Honan's claims are hyperbolic and unnecessary at times. In his opinion, no one (except him) has "seriously" tried to assimilate new data from research about Austen since Elizabeth Jenkins's biography in 1938. And surely Honan overreaches in his judgment at the beginning of the book about Frank Austen's influence on his novelist sister. "Prelude: Frank Austen's Ride" tells of an imaginary journey taken by the young naval cadet Frank Austen from